

THE HEART OF PLANNING:
AVOIDING THE DITCH OF GODLESS PRAGMATISM
AND THE DITCH OF LETHARGIC MINISTRY

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ABSTRACT

Pastors understand the importance of planning for ministry, but do pastors always pay attention to where their heart is when they plan? Pastors can easily plan as if everything depended on themselves and as a result forget about God. On the other hand, pastors can easily sit back and do no planning whatsoever, while hiding behind all kinds of excuses. This thesis starts by explaining the importance of planning and looking at the literature that has an influence on planning. Following that, the biblical principles of planning are laid out as the basis for how pastors understand planning to the glory of God along with the common errors that pastors fall into. Finally, the constant struggle of balancing these biblical principles are explained.

INTRODUCTION

As the disciples looked up into the sky and saw Jesus disappear from view, what were they thinking? Perhaps they thought, “Now what?” They were followers of Jesus, and as followers, they did just that—they followed him. The disciples were not leading Jesus around, but he was leading them. Now, everything had changed. The disciples could no longer sit down with Jesus and ask him questions or get his advice. Jesus did not leave the disciples with a huge owner’s manual, he simply gave them this commission, “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19)¹ and a promise, “surely I am with you always to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:19). These two things were not small things. The concept of making disciples of all nations was daunting, to say the least, but the promise of Jesus’s continual presence was comforting beyond belief. Jesus gives to us this same daunting task and this same comforting promise.

Still, the question remains: Now what? As the disciples filed back through their memories from the last three years, they probably tried to think of things that Jesus had taught them. He taught them so many lessons here on earth, and undoubtedly each disciple carried with him a different lesson and experience from his time with Jesus that affected them individually. Even though Jesus taught the disciples many things, something that would seem so simple was missing from the disciples’ memory banks. Jesus never prescribed a specific way to go about making disciples of all nations.

Surely the disciples grasped the full gravity of their responsibility. They were to carry the gospel to all nations, to spread the gospel message that everyone so desperately needed. They

1. Unless otherwise noted

understood that God desired all people to be saved and to learn the truth. They knew their work would have an eternal impact.

Although they understood the importance of the commission, they lacked specific, biblical methods for “making disciples.” They were confused about how to carry out Jesus’ command. The Great Commission certainly does give methods, but only two are listed: “baptizing” and “teaching.”² While these are vital methods in making disciples of all nations, the disciples were still left to wonder how they were going to carry out this work.

The same question remains to this day: How do we go about carrying out the Great Commission in the 21st century? Sure, we could read through the book of Acts and try to glean methods from the Early Christian Church, and some of them would be legitimate, but we do not live in the same environment or circumstance as the believers in Acts. Perhaps that is the reason why God did not prescribe specific methods of operation in the Bible. God knew that contexts change based on time, region, and many other factors.

While Jesus indeed has removed his visible presence from us, that does not mean that he is no longer leading us. We know that he is still leading his people as the head of the church. Paul writes in Ephesians, “And God placed all things under [Jesus’] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church” (1:22). Christ leads the church, yet he operates in the same way that God typically operates, by giving to his people scriptural principles. For example, there are scriptural principles for how a Christian should live under the government. A Christian must realize that the government has been instituted by God to maintain order and administer justice. He must take into consideration that God commands his people to respect those in positions of authority as the fourth commandment states, that God wants us to pray for our leaders, and that

2. Robert J. Voss, “The Great Commission.” Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File. January 24-25, 1974, 2

there are some times when it would be scriptural to refuse to follow the government. In order to be a God-pleasing citizen, these scriptural principles need to be known.

Knowledge of the principles is important, but acting on the basis of these principles is difficult. Following these principles takes great care and thoughtful balancing. Martin Luther memorably captured this balancing act when he said, “The world is like a drunken peasant. If you lift him into the saddle on one side, he will fall off on the other side.”³ Some, most notably Daniel Deutschlander, have used the illustration of avoiding the ditches on either side of the road and keeping on the narrow, Lutheran middle. The thought captured in both of these illustrations demonstrates the precision, care, and continual growth that is necessary to balance scriptural principles. Without precision, care, and continual growth in balancing principles, a pastor may find himself falling into one of the ditches where the devil is waiting expectantly. Daniel Deutschlander captured the reason why it is essential to remain on the middle road so that we avoid false doctrine and error. He wrote,

Any number of false doctrines are the result of falls off the narrow middle road into ditches on either side of the truth in the middle. See how clever the devil is: Often he does not make a frontal assault on the truths of God’s Word. Rather, he prefers to take a bit of truth and distort it until it becomes a lie; he does that by emphasizing only one aspect of the truth at the expense of the whole truth. With the grain of truth that he has corrupted, a grain that he uses to make his lie believable, he seduces unguarded souls into error and even unbelief; he pushes them from the narrow middle into the ditches on either side of the truth.⁴

Care, precision, and continual growth are necessary when it comes to planning in ministry. Undoubtedly, the devil will attempt to elevate certain planning principles over others, pushing you in the direction of one of the ditches. Is there a time when the heart of a pastor trusts

3. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works: Table Talk*. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, trans. Theodore G. Tappert, vol. 55 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 111.

4. Daniel Deutschlander, *The Narrow Lutheran Middle: Following the Scriptural Road* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2012), 2.

more in his plans than he does in God? Is there a time when the heart of a pastor uses God's power as an excuse to sit back and do nothing, while he lets God do the work of evangelism? Both of these ditches are dangerous possibilities for any pastor. A proper understanding of the scriptural principles involved with planning is vital for a pastor to keep in mind whenever he plans. He must keep these principles in balance in order to avoid the ditch of godless pragmatism and the ditch of lethargic ministry.

The purpose of this thesis is not to give a specific planning method, nor is the primary purpose to encourage you to plan (although that may fall into a secondary purpose). The purpose of this paper is to lay out a theology of planning and to talk about difficulties and sticking points that confront a Lutheran pastor as he seeks to plan to the glory of God.

PLANNING IN GENERAL

Planning's Importance

The vast availability of planning literature in the world begins to answer the question of planning's importance by laying out numbers and statistics. In fact, in Aubrey Malphurs's book, *Advanced Strategic Planning*, he included in his introduction charts of several different church situations. He laid out a few churches that have plateaued in their growth and some churches that are steadily declining.⁵ While these numbers and statistics should not be ignored, the reason for planning in the church is not for fear of dying.⁶

Planning is important not because the church will not survive without our planning, but because God has entrusted to pastors the tremendous responsibility of spreading the gospel and administering the sacraments. Christ could have chosen a different way to go about ministering without using pastors, but in love and grace, he entrusts pastor with leadership responsibilities in his church.

Paul talks about the ministry that had been entrusted to him, which he calls "a ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18). Paul describes this ministry, not as a conduit through which he receives praise and acclamation, but it is simply that "Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Cor 5:14, 15). The care that Paul took in ministering to God's people was rooted in the truth that he had become convinced of, the gospel. Jesus Christ died for all and that is a reality that is good for all

5. Malphurs measures church growth with church membership as the metric.

6. While this fear should not be the motivation for anyone to plan, fear tends to be the wake-up call that sparks re-evaluation and self-assessment in the church. There is value to statistics like this, but they should take a secondary role to our primary motivation.

people, that is why Paul wrote, “therefore all died” (2 Cor 5:14). Paul’s life was no longer a life lived for his own desires, but a life lived for Jesus.

Therefore, it is with great humility that a pastor approaches the responsibility to minister to God’s people. At the same time this responsibility is a treasured joy. Erik Janke calls this “the Lutheran why” as he poses the questions: “Why strive for excellence in the ministry? For that matter, why think about the ministry at all?”⁷ The answer is quite simple and yet incredibly profound, “The ‘why,’ the root, the cause, and the case for Lutheranism is grace.”⁸ Without grace, there would be no reason to minister, nor would there be a reason to plan for ministry. Without grace the world would be left with moral structures that have no eternal benefit. Grace is the motivation for ministry and the motivation for ministry planning.

Grace is always enough, but even more motivation can be added for planning. The pastor, in many ways, leads a congregation by example. It is a common expression that pastor lives in a glass house, meaning that a pastor’s life is publicly visible and he has to answer for a lot of decisions that he makes. Many times, this “glass house” is viewed as a negative thing or at the very least a caution to take care in how you live. While there is truth in that, the glass house is also an opportunity to lead through an example. Just as people look at a pastor’s marriage for instruction by example, so also people observe and soak in how a pastor goes about planning. Therefore, every plan that a pastor makes is another opportunity to exemplify godly planning principles.

7. Erik Janke, “From Sola to Soli: Focusing Faithfulness for Excellence in the Pastoral Ministry” (an essay written for the Senior Thesis, 2017), 3.

8. Janke, 3.

What is Planning?

Perhaps this seems like an obvious question. In general, planning seems like a pretty straightforward concept that is well-known to society. When it comes to the work of the pastor, it is assumed that planning is just a regular part of ministry. Think specifically about the multitude of things that pastors typically plan, such as: planning a Bible class schedule, planning a worship schedule for 3-6+ months, planning what will occupy time in pre-marriage counseling and Bible information class (and that is to name a few). On top of that, a pastor will have to shepherd a leadership council through budget planning and church operations, while keeping in view the mission, vision, and purpose of the church. Obviously, a pastor will want to be mindful of the principles of planning since it will be such a regular part of his ministry, but a pastor will also want to explore the many different facets of planning and the numerous planning resources that he could have at his disposal.

On a fundamental level planning is making goals and then charting the steps it will take to reach those goals. For the purpose of this paper, I will limit examples and applications to ministry planning.⁹ Aubrey Malphurs describes this planning. “I define strategic planning as the envisioning process that a point leader uses with a team of leaders on a regular basis to think and act to design and redesign a specific ministry model that accomplishes the Great Commission in their unique ministry context.”¹⁰

The model for ministry will change depending on the circumstances in which the church finds itself. A church in Atlanta, GA will most likely have a different ministry plan than the church in Broken Bow, NE. Context drives the specifics of a plan. Most proposed ministry plans

9. Some have called ministry planning, Advanced Strategic Planning or Comprehensive Ministry Planning.

10. Aubrey Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning: A New Model for Church and Ministry Leaders* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 26.

try to have terminology and concepts that will translate across cultures and contexts, whether they are successful or not is an altogether different issue. But one thing will not change across contexts and cultures, scriptural principles will not change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While planning in the church has always existed to some extent, long-range planning for growth and operation was an innovation of American churches. In Europe, the church was always tied closely to the government, so people went to church because it was what everyone in that region did, but not so in America. Therefore, churches in America were forced to think about how they could grow and reach more people with the gospel. As a result, planning in the church and related issues have become popular topics to write about, especially since the emergence of the Church Growth Movement in the mid-1960s.¹¹ Each book has a slightly different angle on either how to organize a church and structure leadership or how to go about carrying out gospel ministry.

Most planning literature falls into two different categories: planning in the business world and planning in Evangelical churches. While there have not been books written on planning in a Lutheran category, the Literature Review will also cover the literature which does exist for planning in the Lutheran church.

Business Planning Literature

Business literature contributes significantly to church organization and leadership, without the intent to do so. Business literature provides many different methods for a variety of different areas of work. The focus on methodology, in books meant for business settings, is perfectly logical. Businesses are looking for visible, tangible results. These business books were not

11. The Church Growth Movement began in India and started under the direction of Donald McGavran. The ideas of the Church Growth Movement have been carried on by many, but none more prominently than the Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. For more information about the Church Growth Movement from a Church Growth author, check out Thomas Rainer's book, *Church Growth*.

written with the thought that their business principles should be super-imposed on a church structure. Therefore, reading business books and trying to apply them to a church setting takes great care and a discerning mind.

A popular planning book that has made its way around the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) is the book, *Traction* by Gino Wickman. In Wickman's book he presents, what he calls, "The Entrepreneurial Operating System." In this system, he lays out six key components of any organization, they are: vision, people, data, issues, process, and traction. These six components provide some useful insights for organizations, including churches. Although even Wickman is consistent with church planning books when he begins with vision. A clear vision is valuable to any organization and Wickman writes about the great result of having a clear vision, "The more clearly everyone can see your vision, the likelier you are to achieve it. Focus everyone's energy toward one thing and amazing results will follow."¹² *Traction* speaks in language similar to other business books, *if you do this, or if you follow this plan, then you will have success and see results.* For businesses, the right equation equals success.

Another example of businesses relying on methods to bring success appears when Wickman writes about processes, "When you apply [processes] correctly, it works like magic, resulting in simplicity, scalability, efficiency, and profitability."¹³ *Traction* is a great example of a suggested structure where specific methods bring about success.

The heavy emphasis on methods and the correlation between methods and success are two large reasons why Lutherans hesitate to put too much stock in business planning literature. While that cautionary thinking is legitimate, is it necessary to discredit the entire area of

12. Gino Wickman, *Traction: Get a Grip on Your Business* (Dallas: BenBella, 2011), 4.

13. Wickman, 7.

literature? Valuable methods and useful organization are found in business books. It is also valuable to point out that since business planning books are written for the business sector, the author has no spiritual pretense. This means that the pastor who reads it is free to make their own application to ministry, rather than rely on the application the author makes, which may or may not be doctrinally sound.¹⁴

Overall, business literature has many things to offer the church, but the gospel will never be something that business literature can offer to the church. If a pastor can be clear on that fact then business literature has a place in a pastor's planning library.

Evangelical Planning Literature

Planning in a church provides a different context than a business. A church does not operate in the exact same way as a business. Success in business is the direct result of human ingenuity and organizational excellence. Ingenuity and excellence are the source of the methods that make a business run, which is not the case with planning literature written for the church. This literature will have notable differences to a business planning book. Church planning books have a different context and also a different metric for measuring success. Churches do not measure success by the deposit amount of the weekly offering, nor are churches measuring success by the sheer number of people attending a service. Both of these statistics are valuable metrics that give the leadership team a glimpse into the church's health, but success is not measured by either of these metrics. For this reason, writing a planning book for a church is difficult, because first, the author needs to define how to measure success, then for the rest of the book, the author needs to

14. Authors in church planning literature make no apology for the applications and conclusions they draw. While some of these conclusions are biblical and valid, others distort the truth or say too much.

walk the tightrope between what success is and what it is not. If the author fails to walk that tightrope, he runs the risk of promoting a business with the name “church” attached to it.

A book that makes a concerted effort to walk the tightrope is *Faith-Based: A Biblical, Practical Guide to Strategic Planning in the Church* by Michael Gafa. Gafa is a reformed theologian who sets out with the intention of distinguishing between three different approaches to planning: fear-based planning, fact-based planning, and faith-based planning.¹⁵ Gafa’s goal for his book is to encourage proper motivation behind planning in the church.

Gafa says that if fear is the driving factor behind planning, the planner will become easily overwhelmed.¹⁶ In this sense, a fear-based motivation behind planning has a short life-span because an overwhelmed planner can turn into one who either has a high level of anxiety or someone who shuts down due to the weight of the task at hand. The logical conclusion of this motivation shows that this kind of planning is not healthy, nor sustainable. Gafa quickly and correctly discredits fear-based planning.

If facts are the motivating factor for planning Gafa says that “a fact-based approach will lead to spiritual blindness.”¹⁷ A “fact-based approach” is approaching ministry using only statistics as the guiding principle for planning. A person who is fact-based in their approach will likely find themselves tied up in how to raise the offerings and get more people in church without much of a thought to the spiritual health of the church. A fact-based approach is very attuned to the law without a grasp of any gospel.

Gafa’s position on the fact-based approach is a unique position among Evangelical Christians. While an Evangelical planning book will not openly claim that its motivations are in

15. Michael Gafa, *Faith-Based: A Biblical, Practical Guide to Strategic Planning in the Church* (2016), 16-19.

16. Gafa, 16.

17. Gafa, 17.

the facts and numbers, they will write page after page divulging and analyzing facts and numbers. Most of these authors will attach the Great Commission to these facts in order to draw on something biblical. These authors want their churches to grow and to see great success in ministry, almost as if they would like to build their little heaven here on earth.¹⁸ They fail to give credit to the work of the Spirit through the Word and the Sacraments. Thomas Rainier would be an example of a pastor who relies heavily on facts and statistics in his writing.¹⁹

Gafa promotes a faith-based planning, where he roots the faith of an individual in the sovereignty of God. God is watching over everything that lives and he is certainly watching over the well-being of his church. While Gafa's effort to stay rooted in faith for planning may seem noble and can even be understood correctly, what lurks behind Gafa's faith-based planning is a faith that is obtained and strengthened apart from the Means of Grace. In this faith-based planning, faith is the work of the individual, who needs to learn to rely more fully on the control God has, rather than a faith that rests on the work of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Without the Means of Grace, Gafa's faith-based planning leads to the realization that the planner needs to believe harder, which then leads to the realization that the planner cannot believe harder. At worst, Gafa's faith-based planning leads to the questioning of personal faith and despair. At best, Gafa's faith-based planning leads to someone waiting for the immediate work of God to strengthen faith.

While Gafa did make a reasonable attempt to accomplish what other planning books do not, he remained consistent with Evangelical planning books by leaving out the Means of Grace.

18. Heaven on earth is not a new concept. The disciples and others wanted Jesus to establish an earthly kingdom that they might regain a position of power and prestige once again.

19. Thomas Rainer's book *Breakout Church* is an example of a book that is largely fact-based using worship attendance as the metric.

The absence of the Means of Grace in Evangelical books is not surprising since most Evangelical churches do not believe in or teach the Means of Grace.

Lutheran Planning Literature

The strong belief in the Means of Grace is what sets Lutheran planning literature apart from any other available planning literature. Lutherans not only highly value the Word and the Sacraments, but they also recognize the power connected to them. This understanding of the Means of Grace changes how a writer will approach his task of writing planning literature. On account of this, confessional Lutheran planning literature has a different sound to it than planning literature from other denominations.

This high value of the Means of Grace is evident from the beginning of Jonathan Hein’s Symposium Essay, “The Shepherd-Leader at Work: Moving Forward.” Hein’s key phrase throughout the essay, but especially at the beginning is, “God speaks; reality results.”²⁰ He talks about the creation of light (Gen 1:1) and the calming of the storm (Matt 8:23-27). Both of these occurrences show the power of God’s words to create and to control nature. God’s Word indeed has great power, therefore Hein calls for “*careful listening* to the Word of God followed by *careful reasoning*.”²¹ What could be more valuable than taking in and digesting the Word as the source from which any plan begins, moves, and has being. Careful listening and reasoning are found even in the first few chapters of the Bible. Hein talks about the leadership of Adam in the Garden of Eden, “Man would use both gifts of God—the direct revelation of God’s will *and* his

20. Jonathan R. Hein, “The Shepherd-Leader at Work: Moving Forward,” (paper presented at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium on the Pastor as Shepherd-Leader, Mequon, WI, September 2018), 1.

21. Hein, “The Shepherd-Leader at Work,” 2. (Italics in original)

heightened intellect—to make decisions that were for the benefit of creation and the glory of the Creator. *Careful listening. Careful reasoning.*”²² Decision making and planning can be seen from the beginning, but both find their proper source in listening to the Word for guidance and principles.

Lutheran planning material does not seek to outdo the planning material that comes from Evangelical sources or business sources. The Evangelical and business sources have a good grip on methods and present a plethora of options. Lutheranism’s contribution to the planning community is laying out the biblical principles that guide thinking and motivation.

22. Hein, “The Shepherd-Leader at Work,” 4. (Italics in original)

PRINCIPLES OF PLANNING

Introduction

The Christmas season is a wonderful time of year, but it is also a time of year that causes a lot of stress, especially for a family that hosts a gathering. Hosting means that there will be a long list of chores that need to be completed in preparation. Along with making the food, the house also needs to look presentable. The last thing that any mother wants are clothes laying all over the floor of a bedroom, the living room looking like a mess, and a foyer coated with dog hair. Before all the guests show up, all these things must be cleaned, because every mother knows that how the house looks sends a message to every guest who shows up. Each guest should be able to look around the cleaned house and determine that the upkeep of the house is important to the host. Therefore, hosts spend a great deal of time cleaning in preparation for company.

Could the same thing be said concerning planning? If someone were to walk into a church council meeting, would it be obvious to that person that this was a church that took planning seriously? Would someone easily pick up on the direction in which this church wants to head and where the church's priorities lie? Or would that person find a meeting that is a little chaotic and haphazard? Would that person find a meeting where a lot of good things are happening, but they are happening in all different directions?

Like it or not, the planning and organization of big picture items in the church communicates a message. For a church that does not take planning seriously, the church communicates that the future is not important to the congregation. To state it even stronger, the church communicates that the gospel does not matter that much. No Christian would intentionally want to communicate that message, yet disorganization and lack of planning communicates that very message.

The message a church wants to communicate is that the gospel is the most important, most precious message in the world. That means churches want give their best to whatever it is they are doing because they know that their efforts are a testimony to the gospel. Professor Gurgel wrote concerning this area of growth, “Such progress in our First Article gifts (‘our mind and all our abilities’ as Luther calls them) allows those gifts to be more and more fully put to work under the tutelage of the gospel as we accomplish what ‘God prepared in advance for us to do’ (Ephesians 2:10).”²³ In this manner of thinking, planning is nothing more than thanking God for his gracious gifts and also “a concrete way to trust in God’s good and gracious will for our lives and ministries.”²⁴

Certainly, every person on earth has many reasons to give thanks to Christ for the gift of life and forgiveness, but if there were not already enough reasons for which to give thanks, God also gave us a Great Commission. The Great Commission was not just a command, but it is also a gift. Voss wrote, “Surely [God’s] Great Commission requires some grateful response! Let us be *praising* Him for having called us into fellowship with Him! Let us be *thanking* Him for the privilege of being His partners! Let us be *petitioning* Him that He will fill our hearts with zeal to do the work He has given us to do while it is day, before the night comes when no man can work!”²⁵

Since the proclamation of the gospel is a distinct honor that God has given to his people, pastors will want to take great care in going about planning. In order to plan with a heart that honors God, it is necessary to hold fast to the principles that God has laid out in Scripture.

23. Gurgel, 3.

24. Gurgel, 5.

25. Voss, 4. (Italics in original)

The Means of Grace

The Means of Grace are rare guests in planning literature. While the Means of Grace find a central focus in the Lutheran church, they are often not even taught or recognized in other stripes of Christianity. For this reason, the Means of Grace are what separates the planning literature in the Lutheran church from the planning literature of most other churches. Where others rely on methods to bring people to faith, Lutherans rely on the Means of Grace to work powerfully and effectively in lives.

Lutherans take Scripture seriously when it says, “for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). When Lutherans say the Word has power, they are not merely saying that the Word was written in a powerful way or that it is some emotionally moving speech. The Word’s power means that it has the power to give exactly what it proclaims: life, faith, and salvation.

The Word is also not a dead word, but a living Word that continues to work today, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb 4:12). Again, we see the validity of Jonathan Hein’s words, “God speaks; reality results.”²⁶ The same Word that created the world is the same Word that lies open on the table ready to be read.

This same Word gives the Sacraments of Baptism and Lord’s Supper their power. Martin Luther’s words concerning Baptism explain this well,

It is certainly not the water that does such things, but God’s Word which is in and with the water and faith which trusts this Word used with the water. For without God’s Word the water is just plain water and not Baptism. But with this Word it is Baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of rebirth by the Holy Spirit.²⁷

26. Hein, “The Shepherd-Leader at Work,” 1.

27. *Luther’s Catechism: The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2017), 10.

And also, Luther's words on the Lord's Supper makes this clear,

It is certainly not the eating and drinking that does such things, but the words "Given" and "poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins." These words are the main thing in this sacrament, along with the eating and drinking. And whoever believes these words has what they plainly say, the forgiveness of sins.²⁸

With such a powerful source at the disposal of every Christian, why not use the Word of God and the Sacraments? The Word is spiritual bread through which God has promised to work. For this reason, the typical goal of any Lutheran is to plan how to get people in contact with the Word and the Sacraments. Lutherans attack that goal in two ways: they do whatever it takes to get the Word out into the community, and/or they do whatever they can to invite people to experience worship at the church. These are the goals of the Lutheran because a Lutheran recognizes that he/she has no power whatsoever to change hearts and create faith, but the Means of Grace have that power.

While the power of the Means of Grace is an essential concept to understand in planning, there is another concept to keep in mind. It is not unusual to hear lay people and even to hear a pastor comment on the miracle of Baptism or the miracle of Holy Communion. People that say such things undoubtedly have good intentions and want only to comment on the remarkable work of God through the Means of Grace. However, a proper understanding of a miracle is necessary.

A miracle is when God works outside of his normal means. For example, when Jesus takes five loaves of bread and two fish and turns them into enough to feed over five thousand people, that is a miracle. It is a miracle because typically this is not a way in which God works. Contrastingly, when God works through Baptism to create faith and new life in an individual,

28. *Luther's Catechism*, 14.

God is not working outside of his normal means. God says through Paul, “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Tit 3:5b-7).

The Means of Grace are not miracles and we can take great comfort in that truth. Jesus did many miracles here on earth, but they were hardly ever something that people could have expected on a regular basis. The disciples were eye-witnesses to the wonderful power of Jesus. They had seen him heal illnesses and disabilities and they had seen him show his power over nature, but they never expected these miracles to happen with regularity. For example, when Jesus had five thousand or more people gathered around him near the Sea of Galilee, the disciples did not expect Jesus to work in the way that he chose to work. Jesus performed a miracle by turning five loaves of bread and two fish into enough to feed the people. It would have been presumptuous for the disciples to demand Jesus to work a miracle at their command. In the same way, if God’s faith-giving and strengthening means are considered miracles than it would be presumptuous for anyone to think that Jesus would work this miracle all the time. However, since the Means of Grace are not miracles, but God’s designed way to create faith and strengthen faith, we can count on God to give us exactly what was promised through them every time we receive them.

Ministerial Cause of Salvation

The understanding of how God works remains a dividing issue among Christians today. The division finds its roots in a straightforward question: Can God work in whatever way that he wants to work? Of course, the answer to that question is yes. God is perfectly powerful, and he

can do whatever pleases him. The Psalm says, “Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him” (115:3). If God wanted to, he could appear to someone while they are traveling and reveal to him everything he needs to know for salvation. After all, God worked that way with Paul. He appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus and revealed to him the very one that Paul had been persecuting, Christ. Paul came to faith. What a miraculous story!

Paul’s story is one that demonstrates to people that God has compassion for people. God took the greatest enemy of the faith and changed his heart of stone into a heart of flesh. This is evidence that God can work immediately, meaning that God can directly come and convert someone to believe in him. However, should we expect God to work this way all the time? Why does it make sense to wait for God to work in a way that he has not promised to work and in a way that has only one recorded instance in Scripture? Today if someone were to wait on God to work immediately in his or her life, that person may wait their whole life and never experience God’s immediate work. God not working immediately does not mean God does not love people and this is most certainly not to say God is not able to work immediately, it has already been established he can and has worked immediately. Simply put, God has not promised to work immediately.

God has promised to work *mediately*. God has promised to work mediate through the Means of Grace (as described above). God has entrusted the Means of Grace to universal priests and public ministers of the gospel. In this way, God has also chosen to work mediate through humans. What a gift of God’s grace that he would choose to work through fragile jars of clay to bring the gospel message to the world. Paul wrote about the treasure of the gospel that brings light to the sin-darkened world. In that same section, Paul describes where God has put this treasure of the gospel, "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing

power is from God and not from us" (2 Cor 4:7). The "jars of clay" that Paul references are humans, the fragile vessels in which God chooses to entrust his Word, "to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Cor 4:7). Jonathan Hein writes about this section of Scripture,

The metaphor in this portion of Scripture depicts the relationship between mankind and the Means of Grace in God's plan of salvation. The Gospel is the treasure. It is what has value. It is what has power. Man is but the vessel in which the Gospel is carried. While St. Paul puts man in his proper place he also makes it clear—*man does have a role* in God's saving work. It is not bare treasure, but treasure *in jars of clay*. Man's role in God's plan of salvation is not an insignificant one. Indeed, mankind plays so vital a role in God's plan of salvation that Lutheran theologians have referred to man's role as *the ministerial cause of salvation*.²⁹

The ministerial cause is one of four causes of salvation which Johann Andreas Quenstedt³⁰ distinguishes. The four causes are the principal cause (the Trinity), the impulsive cause (mankind's misery/God's grace/Christ's merits), the instrumental cause (Word and Sacrament), and the ministerial cause (believers).³¹ The division of the four causes does not seek to divide the glory of Christ's saving work, but it is merely an attempt to explain the different avenues through which God works to bring that salvation to people.

The minister plays a vital role in God's saving activity. He is the one who preaches the powerful Word of God to the people, and he is the one who administers the powerful Sacraments. Paul underlines the importance of the ministerial cause of salvation with this passage, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone

29. Jonathan Hein, "Treasure in Jars of Clay: The Synergy Between the Instrumental and Ministerial Causes in God's Plan of Salvation," Wisconsin Lutheran Essay File, 1. (Italics in original)

30. Johann Andreas Quenstedt (1617-1688) was a theologian and more specifically a dogmatician of the Post-Reformation Era. Quenstedt is a well-known Confessional Lutheran writer, who is still read and referenced widely to this day.

31. Hein, "Treasure in Jars of Clay," 2.

preaching to them?” (Rom 10:14). Paul made it very clear in his letter to the Romans that the Word of God has great power, but now he clarifies that the Word is rendered useless if no one will share the Word with others. The Bible is just a dust-collecting book if the pastor does not open it up and share it with others. Hein comments, “The Word is powerful, but it is not effective in cleaning my laundry; powerful, but ineffective in fixing my car; powerful, but has no healing effect upon the sick.”³² Hein is saying that the Word indeed has great power, but the Word will not put on festivals that engage the community and peak interest in the church. The Word will not sprout legs and knock on the doors of the unchurched. God has appointed ministers of the gospel and all believers with the responsibility to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19).

Therefore, the ministerial cause principle is fundamental for a pastor to keep in mind while he is planning. Every plan will seek to recognize and to give credit to the power of the Word and the work of the Holy Spirit, but it will also recognize the critical role that humans play in God's desire to save the whole world. Understanding the ministerial cause of salvation will encourage the pastor to prioritize planning and to take the details of planning seriously. The pastor trusts that God does not need him in order to do work here on earth, but God gives this opportunity as a great gift. God has chosen him to serve. This great responsibility requires constant evaluation and constant growth throughout the life of the pastor, as he seeks to carry God's Word to God's people in the best way possible.

Pastoral Stewardship

The word “pastoral” adds a new dimension to a discussion when it is coupled with “stewardship.” While stewardship in the broad sense is not an easy subject to talk about, perhaps

32. Hein, “Treasure in Jars of Clay,” 4.

adding the word “pastoral” makes the discussion even more difficult. The difficulties exist on account of the level of responsibility which pastors are given. However, this responsibility is a beautiful responsibility as Jones and Armstrong write,

Those entrusted with ordained ministry are called to a life that is deeply attractive, even in its risks, because it takes with utmost seriousness the mystery and complexity of both human and divine life. It is a way of living that, through example, careful study, and gifts of leadership, is able to draw others to the light of God’s kingdom, to the “everlasting holy place”—places of mercy, compassion, and justice; places of beauty, joy, and salvation. It is a deeply human way of living that is “filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:19).³³

While the office of pastor carries blessings as well as challenges that are unique to being a pastor, general stewardship principles still apply to the pastor. John Jeske describes Christian stewardship as, “The Christian’s role as God’s *steward*—handler of possessions, manager of a lavish Father’s gifts.”³⁴ Pastors have been given these gifts to manage. They are not the owners of these gifts. The church will always belong to God and never to the pastor. However God was not stingy in bestowing gifts on pastors to manage. The gifts God has given are numerous, and they fall in a variety of categories. Since there is such a wide variety of things for a pastor to manage, planning becomes even more critical for God-pleasing management of those gifts.

Jeske’s article on Christian stewardship has direct applications to pastoral stewardship. The place where pastoral stewardship begins is in believing the message of God’s Law.³⁵ Jeske writes, “God asks—and without apology—to come first in your life. From the moment Jesus began his public ministry he made it clear that although there are many things God will put up within the human heart, second place is not one of them.”³⁶ Taking that thought and applying it

33. L. Gregory Jones; Kevin R. Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 80.

34. John Jeske, “Christian Stewardship Is Taking God At His Word,” (An essay delivered at the Nebraska District Convention of the WELS, Waco, NE, 13-15 June 1994), 1.

35. Jeske, 2.

36. Jeske, 2.

to planning, one starts to form the spirit behind planning. The spirit behind planning is an application of the first commandment: God is the only God, and he deserves first place in hearts. Therefore this spirit desires, above all else, to make God the center, the focus, and the breath of the congregation. This is also a spirit that continually evaluates the priorities of the congregation: praising God for the times when God has remained the first priority and repenting for the times when God has not had the primary seat in hearts.

The centrality of God in planning is best maintained by continually asking the question, "Why are we doing these things?" Often, churches are the source of many great programs, festivals, and classes. All these things are wonderful contributions to the church's community, but the question needs to be asked, "Why?" Are these programs being run because they have always been run or because someone has a vested interest in them? Are these festivals being put on to outdo the church down the street? Are these marriage classes and financial classes taught because the church has some moral obligation to the community and people expect them? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then we either need to reframe our vision of these projects or get rid of them altogether. At this point, it is obvious that ministry planning is a necessary part of Pastoral Stewardship.

Creating a vision for the congregation and setting goals are two major components to ministry planning. When a pastor and his congregation think about and cast a vision, they are pre-emptively asking the question, "Why?" If that question can be answered before the congregation sets out to run an event or program, then the purpose of the event or program is clear and worthwhile. The purpose the pastor will always drive home is that every event, program, or festival is meant to give glory to God. This is the logical intersection where Pastoral Stewardship and planning meet.

God is not as concerned about the outward actions as he is concerned about the heart. Jeske encourages this regarding offerings, but the same thought applies to Pastoral Stewardship, “What is the reason we bring offerings each week? What would [the congregation] answer? Would the majority respond ‘To help the congregation pay its bills?’ If so, you congregational leaders have got a teaching job ahead of you, helping people to view their offerings as God views them.”³⁷ Just as God is not pleased with the man who gives his offering out of a sense of obligation, so also God is not pleased with the man who runs programs, festivals, and classes without first answering the question, “Why?”

The simple answer to the "why?" in planning and Pastoral Stewardship is the gospel. The reason why a pastor wants to give God glory in the first place is that God loves him so much that he sent his only Son (John 3:16) who took away the sin of the world. Ministry and ministry’s tasks are all focused around that central point, the gospel. The gospel that has saved me, the gospel that has created in me a new heart, the gospel that strengthens me for service in his kingdom, that is always the answer to the simple question, “Why?” When Janke writes about the answer to the question “Why,” he shows the grace of the gospel as it is clearly found in Lutheran teaching. “The core of Lutheranism is grace. Each branch shooting from that core is also imbued with grace. This Lutheran ‘why’ permeates everything we do.”³⁸

Understanding the “why” is a vital step in Pastoral Stewardship, but it is not the end. The “why” is the beginning and what follows is a pastoral ministry that is driven towards excellence in all areas, especially planning. Pastoral Stewardship is nothing more than living our life of sanctification, where the gospel is the motivation and the power to live in a God-pleasing way.

37. Jeske, 12.

38. Janke, 6.

The pastoral words that Paul shares with Timothy speak very directly to Pastoral Stewardship, “[the promise] is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim 4:10, 15, 16).

Paul makes the “why” incredibly obvious and then he gives the charge to “be diligent” and “give yourself wholly.” Paul is exhorting Timothy to carry out his call to the best of his ability and with all of his heart. Since no one will be fully sanctified until entering glory, the pastor will continue to evaluate what is the best way to conduct the ministry entrusted to him.

God’s Plans

Generally, people consider order to be a positive attribute, and they consider disorder to be a negative attribute. A parent never praises his child for a room that has clothes piled up to the ceiling and a strange smell emanating through the doorway. Humans value order, so does God. God is a God of order, as is evident from the very beginning. The very first chapter of the Bible displays the great attention to detail as God created the world. He first creates light and later creates the sun, moon, and stars to bear that light. He first creates sky and water which he later fills with birds and sea creatures. He first creates dry land and vegetation and later he creates animals and humans to inhabit the land and eat the vegetation. God is indeed is a God of order.

When sin entered the world, so did disorder. While humans suffer from disorder, God’s order was not affected. God is still an orderly God. God is a God who has plans. Joshua Schultz writes, “The more we consider God's planning, we see his plans are neither general nor vague.

God's plans are purposeful and specific. God always follows through."³⁹ God does not need to plan in order to accomplish his purposes, but he plans for the benefit of his people. This is best seen in the carrying out of God's greatest plan, the salvation of the world. God promised a Savior as part of his plan as early as Genesis 3:15. Throughout the Old Testament, God carries out his plan by preserving the line of the Savior. Jesus completed God's greatest plan by taking upon himself the sins of the world, dying on the cross, and rising from the dead. Through God's plan, we are saved.

God's plans are certainly greater and better than the plans of men. Solomon makes this very point, "Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails." (Prov 19:21) Humans make all kinds of plans. They have a plan for their money. They have a plan for their children and they have a plan for their future, etc. Solomon says that despite the plans of humans, God's plans will always prevail over the plans of men. For example, David, in devotion to the LORD, wanted to be the king to build the temple in Jerusalem. David said, "Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent." (2 Sam 7:2) David had good intentions, and his plans were certainly to God's glory, but God had a different plan for the temple. As the Bible explains, Solomon would be the one to build the temple and after that, there would be one even greater than Solomon, who would build a house for God and this one's throne would be established forever. David was sincere in his plans, but that did not mean that God would automatically grant David success. God's plans were higher than David's plans.

Christians rejoice that God's plans are higher than their plans because God is a God of all goodness, wisdom, love, and power. The new man in every Christian wholeheartedly trusts his future to their loving God. Paul was a great example of trust in God's plans. In Paul's letter to

39. Joshua Schultz, "The Benefits of Comprehensive Ministry Planning and Its Correlation to Congregational Health." (an essay written for a Senior Thesis, 2015), 7.

the Philippians, he was not sure whether the Romans would put him to death for his faith or whether they would let him live. He wrote to the Philippians about the possibility of his death and said, “For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (Phil 1:21) For Paul, both life and death were legitimate possibilities, and he says that in both of these possibilities he could see God's blessings.

Michael Gafa used a phrase throughout his planning book that acknowledges that God's plans are higher than our plans. He said that “we should hold onto our plans loosely,”⁴⁰ meaning that our plans are not the final authority. God's plan will always succeed and will always be the final authority. Holding onto plans loosely is nothing more than responsibly planning, but also trusting God to do what is best, whether that fulfills the plan or not.

40 Gafa, 32.

THE DITCHES

Godless Pragmatism

The word “pragmatism” is attributed to a group of philosophers⁴¹ of the 1870s who emphasized the importance of the most practical solution. The most efficient and effective way to accomplish a task was always the best option in their pragmatic system. These pragmatists would evaluate the validity and effectiveness of a concept or idea based on the practical result of that concept or idea. Simply put, these philosophers were the fathers of results-driven thinking. Although this philosophy was not made popular until the 1870s, pragmatism has been flourishing in the human spirit since the fall into sin. The argument could be made that the first sin was a pragmatic decision. Eve knew the command of God, “You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden” (Gen 3:3). However, Eve trusted the words of the serpent when he said that she would gain the knowledge of God as the result of eating it. She desired that knowledge and saw that taking the fruit was the best and quickest way to gain the knowledge of God. She did all of this despite the command of God. By eating the fruit, Adam and Eve became the first godless pragmatists.

Years after Adam and Eve, God came to Abraham when he was seventy-five years old and promised him that he would be the father of many nations. Abraham believed God’s promise, but each year would come and go and Abraham’s wife Sarah was still barren. What did Abraham think about this? Could Abraham have been wondering if God’s promise would be fulfilled? God seemed to be taking his time in fulfilling this promise, and both Abraham and Sarah were not getting any younger. Alternatively, maybe Abraham did believe that God’s

41. The fathers of pragmatism were William James, John Dewey, and Charles Pierce. Their pragmatic maxim was this: "Consider the practical effects of the objects of your conception. Then, your conception of those effects is the whole of your conception of the object."

promise would be fulfilled, but it was necessary for him to do something to help God along. The latter appears to be what Abraham and Sarah both chose to believe. Sarah gave her maidservant, Hagar, to Abraham that he might have a child with her. The result was exactly what God had promised. He promised a son and Abraham and Sarah had a son. Pragmatically speaking, Abraham and Sarah accomplished what God had promised by giving birth to Ishmael. Was God pleased with Abraham and Sarah's pragmatism? Scripture does not definitively say either way, but one thing that is obvious, Ishmael was not the son that God had promised.

While pragmatism, as a concept, is not a sin, the concept of pragmatism in the realm of religion tends to restrict God's promise and even leave God's promise and Word out of the equation entirely. Eventually, there comes the point in pragmatism where trust in God to fulfill his promises wanes and what prevails is trust in myself to carry out the task. Is this surprising? It should not be. My sinful nature always turns my focus, love, and attention inwards. That nature is the same nature that exists in *schwärmer*.⁴² It is the basis of the *opinio legis*⁴³, and it exists in decision theology.⁴⁴

The devil certainly knows how to twist any thought, even godly thoughts to serve his evil purposes. He craftily takes the concept of pragmatism and warps that thought to stand in direct contradiction to trusting in God's promises. Consistently and successfully the devil has attacked the command and promise of God in the Great Commission. The devil has removed or diminished God from the action of disciple-making and has thereby removed the necessity of comfort in God's promise to be with his disciples always to the very end of the age. After all,

42. Schwärmer is the German term for "enthusiast." An enthusiast is someone who looks for truth outside of the Word of God. Many times, a schwärmer will look for God to speak to him/her personally, which leads to placing a high value on feelings.

43. The *opinio legis* is the works righteous nature that exists in all people. It is the desire to do something or accomplish something in order to contribute something to God. The *opinio legis* turns inward and not to God.

44. Decision Theology places the burden of responsibility on the individual to be converted and give their life to Christ, rather than believing that only God can take a heart of stone and make it a heart of flesh. (Ezek 11:19)

why does anyone need God to be with them if he can accomplish all the disciple-making on his own?

The same evil spirit that the devil incites in disciple-making is the evil spirit that thrives in the realm of planning. Pastors can quickly and easily come to believe that the health and growth of the church rely solely on them. Gurgel writes about the logical result of this thinking, "[Pastors] can become so anxious about the challenges of the next day, next week, next month, or next year that we indulge in faithless, frantic activity as if everything depends on [the pastor] or become paralyzed by the burden of it all."⁴⁵

While avoiding godless pragmatism might seem like an easy task conceptually, godless pragmatism can subtly creep into the ministry of any pastor. Michael Gafa aptly writes, "No one sets out to make an idol out of a plan, but it happens all too frequently."⁴⁶ Often falling off of the narrow middle road into the ditch of godless pragmatism is the result of a very godly desire to spread the gospel and grow the kingdom of God. Even those who know the scriptural principles of planning are not exempt from falling into godless pragmatism.

The devil is accustomed to leading the pastor to forget about the principles taught in the Bible, but more often the devil uses a different tactic. In movies and books, the tension of the story is often found in a conflict that exists between two people, but other times the tension is found in someone who is internally conflicted. The internal conflict that creates this tension often comes from a decision between two options that stand in opposition to each other. Both of these options are often worthwhile and valid options, and choosing between the two is difficult. This is similar to the tension that the devil creates in a pastor who sets out to plan for ministry. The devil elevates the importance of certain principles while at the same diminishing other principles. This

45. Gurgel, 6.

46. Gafa, 34.

tension leads to an unbalanced approach to planning that unintentionally fails to practice some of the planning principles.

More often than not the godless pragmatist has godly desires. He sets as his goal to win as many souls as possible for heaven and to carry out the Great Commission. He wants no one to face condemnation but wants everyone to come to the knowledge of the truth. This is a thought after God's own heart. In order to remain steadfast in the truth, it is necessary for the planner to harmonize his desire to achieve the result of saving souls with the manner in which he carries out this task. In his fervor to save souls, the pastor may be tempted to use whatever means possible to achieve his desired results. Unfortunately, many times this fervor will disregard godly principles as long as a seemingly godly result is accomplished.

There is a certain harshness to adding "godless" with the title "pragmatist." Are people who are results-driven truly "godless?" It is not the intent of this author to judge hearts. However, if a pastor disregards the biblical principles of planning in order to achieve his desired results, he has left God out of his planning, which makes him godless. At this point, the pastor reaches the height of arrogance. He thinks, speaks, and acts as if he can accomplish godly results without God's help.

The real irony of godless pragmatism lies in the actual results. Godless pragmatism may succeed in achieving the goals of higher attendance and more lucrative offerings, but it encourages shallow, legalistic Christianity. The godless pragmatist reforms his people's outward behavior, but their hearts remain starved for the gospel. Over time these Christians have been the product of the pastor's methods, but not the product of the Holy Spirit's work. The Holy Spirit will not work in a plan that excludes the Bible and excludes God.

The results of godless pragmatism are not only dire for the congregation. The spiritual health and longevity of the pastor are at stake here too. Any pastor who begins to believe that he is the one producing the increase in attendance and offerings will be left to despair when the attendance begins to drop and so also the offerings. If everything depends on the pastor's plan than how can failure be explained? Does this mean that God is not with the pastor? Does this mean that God is punishing the pastor? Not only will the pastor be led to despair, but he might be led to question the goodness of God.

Subtly, the pastor can fall into a theology of glory and think that a lack of results means it is not God's will. God's operation of this sinful world is a little more complicated than that.

Gurgel explains,

There is even one more danger in planning that lurks here: we can fail to humbly acknowledge that it is a good thing that God has subjected this whole world to frustration (Romans 8:20). That frustration to which God has subjected a fallen creation is God's loving testimony that life in this sinful world can never again be our ultimate hope. If by our planning we begin to think that we can almost erase the curse of troubles coming our way or entering the life of our congregations (a subtle or not so subtle theology of glory), then we need to take to heart another inspired word of Solomon: "What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted" (Ecclesiastes 1:15).⁴⁷

God does not want a pastor's ministry to be about building a legacy here on earth. God wants the pastor to prepare souls for heaven. While the pastor certainly wants more and more people to come to church, he is more concerned with the spiritual health of everyone who comes to listen. The pastoral heart cares about hearts: his people's and also his own. The godly planner begins by examining his own heart, knowing that keeping God in planning begins with the heart of the planner.

47. Gurgel, 6.

Lethargic Ministry

Introduction

There is nothing quite like pulling a new pair of shoes out of a box after bringing them home from the store. The scent of newness so easily fills the nostrils, and the shoes go on the feet for the very first time. However, after the first few uses, a blister starts to form on the foot. The constant, prolonged rubbing inside the shoe has caused this sore to appear. While these sores can be painful, with time it is magnificent to see the body work in the exact way that God designed it to work. The place that used to have the sore that was incredibly painful soon forms a callous that is not painful at all. The callous is just dead skin that forms over the sore to protect the body from pain.

From this function of the human body was borne an adjective that is commonly used to describe a person, calloused. A calloused person is someone who appears to show no emotion and has a stony presence. Many times, calloused people are people that have been hurt on repeated occasions. The pain and heartache that they experienced were enough to harden them to the world around them. They became calloused.

Pastors can very quickly find themselves becoming calloused. Often pastors are exposed to repetitive and prolonged issues that start to form this callous. Perhaps this callousness of pastors can be couched in what seems like cynicism. Who could blame a pastor, who looks at marriage counseling differently after twenty years of counseling and having many marriages that have failed? The pastor can pour all of his efforts into helping a couple, but there will never be a guarantee of any success.

While these callouses often form slowly and unintentionally, frequently these callouses can hinder the ministry of a pastor. Evangelical planning literature has formed a callous on the minds and hearts of many Lutheran pastors. Who could blame them? Much of this literature fails

to acknowledge the Means of Grace and the power of the Word, let alone have correct, biblical teachings on Christology or the Sacraments. With the amount of theological garbage that there is to sift through in planning literature, a calloused hardness starts to form in a pastor's heart and mind against literature that lacks biblical understanding.

Evangelical planning literature provokes an emotional response for many Lutheran pastors. If the pastor experiences anger or outrage over the literature, they may soon move on to ignoring it all-together or to fervently speaking against it. The unfortunate consequence of this strong disdain toward planning literature leads pastors toward the other ditch in planning, lethargic ministry.

What's in the Ditch

The Sinful Nature of the Pastor

Around the time that the Church Growth Movement was gaining influence in American churches, Paul Kelm wrote an essay looking at this movement from a Lutheran perspective. Kelm had criticisms for the Church Growth Movement, but he also made an interesting observation, "There may be some validity to the charge that those who object to the use of numbers are rationalizing ineffective ministry."⁴⁸

The importance of numbers and facts in Evangelical planning cannot be denied, but is the Evangelical abuse of numbers and facts a reason to get rid of them all together? Pastors who react to this extreme run quickly to the ditch of lethargic ministry. A pastor who is not willing to look at numbers and facts is merely blinding himself to obvious realities. Gurgel writes about the danger of going toward this ditch, "But even though making plans for growth can indeed become a platform for sinful pride, it is also true that this real danger can be distorted into a pious

48. Paul E. Kelm. "The Church Growth Movement: An Explanation and Evaluation" (an essay on the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File), 3.

sounding smokescreen to conceal less than sanctified reasons to avoid all planning for growth.”⁴⁹

Gurgel then proceeds to list several of these “less than sanctified reasons,”⁵⁰ the pastor could be: lazy, prideful, comfortable, discouraged, saving face, or has false humility that denies gifts.⁵¹

The list of reasons that Gurgel gives is strikingly accurate and shows that there are many reasons that a pastor may hide behind the guise of an anti-Evangelical philosophy as an excuse to conceal other issues. Pastors do not like to come to grips with their failures or sins. Pastors are not different from laymen and are plagued daily by the sinful nature they were born with. At any moment in ministry, even the most driven and motivated pastor can fall into lethargic ministry for varied reasons. No pastor enjoys standing up in front of the congregation feeling that he did not prepare well enough for a sermon. Similarly, no pastor enjoys being asked about the direction, vision, or purpose of the church without having a well-thought-out plan in place.

Falling into the ditch of lethargic ministry for the reasons listed above violates the Pastoral Stewardship principle. God desires faithfulness on the part of his pastors. St. Paul writes, “Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (1 Cor 4:2). God does not demand that the pastor must produce specific results, but God expects the pastor to do all that he can to be a faithful steward, which includes planning. Pastors plan not because it is all about themselves, but because it is all about Christ.

Therefore, a pastor, just like all people, will fall on his knees daily before the Lord and ask the Lord to forgive him. Luther talks about this in general when he writes about the meaning of baptism for daily life. He says, “Baptism means that the old Adam in us should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and that all its evil deeds and desires be put to death. It also

49. Gurgel, 9.

50. Gurgel, 9.

51. Gurgel, 9.

means that a new person should daily arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”⁵² Through this daily forgiveness and the new life, any pastor can plan for excellence in the church. Jones and Armstrong comment, “It is an excellence that is shaped by God’s excellence, nurtured by the new life in Christ to which we are all called in the power of the Holy Spirit.”⁵³

Inability and Inadequacy of the Pastor

At an early age, children are taught to plan for assignments. In lower grades, students have daily assignments that they must plan out in order to complete. As a child advances in school, teachers begin to assign more long-term projects. These long-term projects must be completed on time, while also completing the daily assigned work. Through the process of these long-term projects, teachers hope to teach their students how to plan so that they can accomplish a big assignment on time.

Invariably, every student (at one time or another) falls into procrastination. Besides laziness, procrastination happens for two main reasons: 1) the student procrastinated because he had not been adequately taught how to plan and failed as a result of it, 2) the student procrastinated because he was so overwhelmed in other areas of his life that he did not have time to spend on the project.

Pastors who make similar excuses cause a lethargic ministry. Excuses that pastors never thought they would have when they were seminarians. C.F.W. Walther wrote about the wide-eyed seminarian who believes that he has understood everything, only to find out how little he knows. “When [the students] arrive at the university, they know everything. In their second year of study they become aware of somethings that they do not know. At the close of their last year

52. *Luther’s Catechism*, 10.

53. Jones; Armstrong, 21.

of study they are convinced that they know nothing at all.”⁵⁴ They may come to realize that they know little about how to plan efficiently and effectively. A rookie pastor is not the only one who finds himself having this issue; even an experienced pastor can struggle with how to go about planning. The issue is complicated further by the hectic schedule of a pastor, who can find little personal time, let alone time to plan.

Part of the professional growth of the pastor can be to learn how to plan more effectively and efficiently for his day-to-day tasks and also for ministry planning. It is at this point that planning literature can be very useful for growth. A discerning Lutheran pastor can learn effective methods for organization and planning from both business literature and Evangelical literature. With the sheer number of resources that exist today, no pastor can legitimately claim that they have no way to learn how to become a better planner. Proven methods and immense creativity are at the fingertips of every pastor who wants to gather information and ideas.

Rather than blaming a lack of planning on a supposedly inadequate pastor, it is more likely that the pastor might not plan for another reason. The pastor may not have the relationship with his people that is necessary to lead the congregation forward with a plan. No one is going to trust the plan of a pastor who has not yet earned that congregation's trust. First, the congregation's trust needs to be earned before the pastor can help lead the congregation by organizing the ministry of the church and planning for the future.

Lack of planning skills and lack of congregational trust are not the only obstacles that push the pastor toward the ditch of lethargic ministry. Pastors are asked to take on a large number of responsibilities that consume fifty (or likely more) hours a week. This level of

54. C.F.W. Walther. *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel: Thirty-Nine Evening Lectures*, trans. W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia, 1928), 41.

responsibility may leave the pastor feeling like he is treading water to stay alive and can never get ahead. He may feel like he does not have any time to plan.

For the overworked and overwhelmed pastor, planning seems like just another task that he does not have time to do. However, minutes spent on ministry planning can save hours spent on those ministry tasks. The mundane practice of planning can lead a pastor to be far more efficient and faithful with his time. Jones and Armstrong write about the value of practicing mundane tasks because these mundane tasks can lead to excellence.

We are increasingly convinced that careful attention to practices – and to the diverse crafts that contribute to a practice – is indispensable to cultivating genuine excellence. An essay by Daniel F. Chambliss, ‘The Mundanity of Excellence,’ focuses on the difference between Olympic swimmers and other who get close to Olympic level. He concludes that it is not so much talent or hard work as it is a willingness to focus attention on the mundane that is most central to fostering excellence. Chambliss notes: ‘Of course there is no secret; there is only the doing of all those little things, each one done correctly, time and again, until excellence in every detail becomes a firmly ingrained habit, an ordinary part of one’s everyday life.’⁵⁵

While planning may seem like just another task, it is “the mundane little thing” that separates excellence from mediocrity. The pastor, as a faithful steward, will strive for this kind of excellence in his ministry, realizing that proper planning may even remove his overwhelmed, overworked feeling.

Misunderstanding of the Means of Grace

Satan has cleverly twisted the truth of Scripture by using countless Evangelical authors, who write about planning. Satan is pleased with the absence of the Means of Grace in Evangelical planning literature because he has led many people into error on account of it. The public nature of this false doctrine has made the effects even worse. Walther writes,

False doctrine is poison to the soul. An entire banqueting party drinking from cups containing an admixture of arsenic can drink physical death from its cups. So an entire audience can invite spiritual and eternal death by listening to a sermon that contains an

55. Jones; Armstrong, 57.

admixture of the poison of false doctrine. A person can be deprived of his soul's salvation by a single false comfort or a single false reproof administered to him.⁵⁶

As the Lutheran pastor observes Satan's wreckage contained in Evangelical planning literature, he is led to shake his head in disgust. How could such a beautiful truth of the Bible be so easily lost? Without the Means of Grace, Christians lose the pipeline that connects them to Christ. They lose the faith that is promised in Baptism. They lose the forgiveness given in the Lord's Supper. They lose the power of the Word of God. They lose the precious truths that many Lutheran pastors hold dear.

The reaction of Lutheran pastors to Evangelical literature is expected, and it could even be considered an appropriate reaction. If someone is going to challenge the power to the Word of God and Sacraments then in defense, pastors need to emphasize that same power that is being challenged. In this way, pastors can stand up for the truths of Scripture that are absent from Evangelical literature. After all, the Means of Grace have God's power. The Apostle Paul writes, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because *it is the power of God* that brings salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16, emphasis added). How could anyone deny the truth of this power from an obvious passage like this? The truth seems to be so plainly written. In response, when someone refuses to accept such an obvious truth, Lutheran pastors often hover between frustration and outrage.

The longer that frustration and outrage fester in the pastor's heart, the level of disgust rises toward the false doctrine of Evangelicals. In an attempt to avoid the ditch of godless pragmatism that many Evangelicals have fallen into, some Lutheran pastors unintentionally find themselves walking into the ditch on the other side of the road.

56. Walther, 20.

No doctrine is safe from the devil's ability to twist the truth, not even the truth of the power of the Means of Grace. To put it crassly, the devil can make the Means of Grace into magical words and practices that work like a spell or incantation. Rarely does a Lutheran pastor go to that extreme, but an overemphasis of the Means of Grace can lead to a subtler error. A pastor, who overemphasizes the power of the Means of Grace, can abuse this power by using the power of the Word as a crutch to avoid preparing faithfully. This abuse creeps into preparation for sermons, Bible studies, or devotions. This abuse of the Means of Grace can also be an excuse for a pastor to avoid the work of long-term, ministry planning. If a pastor overemphasizes the Means of Grace to the point that they become magical words and practices, then why is there any need for the pastor? The pastor becomes a non-factor in the administering of the Means of Grace because it does not matter how he administers as long as the proper words are spoken. If the Word is merely an incantation, then why does any pastor need a plan for outreach or a vision for the future? Will not the Word do all the work? While the answers to these questions are obvious, many pastors lean toward this error as a defense against the total rejection of the Means of Grace.

No confessional Lutheran would dare deny the great power of the Word of God, especially after witnessing the Word and Sacraments work first hand in their ministry. However, when the power of the Means of Grace is overemphasized, the principles of the Ministerial Cause of Salvation and Pastoral Stewardship tend to be violated.

Ministry planning is not meant to detract or erode the power of the Means of Grace. Planning can serve the exact opposite purpose. Gurgel wrote, "Planning can become an exercise of faith."⁵⁷ Pastors can center their congregational plans around the Means of Grace and can set as their goal to reach as many people with the powerful Means of Grace as they can. Even an

57. Gurgel, 7.

Evangelical writer like Aubrey Malphurs understands that there is a relationship between the work of God and the work of the pastor.

It becomes obvious, then, that God has sovereignly chosen to work through strategic thinking and acting to accomplish his divine will on earth. Accordingly, churches must be careful of those who advise them to ignore any planning and simply “let go and let God.” On the other hand, we must not trust our strategies and ignore the role of the Holy Spirit in the process. Letting go and letting God must work in conjunction with strategic thinking and acting.⁵⁸

God will use both the work of the pastor and the power of the Word to carry out his saving purpose here on earth. A pastor is not tasked with the responsibility of figuring out when God will work *through* the pastor’s plan and when God will work *outside* of the pastor’s plan. The pastor’s responsibility is to preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, and faithfully plan to God’s glory.

58. Malphurs, 30-31.

CONCLUSION

Jonathan Schroeder wrote an essay for the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium in 2018 that described the cross that shepherd-leaders carry in their role as a pastor. In this essay, he asserts the biblical truth that God asks all people, even pastors, to bear a cross. The cross is a reality, but not a reality that even pastors particularly enjoy accepting. “The struggle to accept the cross as a necessary consequence of Christianity is not restricted to the great men of history. It is the daily struggle of every shepherd-leader and every congregation, a struggle characterized by the sobering reality that the cross Christ asks us to carry is not generic. It’s completely custom-made for us.”⁵⁹

The pastor’s cross is unique to him. One of the pastor’s crosses comes in planning. He may be the most talented planner in the world and may have all the keys to organizational excellence, but may never actually see tangible fruits from his plans. He may be forced to wrestle with the effectiveness of his own plans and God’s timing. He may never understand why God did not bless his plan in the way that he expected. He may look down the street and see the non-denominational church growing by the hundreds while he struggles to have more than two people in Bible Information Class. On the other hand, he may plan and see the tangible success that his planning produced. With each success that he accumulates, he fights the fierce war against the pride of his sinful nature.

Planning principles are easy to understand, but learning them, applying them, and living them out is complicated in a sinful world, with a sinful congregation, and a sinful pastor. Throughout the course of one year of ministry a pastor may run back and forth between the

59. Jonathan E. Schroeder. “Shepherds Under the Cross” (paper presented at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium on the Pastor as Shepherd-Leader, Mequon, WI, September 2018), 6.

ditches of godless pragmatism and lethargic ministry twenty or more times. However, in every stage of ministry, a pastor must run back to the foot of the cross. At the foot of the cross he lays his inability to carry out ministry perfectly and trusts Jesus to take his sin away. In every stage of ministry, a pastor must plan to be in the Word that he might be able to handle the challenges of each new day. Schroeder writes, “After a few years serving as a shepherd-leader, you may observe that the hardest times in ministry seem to coincide with the times our devotional life has ebbed. It’s not that God is punishing us for our lack of devotional piety, but the absence of it handicaps our ability to meet adversity with faith and rejoice even in sufferings.”⁶⁰

The cross means that planning in a God-pleasing manner will never be easy. The Great Commission was a great responsibility that God gave to his disciples, to pastors, and to all people. But let no one lose heart at the weight of this responsibility, for God has attached his promise: he will be with you always to the very end of the age (Matt 28:20). Through the comfort of the gospel and the power of God’s Word, God grows the heart of the pastor to want spread the gospel to more people so they might hear the truth. God will inspire the pastor’s new heart to use planning as a useful ministry tool. God will also convince each pastor that motivations matter and the manner in which he plans matters. It will always be my prayer that God may continue to help all people, and especially pastors to grow in their abilities to plan to the glory of God.

60. Schroeder, 11.

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