

# “Ministers of Christ”

## 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Even in kindergarten, I knew that I wanted to be a minister. I don't know how I knew. I just knew. Richard Kuehne, a former pastor at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Winter Haven, often reminded me of how, as a kindergartener, I tugged on his sleeve one day and said, “Pastor Kuehne, I'm going take your place.”

On occasion, I coaxed my younger sister Paula into playing ‘church’ with me. I was the pastor. She was the parishioner. And there she sat, alone, in the middle of the living room; listening to my sermons; standing and sitting at my directions; and singing hymns of my choosing. I can't recall with certainty; but I may have even passed a collection plate.

There were times, of course, when I thought about other occupations: a doctor, lawyer, fireman, astronaut, President of the United States. But the desire to be a minister never left me. And even though I didn't always return to Immanuel Lutheran College and Seminary for theological reasons—sometimes the reasons were sports, classmates, and yes, girlfriends—nevertheless, I did keep returning. As the hymnist wrote: “God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.”

In 1978, I graduated from the seminary and became what I had always wanted to be; but more importantly, what I had always believed God wanted me to be, namely, a minister of Christ. And it was then, when I stepped from the classroom into the realities of ministry, that I asked myself for the first time—and not the last: “Why did I ever want to be a minister.”

Paul told the Corinthians: **“I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.”** Frankly, I can't imagine any minister of Christ not saying the same. Fear, weakness, and trembling at the accountability of the office. When criticized for his ministry, Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:2-4, **“Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.”**

Or fear, weakness, and trembling at the responsibility of pastoring Christians; that is, people redeemed with the blood of Christ and precious in God's sight. Paul admonished the elders of Ephesus: **“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which He bought with His own blood,”** Acts 20:28.

And fear, weakness, and trembling at the magnitude of life's problems and heartaches. During my first year of ministry, while serving two congregations in

northern Minnesota, I received a phone call shortly before dawn. Scrambling to the kitchen, I snatched the receiver from its cradle and said, “Hello, this is Pastor Weis.”

At first, I heard only gasps and sobs. Eventually, I realized that I was talking with one of the members of my congregations. Through the broken syllables and incomplete sentences, I finally understood six words: “The baby is dead. Please, hurry.” That baby was Matthew Paul Pederson, who today would be forty-one years old.

I will never forget the look on the parents’ faces. I will never forget the grandfather saying, “But what did we do wrong, Pastor? Why is God punishing us?” I will never forget how, amid the grief and weeping, the small mobile home still smelled like baby powder. I will never forget the weakness, fear, and trembling, as I prayed to God for the right words to say. Who is up to such a task on his own? No one. Not me. Not even the great apostle Paul; the same apostle who told the Corinthians, **“I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.”**

But the phrase “ministers of Christ” is broader than the office of the public ministry. It also embraces the personal priesthood of all believers; that is, their God-given right, responsibility, and calling to proclaim and administer the Gospel in whatever circumstances the Lord God has placed them—as fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters; as coworkers, and in some cases, as complete strangers. Consider the many opportunities each of us has daily to comfort another hurting human being with, as Paul wrote in Second Corinthians, **“the comfort we ourselves have received from God,”** 2 Corinthians 1:4.

Martin Luther wrote: “When we were made Christians, we were also given the right and power to preach and profess the Word we received from Him before everybody, everyone according to his station and calling. For, though we are not all in the public office and calling, still every Christian should and may teach, instruct, admonish, comfort, reprove his neighbor with God’s Word whenever and wherever he finds someone in need of it.” Yet, as individual ministers of Christ, we also view opportunities to share Christ with a sense of personal weakness, fear, and trembling.

Over the years, the Lord has richly blessed St. Luke’s Lutheran Church; its membership and its ministry. Yet, to this very day, as we undertake the work of God’s Kingdom—teaching, preaching, counseling, comforting, admonishing, inviting, administering the sacraments, visiting the sick—we also, like Paul, freely admit our own fears and weakness and trembling.

And yet, also like Paul, we praise God that amid our weaknesses He displays His infinite strength. **“Therefore,”** Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, **“I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”**

Therefore, dear ministers of Christ, as we pursue our Gospel outreach in Lemmon, South Dakota, let each of us understand and be comforted by the three great principles of ministry that Paul mentioned in today's text. In a Christian ministry, the means must always be Scripture; the message must always be Christ; and the power must always be God's.

**First, the means must always be Scripture.** Paul wrote, **“When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God,”** 1 Corinthians 2:1.

Corinth was in Greece; and Greece was famous for its philosophy and oratory. As early as the Fifth Century B.C., traveling teachers known as “Sophists” taught a discipline they called rhetoric; from the Greek *rhema*, meaning ‘words’ or ‘that which is spoken,’ hence, ‘speeches.’ The goal of this early rhetoric was to persuade and even manipulate listeners through powerful speeches, practiced gestures, eloquent vocabularies, flowery metaphors, appeals to emotion, dramatic pauses—often at the expense of the truth. All presentation, and no substance.

This same sort of all-presentation-no-substance rhetoric is still heard today in political speeches; in the words of silk-tongued politicians who dance around questions instead of answering them. Or in TV advertisements, where the true cost of that MUST-HAVE PRODUCT and that BEST DEAL EVER is buried deep in the fine print.

Sadly, the same can be said of some churches, who hide or twist the truth of Scripture because they are more interested in membership than in ministry. For good reason, Paul warned the Christians in Rome: **“I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and offenses and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naïve people,”** Romans 16:17-18.

What, then, did Paul mean when he said, **“I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom”**? He meant, ‘I did not come to trick but to teach. I did not come to conceal the truth but to reveal the truth. I did not come to impress you with my words but to proclaim to you God's words—or as he put it, **“the testimony about God.”**

But does this mean that, as ministers of Christ, we should give no thought and no preparation to our sermonizing or witnessing; that pastors especially should not strive to improve their styles, vocabularies, applications, gestures, examples, figures of speech, and delivery? Of course not. In my opinion, every sermon should be as good as it can be—not good for the sake of good; but good for the sake of glorifying God. Not as a testament to the skills of a preacher, but as a testimony about salvation in Jesus Christ.

Styles, vocabularies, compelling introductions and powerful conclusions are only useful insofar as they serve the Word of God and do not supplant the Word of God. The goal is not to have parishioners leave church saying, “My, what a beautiful sermon;” rather, to leave church saying, “My, what a beautiful Savior.” Such a belief and perspective can never come from purely human persuasion or purely human words, no matter how well-crafted or eloquent. Such a belief and perspective can only come from the Word of God.

And so, as we move forward with our Christian ministry, let each of us remember that the means of our ministry lies in proclaiming the Scriptures in their fullness—sin and grace, Law and Gospel; not in entertaining; not in diluting the teachings of Scripture to make them more palatable. Rather, a ministry consisting of sharing **“the testimony about God.”** Scripture must be our means; because Scripture is the only means, both Word and Sacrament, through which the Spirit of God has chosen to work.

**Second, the message must always be Christ.** Paul wrote: **“For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified,”** 1 Corinthians 2:2. What did Paul mean—that his teaching and preaching in Corinth consisted only of reciting the words “Jesus Christ and Him crucified?” No. He meant that Jesus Christ and Him crucified was always the focus of his message. **“But we preach Christ crucified,”** he stated in 1 Corinthians 1:23-24; **“a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”**

**“Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”** Yes, five glorious words; but in reality, the substance and focus of the entire Scriptures—from Genesis to Revelation; from the countless sacrifices of the Old Testament to the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. The Old Testament prophesied of the Christ to come. The New Testament recorded the Christ who came. And that Christ was Jesus of Nazareth, both Son of God and Son of Man.

Early in my ministry, someone advised me to ‘look for Christ on every page of the Bible.’ I wish I could remember the source; because that godly counsel helped shape my entire ministry and my entire approach to sermonizing, counseling, and addressing congregational problems. ‘Look for Christ on every page. Let Christ be preeminent in all your thoughts, words, deeds, priorities, and ministries.’ Not surprisingly, Martin Luther offered much the same advice, writing, “The Bible is the cradle wherein Christ is laid;” and again, “If you want to interpret well and confidently, set Christ before you, for He is the Man to whom it all applies, every bit of it.”

And so here, at St. Luke’s Lutheran Church, we too preach **“Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”** Jesus Christ must be our focus, because He is the focus of the entire Bible. Jesus Christ and Him crucified must be our message, because there is no other

Savior and no other way to be saved. As Jesus Himself said: **“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me,”** John 14:6. He did not say, ‘I am one way to be saved among many ways.’ He said, ‘I am the only way to be saved.’ In fact, the Greek construction Paul used in 1 Corinthians 2:2 is very emphatic; literally, ‘For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and THIS ONE crucified.’

But how can we preach **“Jesus Christ and Him crucified”** without preaching about the reason for His crucifixion? And how can we preach about the reason for His crucifixion without preaching about sin? And how can we preach about sin without preaching that we ourselves are sinners? And how can we preach that we are sinful without preaching that we can’t save ourselves?

And how can we preach that we cannot save ourselves without preaching our desperate need for the Savior? And how can we preach about the Savior who came to save us without preaching about God’s love? And how can we preach about God’s love without preaching about its incalculable cost? And how can we preach about the incalculable cost without preaching about the cross. All of these blessed teachings are connected. And their focus is Christ.

This, dear ministers of Christ, is why our message must always be Christocentric; that is, a message about Jesus Christ and Him crucified. This is why we don’t focus on entertainment or water-down Scripture or preach a ‘prosperity gospel’ or shy away from explaining the ugly reality of sin along with the unsurpassable brightness of God’s grace. Our message is about Jesus Christ for the simple reason that Jesus Christ and Him crucified is the only way to be saved.

**Third and finally, the power must always be God’s.** Paul wrote: **“My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power,”** 1 Corinthians 2:4-5.

This is a beautiful, historic church building. And since it was built, much has been lovingly added, donated, and cared for. In the sixteen months I’ve been your pastor, we’ve added a new wireless sound system, which prayerfully makes sermons at least a little easier to hear. At St. Luke’s we have Bibles, hymnals, organ and organists, Sunday School rooms and Sunday School teachers; a wonderful fellowship center with tables, chairs, and fully equipped kitchen—and not to forget that always-important automatic-drip coffeemaker.

We have everything we need to carry out our ministry. And we do. Yet, the most important thing that we have is usually the last thing that comes to mind: the Word of God. And how many of us just rolled our eyes and thought, “Oh, that.”

If I could change anything about my ministering for Christ, it would be the foolish assumption I've had so often, in so many difficult circumstances, that the power to create faith; the power to effect change; the power to return a wayward member to church; the power to strengthen and encourage fellow Christians; the power to improve a troubled marriage; the power to comfort two young parents grieving an infant son named Matthew Paul Pederson; indeed, the power to save a lost sinner—that this power somehow resided in me. It never has. It never will. The power is always God's. And when we finally realize this truth and put it into practice, we will not only save ourselves much heartache, but carry out our public and personal ministries with confidence.

Paul wrote, **“I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes,”** Romans 1:16. Do we understand what this means? Do we really? Do you see this Bible? The cover is worn. The pages are dog-eared. The verses are underlined. But there is no difference between the power in these words and the power and authority that Jesus Christ exercised when He calmed the storms on Lake Galilee; healed the sick; or called dead-and-buried Lazarus from his grave. And this is the Word He has entrusted to us.

In this Christian ministry, the means is Scripture; the message is Christ; and the power is God's.