
BROTHERLY ADMONITION IN THE MINISTERIUM

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In nomine Jesu.

Introduction

During my years at the Seminary, it seemed like there was a wedding nearly every weekend in the summer. Those weddings served a useful function for me as a newly-married man. They reminded me of the great gift the Lord had given me in a suitable helper. They also reminded me of the promises that I had made to love my wife the way Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. At times, however, those weddings were a bit painful, and not just because of the lack of air conditioning in the midst of stifling Wisconsin humidity. Weekend after weekend, as I listened to the Lord's will for husbands, I saw my failings and flaws in 3-D. I had not been what God designed for me to be or done what God desired for me to do.

Summer weddings have been replaced by services of ordination and installation. While I do not attend six installation services each summer, I do get to at least a few. Installation services serve a useful function for me as a pastor. They remind me of the great responsibility with which the Lord of the Church has entrusted me and his requirements of those who would serve as pastors of his flock.

At times, however, those installation services can be a bit painful, even in the comfort of air-conditioned churches. As the installing pastor reads the exhortation to the pastor-elect, I see my failings and flaws in 3-D. I call to mind people whom I have not served the way the Lord wanted them to be served. I begin to count the times that I have complained about how difficult and demanding ministry is instead of enduring hardship like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. I think about how often I have stayed in the comfort of my office instead of doing the work of an evangelist or rebuking the one who is living contrary to the will of God. I reflect on the far-too-many times when I have gone without prayer because I was simply too busy – too busy to listen to my Savior and to intercede for the people the Spirit has called me to serve?!?

I won't ask for a show of hands, for fear of what might happen, but I can't imagine that I'm alone in this. I can't be the only man here who has found himself cut to the heart by the rite of installation. If services of ordination and installation have led you down that same path, consider yourself blessed. The last thing the Lord wants is ministers who imagine that the Savior is for others, for "those people." How can they speak of the One they do not know? As we humble ourselves before the Lord, confessing our specific sins as ones called to serve his people, he invariably lifts us up. By his gospel in Word and sacrament, the Lord of the Church sets us free from our sin. By so doing, he sets us free for service. At that moment, it hits us, almost as if we were having the thought for the first time. The One who called us into public ministry knew that we would fail to carry out his work the way it deserves to be carried out. But he called us anyway.

With the Apostle Paul we then see public ministry properly: "Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this *grace* was given to me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph 3:8, *emphasis mine*). We do not in any way deserve the privilege of serving in the public ministry. While we are not by nature equal to the work that he places before those he calls into service, the Lord gives us the ability to do the work.

The list of duties is long. He asks much of those who would serve as pastors and teachers in his church. One of the duties is the specific focus of this essay: admonishing brothers in ministry.

Every pastor is responsible for admonishing his brothers in ministry

By virtue of the call to faith

Many in the visible church in the United States emphasize a “personal relationship with Christ” to such an extent that people are given to believe that Christianity is a personal and private matter. There is some truth to that. No one can believe in another’s place. A reliance on Christ for the forgiveness of sins takes place in the heart of an individual as the Spirit works that confidence through the gospel. However, Christianity is not merely a personal matter. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Our Father,” he was emphasizing that Christianity is not strictly personal. He meant it as a word of comfort, that those who might be tempted to believe that no one else trusted in Christ would know that there were indeed others who shared a common conviction. Jesus also intended it as a word of instruction. He wanted his disciples to recognize that they had a responsibility to all who shared that common confession.

On the day of your baptism, even as the Lord bestowed on you a grace beyond understanding, he also entrusted you with a serious responsibility. In adopting you as his own and declaring you to be his son, he made you a member of his family and gave you a bunch of brothers and sisters. More than that. In baptism, he called you to be a brother. “Brother” is rather like “neighbor” in that regard. “Brother” is not just a title. “Brother” is a job. By the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus emphasizes that a neighbor is one who sees the needs of others and addresses them. In a similar way, a brother is one who cares for his fellow believers and serves them. To be a brother is to be a brother’s keeper. A brother does what is best for his brother by faith in Christ, including the sometimes difficult work of admonishing him. The Lord gives this responsibility to all of the baptized, not just those that he will later also call into public ministry. To be called to Christian faith is to be called to serve as a brother to fellow Christians, even those the Lord appoints to serve as pastors through his Church.

In Holy Communion, the Lord graciously forgives the sins of those who receive it in faith. He empowers them for Christian life and service. But that is not all that happens at that table. Each time a Christian receives the Sacrament of the Altar with his brothers and sisters in Christ, he promises to be a brother to them, admonishing them when necessary.

By virtue of the call to serve as a pastor

Every public minister of the gospel, because of the first call he received (the call to Christian faith), is responsible for admonishing his brothers, whether those brothers are laypeople or fellow servants of the gospel. One could also say that admonition of brothers in ministry is, in a special way, part of the call of every pastor. I would grant that it is not the first thing that comes to mind when we consider a pastor’s work. We think rather of preaching the gospel, teaching the Word in its truth and purity to people of all ages, administering the sacraments in accordance with the Word and the Lutheran Confessions, counseling, evangelizing, seeking the straying, rebuking erring members of the congregation, and living in a way that befits the office. We think primarily of the parish or specific ministry to which the Lord has called the individual and see that as the area in which he is to serve.

That, however, is to think a bit too narrowly. The diploma of vocation typically used in our circles offers this final charge to the individual called as a pastor: "To devote your time, strength and ability to the general advancement of the kingdom of Christ and to the gathering in of his harvest." That has application first to the parish or ministry to which the individual has been called, answering those who would wish to argue, "It's not in my call." That final responsibility listed on the diploma of vocation, though, seems to be focused more on service outside the local congregation. While the responsibilities given by the calling body should receive primary attention, a calling body ought not expect or demand that its worker focus exclusively on the work of that particular ministry. There is a broader aspect to the call the Lord extends to pastors in his church. Some of those responsibilities come simply by virtue of a particular office held. For example, those who serve as pastors of congregations in an area Lutheran high school federation have responsibilities associated with that. Serving as a pastor in a church body the size of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod means that, somewhere along the line, a pastor may well be formally asked to serve beyond the congregation, whether that is in a district office or synodical position.¹

The rite of ordination and installation included in *Christian Worship: Occasional Services* includes an exhortation to the pastor-elect to recognize a responsibility beyond the local congregation: "As a minister of the gospel, you are Christ's ambassador, commissioned by him to preach the Word and administer the sacraments. Our ascended Lord has given you as a gift to his body, the Church, and he has appointed you to love and serve it."² A pastor is not just to love the members of his parish and serve them; he has been given to Christ's Church and is to be cognizant of his duty beyond the lines of his parish. Sometimes, that service will begin with a formal request from a ministry in the area, the district, or the synod. In the specific matter before us in this essay, there will be no formal request from an outside calling body. It's simply a pastor's responsibility to admonish, first as a Christian, but also as a public minister of the gospel. The man who has been trained to serve in gospel ministry and been made competent by the One who called him has added reason to be a brother to his brothers in public ministry.

To be a brother is to do the work of a brother. He is to admonish, in the broadest sense of the word. That admonition, that "putting in mind,"³ may simply be "instruction as to correct behavior or belief"⁴ for a brother who hasn't thought through the application of a principle of Scripture. Admonition might take the shape of warning a brother to avoid a particular approach to ministry because of possible (or likely) harmful consequences. Admonition could be encouragement toward faithfulness, whether addressed as comfort to a brother who feels his efforts have been in vain or as a reminder to a brother who has given something less than his best. Admonition might be a reprimand of the brother who has failed to watch his life and doctrine closely and needs to repent. Throughout this essay, unless

¹ Though a man has the right to decline such positions, he really ought to have a good reason. Your call as a pastor in our church body means that you should think seriously about any request to serve your district or your synod.

² *Christian Worship: Occasional Services* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2004), p. 247. Interestingly, these words in the rite of ordination and installation are not repeated in the rite of installation. The thought, I suppose, is that upon entrance into the public ministry of the gospel you need to understand the responsibilities entrusted to all public ministers, regardless of where they might serve in the years that the Lord may grant them.

³ After reading Professor Cherney's article in the *Quarterly* on "General Linguistics and Some Exegetical Fallacies," one hesitates to say, "This word has the basic meaning . . ." or "this word comes from the words . . ." But I did it anyway. Spicq and Thayer made me do it. Thayer suggests that the idiom in German would be "*an das Herz legen*."

⁴ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Vol. 1: Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: Based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (414). New York: United Bible Societies.

specifically noted otherwise, please hear in the word “admonition” not just the reprimanding of obvious sin, but of all these facets of putting something in a brother’s mind and on his agenda.

One would naturally (and rightly) think first of a pastor’s responsibility to the pastors in his circuit and conference. He will likely have more interaction with them than other pastors in the synod. Additionally, since what happens in neighboring congregations may well have an impact on the congregation he serves and the ministry to which he has been called, a pastor will properly devote his energies to serving the brothers who are nearest to him. This is where he is to show himself a brother by offering admonition in the broadest sense of the word. At the same time, while every pastor is called to work for the advancement of the kingdom in one little corner of that kingdom, he also bears a responsibility to brothers beyond those in his circuit, conference, and district.

In obedience to the law of love

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus gave his disciples this instruction: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:34,35). Inspired by the Savior’s love for us and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we will love our brothers and sisters in Christ. We do so knowing that the love he desires requires more than just saying the words. As St. John notes in his first letter, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” (3:16). Love shows itself in action. Jesus demonstrated love by doing what was in the best interest of others, without regard to cost to self. A pastor who knows the love of Christ will demonstrate that love in the way that he deals with his brothers in the ministry. He will love his brother enough to tackle the sometimes difficult task of admonishing him.

Love for the people of God in general and for members of a sister congregation in particular also make it necessary for a pastor to admonish a brother in ministry. What is best for a congregation is to have a pastor who carries out the duties of ministry in a way that promotes the Lord’s glory, serves to benefit souls, and promotes unity in the church. If a pastor is straying from a proper path, a brother pastor must show himself a brother by admonishing him. He must do so for the good of the flock, that God’s people might be served the way God wants them to be served.

“Be your brother pastors’ keeper” (BYBPK) is not the latest synodical initiative, devised in a synod administration building in Mil-Pe-waukee, put to acronym, and now passed along to you for immediate implementation. This is what your Savior commands. This is what he expects of you as his child and also as his gospel servant. A servant does not retain the right of refusal; he submits to the will of his master. As you willingly carry out the work of admonishing a brother in ministry, you are not only displaying love for your brother and for the gospel ministry, you are actually demonstrating your love for the One who created you, redeemed you, and sanctified you.

Being your brother pastors’ keeper does not require the strategies and skills of a master detective. The Lord does not want you installing hidden cameras in churches, offices, and narthexes across the land. You are not required, in order to be your brother pastor’s keeper, to visit congregational web sites frequently, watch sermons regularly, or read congregational newsletters as a matter of course. You simply need to be aware of what is happening. You need to be ready to be a brother if it is apparent that a fellow pastor needs admonition.

In appreciation for the fellowship the Lord has granted

As we look at the heterodox church bodies all around us, we dare not fall all over ourselves in praise, “Look at us! Our church body has pure teaching and sound practice. We proclaim what God wants proclaimed, even if the world around us (and even the visible church) calls us ‘out of touch,’ judgmental, and unloving.” We cannot boast about orthodoxy and orthopraxy, as if we had created it and preserved it by force of character or strength of will. When we teach God’s Word in its truth and purity and administer the sacraments in accord with Scripture, we are merely doing what the Lord instructs us to do. How could we boast about that? Instead, Jesus says, “You also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty’” (Lk 17:10). We boast not in our church body, but in Christ, “who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption” (1 Co 1:30).

That we ought not boast in the orthodoxy of our church body does not mean we ought not recognize it. We most certainly should. More importantly, we need to acknowledge the source of our unity in doctrine and practice. The Lord of the Church has united us. By the work of his Spirit through Word and sacrament, the Lord has given us a precious gift in the fellowship we enjoy in our synod. There is no better way to demonstrate our appreciation for that gift than by being faithful stewards of it. The Apostle Paul reminds us of what that stewardship entails when he writes, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). We are to take pains to preserve the unity we enjoy. We are to be zealous about keeping that unity on the basis of what God has revealed to us in his Word. A critical aspect of faithfully managing the Lord’s gift of unity and peace is pastors giving and receiving brotherly admonition.

Reasons why pastors fail to carry out their responsibility towards their brothers

I recall, as a child, thinking that my pastor didn’t sin. Actually, I didn’t *think* that. I *knew* that. I never imagined that I could be as good a pastor as he was. I will, however, confess to this: I thought that maybe, if I actually got to be a pastor, I wouldn’t sin anywhere near as much as before. Talk about a pipe dream! The reality is that as a person grows, he recognizes his sin more and more. The sins of omission are too many for a pastor to count. So many important visits go unmade because of the press of other duties. Valuable projects stall because the energy needed to pursue them has been sapped by the day-to-day grind of ministry. Prayers that could have been offered and time that could have been spent alone with the Savior got pushed to the side for the adrenaline rush of crossing off items on the to-do list.

They’re busy

The longer a man serves in a place, the more he recognizes the great amount of work that needs to be done. Pastors who have faithfully carried out the ministry to which they have been called soon find themselves staring at a mountain of work. After years of saying “yes” to anyone and everyone asking for additional work, some have finally learned to say “no” in good conscience. Called by God through a congregation, they desire nothing more than to pour themselves into service to that congregation. In order to do that, they cut out everything they can, including service to district and synod. On the list of items chopped from the list of responsibilities is being a brother to their fellow gospel servants. Someone with fewer parish responsibilities, they figure, can take care of it.

Other pastors, understanding that someone has to do it, willingly take on part-time duties in the district or synod. They do their best to juggle their various responsibilities, recognizing that they may well end up doing nothing quite as well as they wish they could. With the Spirit's strength, they offer faithful and diligent effort, even if those efforts are not quite what might be offered were more time available. Though they recognize the importance of being a brother, they simply have no time left to offer. Without specifically intending to do so, they end up setting aside the work of being a brother, certain that someone somewhere somehow will pick up the slack.

They're lazy

Busy and lazy are regularly portrayed as opposites. That's not necessarily the case. Laziness can actually be cloaked in busyness. Many pastors, if they carefully analyzed their use of time, would see just how much time they spend in busywork. They frequently give the first and best of their energy to items that are urgent, but not important, and use what they might have left to address the important. Addicted to the "high" of completing tasks, they focus on responding to e-mails, answering phone calls, beautifying the service folder, keeping statistics, and attending meetings.⁵ They are as busy as can be. They have time only to address the most pressing matters, while those items that are important but not urgent remain undone, including being a brother to a fellow pastor. Though it seems like busyness, it really is laziness. Instead of doing the hard work of saying, "Yes!" to the important and allowing those items that are merely urgent fall in where they may, many choose the easy route. They let their schedules and activities be dictated to them instead of setting their own priorities and schedules.⁶

Sometimes laziness dresses itself up in "a balanced life." When pastors carry out their ministries with the zeal the Lord desires, they find themselves doing a juggling act. Included in that juggling are not only the many duties involved in public ministry, but their responsibilities to their families and for their own physical and emotional well-being. That balance is particularly difficult to achieve. There are some pastors who spend so much time on ministry responsibilities that they fail to be what God desires for them to be with their families. They need a brother to tell them, "Your life is out of balance. You need to spend more time with your family. You need to get some exercise."⁷ Others have begun to think that ministry should be done around parental duties and that evenings belong to the family. They need a brother to tell them, "Your life is out of balance. You need to make ministry a priority and dedicate the very best you have to the work the Lord has graciously called you to do." While those in the second group would argue that they have a more balanced life, they may well be neglecting the duties to which they have been called, including the responsibility of being a brother to their fellow pastors.

Laziness has also been known to reach into the closet to find a cloak of piety. When it comes to the work of admonishing a brother in ministry, it is easy to say, "That's between him and the Lord. If he isn't doing what he ought to be doing, the Lord will address it. If his teaching or practice is contrary to the Lord's Word, the Lord will take care of it. That's not for me to worry about." That sounds like the attitude of a sincere child of God. But that is not the way the Lord has told us that he has chosen to operate. The Lord

⁵ I am not saying that pastors ought not engage in such activities. The point is that the matters which are important but not urgent need to be prioritized. The urgent, but not important, can be done after the important has been addressed.

⁶ Obviously, there are emergencies that take precedence over everything else. A pastor cannot say to someone who calls from the hospital, "I am doing something important right now and cannot be bothered by the urgent." The challenge is, on a day-to-day basis, to set aside time for those things that are important, but not urgent.

⁷ Professor Gurgel offers that admonition in his excellent essay, "Ordained for Growth."

can do whatever he wants to do; we dare not limit him in any way. However, he has revealed to us that he will work through means. And the means by which he wishes to admonish pastors? Through his people, including the pastors' brothers.

They're afraid

Many pastors recognize the responsibility they have toward their brothers in ministry. They make being a brother a priority. However, when the time comes to address a brother, fear overcomes them. All they can think about are the worst possible results. "He will probably become defensive. He will ask me what right I have to address him when I am far from a perfect pastor. It will turn into a fight. His feelings will be hurt. The relationship will be damaged at best and destroyed at worst. Nothing good will result." (It is difficult enough to confront a member of the congregation, who ought to recognize that you have been called by God to do so. But to address a brother pastor, who may act as if you are in no position to say anything to him? That seems significantly more challenging.) Just like that, fear wins. A man quickly talks himself out of doing what is good and God-pleasing.

They respect the divine call

"All Christians are priests, but not all are pastors," Dr. Luther wrote in his exposition of Psalm 82.⁸ It is a divine call, issued by the Lord through his Church, that makes a priest also a pastor. Because pastors have been placed in that office by the Savior himself and serve as his representatives, they are to be honored. Some pastors, specifically because they hold the divine call in such high regard, wonder about the propriety of admonishing a brother. Convinced (properly) that the Lord has placed a particular brother in a particular place for his particular purposes, they are uncomfortable speaking to a brother about his choices or his approach to ministry. They feel like they would be busybodies to do so, particularly if the brother hadn't been guilty of teaching false doctrine or acting contrary to Scripture. They fear that they would be setting a poor example for others if they admonished a brother. Though the truth of the matter is that greater respect is shown to the call and the called servant by proper admonition, some have a hard time grasping that.

They're looking out for themselves

More than one pastor dreams of being left alone to carry out ministry in the way he deems best for the congregation and community he is called to serve. If he could have it his way, no one would even think to ask questions about what he is doing and why. Outsiders would remain outsiders; they would realize they were in no position to judge what was being done and would let him serve in peace. No one would suggest that the pastor ought to consider the impact of his activities on others; no one would encourage him to change his practices for the sake of keeping the unity of the Spirit. Knowing that he would like to

⁸ Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 13: Selected Psalms II* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.) (Ps 82:4). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House. For the sake of context, here is a fuller quotation: "No preacher, however pious or upright, shall take it upon himself either to preach to the people of a papistic or heretical pastor, or to teach them privately, without the knowledge and consent of that pastor. For he has no command to do this, and what is not commanded should be left undone. If we want to perform the duties that are commanded, we have enough to do. It does not help their case to say that all Christians are priests. *It is true that all Christians are priests, but not all are pastors. For to be a pastor one must be not only a Christian and a priest but must have an office and a field of work committed to him. This call and command make pastors and preachers.* A burgher or layman may be a learned man; but this does not make him a lecturer and entitle him to teach publicly in the schools or to assume the teaching office, unless he is called to it." (*emphasis mine*)

be left alone, unscrutinized, he treats his brothers that way. If he ever offers any comments on the ministry of a brother, it is only positive. Never would he question a brother's approach to ministry, because he doesn't want his approach to ministry examined. Call it a perversion of Jesus' instruction: "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Lk 6:31). He abdicates his responsibility to admonish because he doesn't want to be admonished.⁹

They misunderstand the "system" in place

Some pastors acknowledge that they theoretically have a responsibility to be a brother. When push comes to shove, however, they really believe that the responsibility belongs to others. "That's the circuit pastor's job. The district praesidium will deal with it. The Conference of Presidents is responsible for addressing it. They have the authority and the final say, anyway." That seems like a reasonable, and respectful, approach – they will not presume to take a position that has not been given them. However, the "system" really begins with a pastor being a brother. You will not find that in the constitution or bylaws, but this is the way we would ideally want all issues to be handled. Brother simply deals with brother. Many matters could be addressed more quietly and more quickly in that way than making it the concern of a circuit pastor, district praesidium, the Conference of Presidents, or the president of the synod.

We could probably identify two extremes in this regard, both of which we wish to avoid. The first is for a pastor to take upon himself every possible issue that might come up throughout the synod, because "that is what a brother is called to do." The second is to divest himself of that responsibility entirely, for whatever reason. As is the case with much of the Christian life, there is a narrow middle road between those two extremes that a public minister of the gospel would wish to follow.

They do not love their brothers

Finally, it always comes back to the Lord's direction to his people: "Love one another" (Jn 13:34). Applied to the pastor in his dealing with fellow pastors, it is this: Do what is in your brother's best interest, regardless of what it may cost. It is in your brother's best interest to admonish him when he has failed to carry out properly the ministry to which the Lord has called him or when his practice might be damaging to the unity we enjoy in our church body. Maybe it will take time away from your other duties. Maybe it will take energy and effort that you don't feel you have left to give. Maybe it will be difficult and make you uncomfortable. But love does not care about the cost.

When a pastor fails to be a brother to a fellow pastor, whether from fear, apathy, a misguided "love," or a myriad of other reasons, he has demonstrated the opposite of love. Looked at from that perspective, hasn't he actually demonstrated hatred? He has revealed that the "old Adam, as an intractable, refractory ass,"¹⁰ still clings to him. By neglect of duty, he has shown himself unworthy of the great and responsible office with which he has been entrusted. Worse than that, he shows that he deserves to be separated from God's love forever. Thanks be to God for the forgiveness purchased with the blood of Christ that covers over our sins! Thanks be to God for the grace he shows in allowing those that he knows will often fail in their ministerial duties to continue to serve!

⁹ He may not believe he would ever need admonition from a brother.

¹⁰ Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, Article VI, paragraph 24, in *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 969.

FOCUS TIME

Spend a minute and a half talking with brothers at your table, with these questions as a guide:

Are there other reasons why public ministers of the gospel might not carry out their responsibility to be a brother? Where do you see yourself in the descriptions given?

How a brother ought to admonish a brother

There could be a number of reasons why a pastor would need to admonish a brother. Sometimes the pastor's failure to watch his life and doctrine closely will be open and obvious and will require a reprimand and a call to repentance. On other occasions, a pastor may need to speak to his brother about a matter that may not be clearly contrary to Scripture. It may be an approach that is unwise that may have unintended consequences. It could be a practice that would be easily misunderstood by others and therefore harmful to the preservation of the unity the Lord has granted us. Though each situation will be unique, the same general principles would hold true every time that a pastor approaches a brother for the sake of admonishing him.

Approach him in love and respect

The Apostle Peter offers this counsel regarding our relationship with one another: "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Pt 4:8). Living as we are in the last days of this world, during which the love of most will grow cold, we are to stand out by the way we treat others. We are to be unwavering in our commitment to our fellow believers. Peter suggests that earnest love will show itself in covering over the sins of a brother and concealing them from view. Concerned for the reputation of his brother, a pastor will not have as his first order of business firing off an e-mail to make others aware of a brother's sin or his unwise practice. Quite to the contrary, he will do all that he can so that no one else becomes aware of it.

Out of love for the brother, a pastor will not immediately jump to a conclusion regarding what he has seen or heard. He will give his brother in ministry the benefit of the doubt. He will assume the best, not the worst. Dr. Luther, in the positive portion of his explanation of the Eighth Commandment, says, "but defend him, speak well of him, and take his words and actions in the kindest possible way." In the Large Catechism, he writes, "It is a particularly fine, noble virtue to put the best construction on all we may hear about our neighbors (as long as it is not an evil that is publicly known), and to defend them against the poisonous tongues of those who are busily trying to pry out and pounce on something to criticize in their neighbor, misconstruing and twisting things in the worst way."¹¹ The obvious application of Luther's words is in conversation with someone else, should that person decide to speak ill of a brother. But wouldn't it also be useful for an individual to have the conversation with himself, to speak against the Old Adam who always rushes to judgment, regardless of how little proof might be available to

¹¹ Large Catechism, The Ten Commandments, paragraph 289. Kolb, Robert and Wengert, Timothy J., ed. *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 424.

support that judgment? Because love always trusts, it is willing to consider alternate explanations and it is slow to come to a determination regarding what a brother has said or done.

Consider how the Apostle Paul dealt with the Galatians. He was astonished at how quickly they had deserted the gospel (1:6). He was perplexed by their willingness to believe those who were preaching a message that contradicted the gospel (4:20). He feared that he had wasted his efforts on them (4:8). Yet he called them “brothers.” Nine times, by my count, he used that term to address them. And that in spite of the fact that they had begun to accept a message that had been promoted as superior to what the Lord’s Apostle had proclaimed. Once St. Paul even referred to them as “my brothers” (5:13), indicating his personal love and respect for them as individuals. The letter closes with the Apostle saying, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen” (6:18).

That’s the way in which a pastor ought to admonish another pastor. Above all, bear in mind that this is a man that the Lord wants to restore. Remind yourself that he is a brother in Christian faith and a brother in public ministry. More than that. Keep in mind that he is not part of a nameless mass of brothers out there, but is actually *your* brother, one whom you are called to love and respect. While many in our society would argue that respect must be earned, that is not the way the Lord would have us deal with one another. Put aside any standards that you may have personally devised as requirements to gain your respect. Freely give your respect to your brother. Don’t just say, “I respect you as a brother,” though that might be a helpful beginning to a conversation. Demonstrate your respect in the way that you speak to your brother. Had I ever been required to admonish one of my favorite professors, I’d like to think that I would have done so with the utmost respect. I would have considered the great blessings the Lord had granted me through that professor and would have attempted to show my appreciation, not just in what I said, but in the way I approached him. That is the kind of respect I am to show to every one of my brothers in ministry.

Part of approaching a brother in love and respect is keeping in mind that a brother may be completely unaware that his practice is unwise or contrary to God’s Word. As a general rule, no brother has as his goal in life to deviate from the teaching of God’s Word. He rather has in mind to share the gospel with as many as he can and to serve people with the Word in the best way he knows how. Chances are that he decided upon a particular practice without carefully pondering all of the implications of that practice. He might have taken a shortcut, basing his practice in large part on a precedent. He saw what others were doing and figured that, since they had been doing it for a while without anyone correcting them, it must be in agreement with the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. He assumed that his adaptation of the precedent was minor.

If you assume a brother knows what he is doing is wrong, you would have to conclude that he has become hardened in his sin. That would probably have an impact on the way you approach him. You might come with guns-a-blazing, ready to shoot him down at every turn. You would prepare yourself for argument and treat him as you would an enemy. And what happens when a person feels attacked? He defends himself. Because he doesn’t hear the word of admonition arising from love or respect, he ends up holding to his practice more steadfastly than he ever had before.¹² Approach your brother with this kind of respect – you are confident that if he understands where his practice or teaching conflicts with the Word of God or may be offensive to others, he will change it. There will be no need to fight with him over it, because he loves the Word of God just as much as you do (*and maybe even more!*).

¹² That’s not to say he is right to do so, of course. We will address that later.

Approach him humbly

The disciples had the argument on more than one occasion. “Which of us is the greatest?” Each time Jesus burst their bubbles with his description of what made someone great. “For he who is least among you – he is the greatest,” (Lk 9:48) he said. On another occasion he offered this description: “The greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves” (Lk 22:24). He even pointed to his own example to prove that in the kingdom of God greatness is measured differently: “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:26-28).

Those who have been called to lead in Christ’s church are called to be servants. They are the servants of Christ, in whose name they labor and for whose glory they serve. Though the Lord could call people to repentance directly, he has told us in his Word that he will use his servants to do so. Every pastor ought to bear that in mind as he approaches a brother in ministry. He is the Lord’s servant and, as such, is to carry out the task the way the Lord would have it carried out.

Not only is a pastor a servant of Christ, he is his brother’s servant. Any servant worth his salt aims to be a blessing to those he serves; he works for their benefit, not his own. That’s the way to approach your brother in ministry. Approach him with the desire to be a blessing to him, to serve him in his important, God-given role as a pastor in the church. The devil suggests an alternate plan: “Go to the erring pastor and hand him your business card, the one that says, in raised letters, the ‘Reverend so-and-so, Chief of the Doctrinal Police.’ Sit him down in his chair and demand that he cease and desist his current practice or else! Play good cop if you have to, but only to impose your will on him and make him submit to your authority.” I cannot imagine any of us following that protocol, but to be forewarned is to be forearmed. Love for pure teaching and practice does not excuse boorishness. It is only too tempting to the incurably proud Old Adam to imagine himself perfectly pure and therefore better than one who has strayed. Words spoken from a proud heart sound like they are spoken from a proud heart and often go unheard, regardless of the volume with which they have been announced.¹³

In Philippians 2, St. Paul writes, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves” (verse 3). We reduce our usefulness to a brother pastor when we allow ourselves to think that we could never have done what he had done. Instead, we want to consider each of our brothers as surpassing us in his love for souls, his commitment to God’s Word, his gifts for ministry, and his usefulness as the Lord’s instrument to bless the people he has been called to serve. Especially do we want to take that view when we find it necessary to address a brother regarding an error in his ways, when the temptation is to do the exact opposite.

Helpful in that regard is a regular reflection on how we became pastors in the church. Read the Apostle Paul’s letters and you can’t help but notice his attitude toward service in the public ministry. He knew that he didn’t in any way deserve to serve as an apostle. The sin he had committed and the wretched nature from which those sins sprang came to Paul’s mind only too often. Confessing that he was the worst of sinners, he could hardly look down at others as his inferiors. He looked up at everyone and let that dictate how he would serve. As we look up to our brothers in ministry, even when they need to be admonished, we are ready to serve them properly, in a way that will more readily be received with

¹³ Again, this does not justify closing ears to admonition from a brother. This is rather a reminder to the one who speaks to his brother that he wants to do so in a way that will be heard.

appreciation. Though the Lord has shown his ability to work through a donkey, we do not want to test him on that in the way we deal with a brother in ministry.

Whether composed by St. Francis of Assisi or someone else, the Prayer for a Life of Service included in the front of *Christian Worship* is a useful one for those who take up the duty of admonishing a brother pastor. These words particularly strike at the heart of the matter: “O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love.”¹⁴ Humility shows itself in listening carefully to a brother as he addresses the concern that you have raised. It means working hard at understanding his perspective and his approach, and picking up some details of which you might have been previously unaware. Maybe when you learn more there will be no need for admonition. If the need for admonition remains, you will be better prepared. Because you have humbly listened, you will be able to address the real situation instead of speaking only to your previous perception.

Serve him gently

A pastor does well to put himself in his brother’s shoes before he ever endeavors to admonish a fellow pastor. Think about how you would react if a brother pastor called and said, “I need to meet with you to discuss some of your practices. What you are doing is downright stupid and you need to stop.” Put on your rose-colored glasses and you might see yourself responding, “I am so sorry that I have not carried out the ministry wisely. Thank you for caring enough about me to talk to me and to help me set a better course for the future. I’ll kill the fattened calf and we’ll celebrate.” Far more likely, you would resent him and respond with something other than thanksgiving.

What can you learn from that regarding the way to approach a brother? Recognize that what you are going to say may hurt his feelings. (Even though your intention is to help or restore, it will not feel that way to him.) While you may end up hurting his feelings, be careful not to destroy him in the process. Recognize, also, that you may come off as arrogant for daring to critique his ministry. For that reason, a pastor may have to go to pains to make sure that he isn’t giving the impression that the brother is a shame and a disgrace, as if he had just been nominated as the worst pastor in the synod.¹⁵ You can deal with him gently even as you point out where he might have strayed from the truth or where his practice might be unwise. Instead of leveling a serious charge over the phone, a brother could say something like this, “Could we get together to talk about some important ministry matters? I come as a brother. I know you have a strong desire to serve God’s people and to reach out to the community. I know you would never intentionally implement a practice that would give an unclear confession. The concerns I have may be completely unfounded, because I don’t know all the details. That’s why I would like to get together and talk about it with you.” By no means would that approach guarantee a positive reaction. He may still feel like he is being attacked, but let that be the result of his defensiveness and not the nearly-inescapable consequence of a brother’s less-than-gentle approach.

In Galatians 6, the Apostle Paul offers this counsel: “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted” (verse 1). In a spirit of gentleness, guided by humility, seek to restore your brother. Make it clear, in your speaking and

¹⁴ *Christian Worship* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), p. 138.

¹⁵ That’s not to say he won’t jump to that conclusion, but do all that you can so that he has no one to blame for that but himself and his defensiveness.

acting, that your over-riding interest is your brother and the ministry to which he has been called by Christ. Do all that you can to make it easy for him to listen to your concern and be willing to discuss it.

Serve him confidently

Arrogance does not become a man of God. Confidence, however, does. The pastor who seeks to admonish and restore his brother can do so with great confidence. That confidence comes first from a knowledge that he is doing what the Lord has commanded him to do. He has not taken upon himself a task that belongs only to others; it is in his call as a Christian and in the call the Lord extended through his church. He is to be his brother's keeper, particularly of those who are in his circuit and conference, but also, when necessary, in his district and synod.

Confidence to do the work of admonishing a brother does not come from a pastor's own abilities, for left to his own devices he would bring everything to destruction. Rather, God-pleasing confidence stems from the Lord's promise to make his people competent for the work he has assigned to them: "Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant" (2 Co 3:5,6). The Lord promises to be with his servants to bless them as they carry out his work. That does not mean that every time a pastor shows himself a brother to another pastor that the pastor will immediately amend his ways. However, while there is no promise of success in the work of admonishing a brother (humanly speaking), a pastor ought not assume that his reproof will be rejected. The pastor who rightly marvels at the Lord's power in working in his heart through the Word knows that the Lord can work an appropriate response in the hearts of others.

FOCUS TIME

Spend a minute and a half talking with brothers at your table, with this question as a guide:

What would you put at the top of the list of "things to keep in mind as you admonish a fellow pastor" and why?

Dealing with a public sin

Jesus, in the words of Matthew 18, tells us how to deal with a brother who has sinned. "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over" (verse 15). The Savior wants us to speak to the individual privately, whether that's by phone or in person, to try to win him over. Sending out a mass e-mail about what a brother has done is not an option that pleases God. The same would hold true of posting something about it on the internet or talking about it with others. The Lord wants to preserve the brother's reputation. He wants to protect the brother's soul. Informing others of a brother's sin directly contradicts his goals. The Lord who has made us new creatures doesn't want us to follow the dictates of the sinful nature, which is eager to bring others down and make himself look good by comparison. Dr. Luther captures only too well the attitude of the Old Adam: "It is a common, pernicious plague that everyone would rather hear evil than good about their neighbors. Even though we ourselves are evil, we cannot tolerate it when

anyone speaks evil of us; instead, we want to hear the whole world say golden things of us. Yet we cannot bear it when someone says the best things about others.”¹⁶

But what about a public sin? When Peter chose to separate himself from the Gentiles in Antioch because of fear of what the circumcision group in Jerusalem might think about him, the Apostle Paul rebuked him in front of everyone. He did so because the truth of the gospel was at stake. Peter had unwittingly, by his practice, encouraged people to think that the kingdom of God was at least partly about eating and drinking and not just God’s gift of righteousness in Christ. Since Peter was “clearly in the wrong” (Gal 2:11), that is, he stood condemned in front of all by his actions, the Apostle Paul reprovved the Apostle Peter publicly.¹⁷ He did so, not because he wanted to prove himself a better servant of God than the one who had been with Jesus for three years, but because of his commitment to the gospel. He feared that Peter’s actions would lead many away from the gospel of salvation by grace alone without the works of the law. Paul wasn’t just concerned for the gospel, though. He reprovved Peter publicly because he wanted to lead him to repentance. He wanted to win his brother over.

In the Large Catechism, the Reformer acknowledged that public sin can and should be addressed differently than private sin.

But when the sin is so public that the judge and everyone else are aware of it, you can without sin shun and avoid those who have brought disgrace upon themselves, and you may also testify publicly against them. For when something is exposed to the light of day, there can be no question of slander or injustice or false witness. For example, we now censure the pope and this teaching, which is publicly set forth in books and shouted throughout the world. Where the sin is public, appropriate public punishment should follow so that everyone may know how to guard against it.¹⁸

It is interesting to note what Dr. Luther cites as a prime example of public sin: the teaching of Rome that had been “set forth in books and shouted throughout the world.” “We *now* censure,”¹⁹ he writes in 1529, “the pope and this teaching.” In the years following the proposed debate on indulgences in 1517, Dr. Luther had worked diligently to point out the errors in Rome. He had done so in the confidence that Rome could be reformed; in the hope that the brother could be won over. When it became apparent that there would be no discussion of the doctrinal innovations that had overtaken the truth, Luther then changed course. Because he did not consider them brothers any longer, he deemed it proper to censure the teaching publicly.²⁰ He spoke and wrote against the teaching of Rome because he wanted to protect the flock, to guard it from the spiritual harm being done by the Pope and his minions.

Without meaning to do an exegetical study of Luther’s words in the Large Catechism, it is worth observing, too, that he speaks of a situation in which the sin is “so public that the judge and everyone else are aware of it.”²¹ A sin to be reprovved publicly, then, is not a sin that may have been committed in public, in the presence of others, but a sin of which “everyone” is aware. While that’s hyperbole, his

¹⁶ Large Catechism, The Ten Commandments, paragraph 264. Kolb, Robert and Wengert, Timothy J., ed. *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 421.

¹⁷ Publicly here in the sense of “in the open, in front of all.” While the Apostle indeed spoke as a representative of Christ and of his church, that meaning of publicly is not intended.

¹⁸ Large Catechism, The Ten Commandments, paragraph 284. Kolb, Robert and Wengert, Timothy J., ed. *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 424.

¹⁹ Emphasis mine.

²⁰ A quick read through the Large Catechism would suggest that Dr. Luther took that counsel to heart!

²¹ *Wo aber die Sünde ganz öffentlich ist, daß Richter und jedermann wohl weiss.*

point is that many people need to know about a sin before it can be spoken about openly (Luther's primary point in his exposition of the Eighth Commandment) and before it requires a public censure.

Public rebuke would not, in every case, have to be the first course of action when a brother's sin is known by many.²² Two goals must be borne in mind. First, there is the goal of winning the brother over by leading him to see where he has gone astray. Second, there is the goal of warning others of the sin so that they are not offended in the Scriptural sense of the term. Both are important. When dealing with a brother in ministry, who has confessed a common faith and has promised to carry out his ministerial duties in conformity with the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, a pastor must prayerfully consider how he, with the Spirit's help, can accomplish both goals.

It may well be that the pastor could, and even should, reprove his brother privately first. As noted earlier, the brother may not be aware of his sin. He may not realize that the sermon posted on his website or an article he authored contains false doctrine or language that could be easily misunderstood. Addressing him privately would provide the opportunity to talk it through and help him see where he has gone astray. Then, perhaps, he could be the one to address the matter. He could acknowledge his error publicly, remove the offensive material, and encourage people to cling to the truth of Scripture. By speaking to the brother first, both goals could be accomplished. If a brother were unaware of his public sin, and he were to be publicly reprovved, his sinful nature might lead him to become defensive and stick steadfastly by something he might have otherwise readily recanted.

Dealing with public sin in the 21st century

You have probably been so engrossed in this topic that you might not have noticed. There is an elephant in the room. We could act as if it weren't there, but then why did we gather for a symposium on Brotherly Admonition? And why would we even have bothered to show up for an essay entitled, "Brotherly Admonition in the Ministerium"? Nearly everyone in this room knows what has happened in the last few years in our church body. Some pastors have been greatly concerned about what other pastors in the synod are doing. So concerned, in fact, that they created a website on which to post blogs about doctrine and practice in different corners of the synod that they deem questionable. So concerned that they prepared and signed a memorial to the synod convention, asking that the convention address one particular matter and move it towards a positive resolution. Other pastors, troubled by the tone of the memorial submitted, prepared and signed a memorial of their own, asking the convention to declare support for a ministry that they felt was being improperly portrayed. The 2011 convention spent considerable time and energy discussing the matter.

Let's talk about this as brothers. What about using a website to point out errors in judgment or weaknesses of a pastor's approach to ministry? What about posting a blog to censure public sin? Is it wise? Is it God-pleasing? Is it beneficial? Our synod website censures public sin every time it points out a false teaching proclaimed by other church bodies. "This We Believe" doesn't just give a positive statement of faith, it also rejects contrary teachings. Whether the church body is specifically named or not, the document serves as a public censure of public sin. The "Question and Answer" section of the synod website often speaks against false teachings espoused by other church bodies. The synod website does what Dr. Luther suggested in the Large Catechism: First, it reproves those whose teachings are publicly set forth in books and shouted throughout the world and, secondly, guards those who might otherwise be led astray.

²² I would consider Paul's approach with Peter to be descriptive, not prescriptive.

Should there be a difference in the way that we deal with the public teaching of a heterodox church body and a public teaching or practice of a brother in our ministerium? I think there should be. While we owe love and respect to every brother and sister in Christ, regardless of their church membership, we have a special debt to those with whom we are united in a common confession. Practically speaking, we have far more opportunities to serve our confessional brothers, with whom we regularly rub elbows. The one who has confessed a common faith and has promised to conduct his ministry in accord with the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions deserves my love and respect. I owe it to him, as part of the “continuing debt to love one another” (Ro 13:8), to speak to him first. I owe it to him to listen carefully, seeking first to understand. Should admonition be needed, I owe it to him to speak the truth in love, with the prayer that he will receive the admonition in the way it was intended and amend his ways for the sake of the gospel. I am obligated to go above and beyond the call of duty for the brother with whom I am in fellowship, because that is what love does.

Be very careful with your use of electronic communication

Before posting blogs about a brother’s error in judgment or his weaknesses, a pastor would have to think long and hard about what he is hoping to accomplish. He would have to decide if the identified goals are God-pleasing and Church-building.²³ He would then have to determine if a blog could actually help achieve those goals, with the recognition that the end doesn’t justify the means. Because there are always unintended consequences, he would want to think about what might happen if he decided to use the internet as his means of public admonition. That can be difficult, of course, because we cannot always foresee how people might take what we might say or do. Some of the consequences, however, are not as difficult to predict.

Blogs and websites aimed at public reproof can quickly become primarily a gathering place for those who are frustrated by what they see happening in the synod, whether it is matters specifically addressed on the blog or not. Instead of being a tool to preserve the unity of the church, blogs may become an instrument of division. A crowd gathers around a common cause and takes the cause as its identity. In order to maintain that identity, they assume the role of detective, looking high and low for additional evidence of their contentions regarding the synod. Sometimes precious little evidence is required before a post makes serious allegations and accusations, because it helps to make the larger case. Without ever intending it, a blog about the false practice or teaching of brothers in the ministerium can lead people to sit together in the cave and say with Elijah, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too” (1 Ki 19:10).

The brothers in our ministerium who have taken to the internet to point out public false teaching and practice of fellow pastors do so, I assume, out of love for God’s Word and for souls redeemed with the blood of the Lamb. Presumably they do so because they love the synod and want it to be a group of brothers walking together in doctrine and practice. They likely do so because they believe, properly, that faith is unyielding. They have taken to heart the counsel Dr. Luther offers in his commentary on Galatians, as he responded to “charges” about the way he had addressed the false teaching of the papal kingdom:

²³ Those are not two separate categories, but rather like “good and right.”

On no account should we humble ourselves here; for they want to deprive us of our glory, namely, the God who has created us and given us everything, and the Christ who has redeemed us with His blood. In short, we can stand the loss of our possessions, our name, our life, and everything else; but we will not let ourselves be deprived of the Gospel, our faith, and Jesus Christ. And that is that. Accursed be any humility that yields or submits at this point! Rather let everyone be proud and unremitting here, unless he wants to deny Christ. With the help of God, therefore, I will be more hardheaded than anyone else. I want to be stubborn and to be known as someone who is stubborn. Here I bear the inscription "I yield to no one." And I am overjoyed if here I am called rebellious and unyielding. Here I admit openly that I am and will be unmovable and that I will not yield a hairbreadth to anyone. Love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor. 13:7); therefore it yields. But not faith; it will not stand for anything.²⁴

I cannot see into their hearts to know exactly why they have decided to use the internet to address what they believe to be public sin or questionable practice. This much I do know. I am to love and respect my brothers in ministry. I assume that they are not intending to divide; they are fighting against the false teaching or practice that they believe is truly divisive. I trust that they do not wish to be the troublers of Israel, but encouragers of unity in doctrine and practice in our church body.

That does not mean, however, that a pastor who loves the truth must demonstrate the unyielding nature of faith by posting to a blog. He should begin by asking the question, "Is this truly a public sin?" There are a couple of aspects to that question. First, is it a sin? Can it be said, unequivocally, that what a pastor said is false doctrine, or is it just not spoken as clearly as I might have liked? Is his practice clearly contrary to what God directs or is it merely unwise? Second, is it public? It would be good to use a definition like what Dr. Luther offered in the Large Catechism – something that is known by all/many. That something has been posted on the internet hardly makes it public, from my perspective, given that precious few might actually see it. That wouldn't mean it isn't contrary to Scripture or that the brother ought not be admonished. He should be. Privately. Only public sin requires public reproof. Making sin public so that public reproof can be given hardly fits with the law of love.

Another question a brother ought to pose before heading out to the internet is, "Will my blog make it difficult for me to address my brother?" Keeping in mind the twin responsibility of winning a brother over and warning against false doctrine, he has to understand the consequences of his action. If he publishes a statement against another pastor, even if he doesn't specifically mention a name, particularly if he does so before taking the time to address the pastor personally on the matter, that brother is likely to turn a deaf ear to anything the man says. He will have a hard time showing love and respect to a pastor who didn't show him enough love and respect to talk to him privately.²⁵ He may have accomplished the goal of warning against false doctrine or an unwise approach to ministry, but he failed to preserve the brother's reputation or show love for his soul.

Before posting to the internet, a pastor would also want to ask the question, "Will what I write make it difficult for others to address the brother?" The blogger doesn't know if someone has in mind to address the brother about his doctrine or practice. If he publishes his comments on a website, will the "accused" feel like he is under attack and close his ears to anyone who would come? Would the brother who was

²⁴ Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*, Volume 26: Lectures on Galatians, 1535. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House), p. 99.

²⁵ I am not in any way saying that a pastor has the right to dismiss the concerns brought to him by a brother who may not have followed the proper protocol. I am just noting the reality that it may be difficult for the pastor to listen to someone who has attacked him publicly without bothering to speak to him privately first.

going to talk to this pastor run into a brick wall instead of having the opportunity to deal with him in a more positive way? This is not to give a free pass on defensiveness, but to warn against inciting someone to defensiveness.

Be very careful how you memorialize

Every voting member of the Synod has the right to submit a memorial for the synod to consider in convention. To submit a memorial is not, *eo ipso*, showing a lack of respect for synodical leadership or being divisive of unity. The right is provided for the good of the synod and the work we do together. The question before us today is how well memorials work in carrying out the work of admonishing a brother.

Some of the questions mentioned earlier would also be apropos for the pastor who decides to prepare or sign a memorial regarding a brother's doctrine or practice. Is it a sin or is it rather that a brother has chosen to operate in a way that you feel is a little too close to the edge? If it's the latter, talk to your brother. He may be able to help you see how his practice is in keeping with the truth of Scripture. You may be able to convince him that, even though the practice might be defensible, it isn't wise and doesn't serve to promote the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Submitting a memorial is to make a strong statement and therefore should only be done after serious thought and prayer.

Another question. Is it a public sin of which many are aware or would that awareness first come as a result of a memorial to a convention? If the purpose of the memorial is to inform people of what is happening in a particular ministry or in our church body, then it is not God-pleasing or Church-building. The Lord would have us protect the brother's reputation, concealing the matter even as we address it with him privately. Though our society contends that we have the right to know about everything that happens, that really doesn't hold true in the church. While we cannot sweep issues under the carpet, those matters should be addressed in a way that serves the individual and the church.

Recently the policy regarding signing memorials was changed. Instead of having the list of signers dwarf the memorial itself, a maximum of three will sign and submit a memorial. While there is a possible drawback to that, in that we may not have any indication of the wide-spread support (or lack thereof) for a memorial²⁶, it may be beneficial. Perhaps more brothers will, instead of using a memorial to take their stand, address the matter personally and privately, with the twin goals always in mind. Those who do sign the memorial have to realize that in so doing they may make it difficult for themselves or others to address the brother. While we cannot allow possible misunderstanding of our actions to paralyze us, since every action can be misunderstood, we do not want to take an action that most would take in a way we did not intend.

²⁶ Those who support the memorial would be allowed to write a letter to the floor committee expressing their support.

FOCUS TIME

Spend a minute and a half talking with brothers at your table, with this question as a guide:

What other questions might a pastor want to ask as he decides how to address a brother's practice, whether it is clearly contrary to God's Word or a potentially-offensive approach?

The synodical system for admonition

Each year, as we celebrate the Reformation of the Church, and talk about the instrument that the Lord used to restore the gospel to its proper place, I think of the words of the writer to the Hebrews: "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith" (Heb 13:7). I want to be like Martin. I want to be just like Dr. Luther as I carry out the gospel ministry with which I have been entrusted. He feared no one. He said what needed to be said, without thought to the consequences. He played no favorites and reproved any who spoke contrary to the Scriptures he loved. What would an imitation of Dr. Luther's faith look like today? To ask it another way: "If the Reformer were a member of our ministerium, how would he deal with brothers who needed admonition?"

The simple answer would be to say, "He would have publicly reproved them. He showed that over and over again, whether it was dealing with Rome or Erasmus or Zwingli or Carlstadt or the Zwickau prophets. If they wrote or spoke contrary to Scripture, he wrote against them, proving from Scripture where they had erred. Out of love for the gospel and for the people for whom the gospel was intended, Dr. Luther tirelessly pointed out the false teachings being presented as truth." While there is much to be imitated in Luther's approach to ministry, I don't know that the times are exactly the same. We will always want to proclaim the unconditional gospel. We will always want to speak out against error. We will always want to protect the flock from false teaching. However, the way in which we do it might be different in our current ecclesiastical situation.

Luther tried, initially, to work through the system in place. He wanted a debate with his superiors regarding the value of the merits of Christ and the merits of the saints. He wanted to discuss with the leaders of the visible church the comparative authority of the Scriptures and the rulings of popes and councils. His attempts to work through established channels failed. He had no choice, at that point, to address public sin with public reproof. The gospel was at stake. The doctrine on which the Church stands and falls was in the balance. Though I hesitate to make the statement, I don't know that we ought to defend our public reproof of a brother with the argument, "I'm just doing what Luther would do." Before we take the step of going public with our reproof, we ought rather to work through the channels that have been established.

The polity that we employ in our church body has not been given by inspiration of God. The Lord has granted his people great freedom in the way that they choose to carry out the work with which he has entrusted them. In that freedom, we (and those who have gone before us) have decided to oversee doctrine and practice through circuit pastors, district presidents, the Conference of Presidents, and the President of the Synod. It is down in writing, even, that all might know how we will operate as brothers

who walk together. I am confident that all of you set aside time each day to read the Constitution and Bylaws of our synod. However, in the unlikely event that you haven't recently committed them to memory, allow me to share some pertinent sections:

The Conference of Presidents shall be responsible for supervising, maintaining, and strengthening synodical unity of doctrine and practice.²⁷

The president (of the synod) . . . shall exercise supervision over the official conduct of all officials of the synod, . . . particularly to insure that it is true to its mission and objectives and that it is being conducted within the framework of the synod's stated standards for doctrine and practice. He shall function in every way as the synod's pastor and chief executive officer of the synod.²⁸

The (district) president shall be responsible for the supervision of doctrine and practice within the district.²⁹

The district shall exercise supervision over its members in matters of doctrine and practice through circuit pastors elected by the circuits of the district for two-year terms with no limitation on the number of terms.³⁰

Consider it an "ecclesiastical reason" not to go public with your concerns over a brother pastor's doctrine or practice. We have decided to ask certain elected leaders to carry out that function. It is their constitutional duty to reprove the brother whose teaching or practice deviates from the Word of God.

When we get to the point, however, that we turn first to the constitution and bylaws to determine what is appropriate, we have arrived at a sad day. Circuit pastors, district presidents, members of the Conference of Presidents, and the President of the Synod have all been duly elected to their offices. Let's be even clearer about that. Congregations in a circuit, through their lay delegates, male teachers, staff ministers, and pastors, extend a divine call to a man to oversee the doctrine and practice in that circuit.³¹ The Lord ultimately stands behind that call, working through his people to place a man in that position. The same is true of each of the district presidents. While we typically speak of them being elected, we would be more exact and perhaps better served to speak of them being called to serve for a term.³² They are representatives of Christ and of the district which asked them to serve in their name. The same holds true of the praesidium. As a synod, through the convention delegates, we call a man to serve as president, who is officially "the synod's pastor."

The Conference of Presidents oversees doctrine and practice, not just through the presidents who oversee doctrine and practice in their own districts, but as a body. Through the Lord's call, extended by his people, the Conference of Presidents has the responsibility for admonishing brothers who have sinned publicly. Dr. Luther, in his exposition of the Eighth Commandment, distinguishes between those who have the office of reproofing sin publicly and those who do not:

To avoid this vice, therefore, we should note that none has the right to judge and reprove a neighbor publicly, even after having seen a sin committed, unless authorized to judge and reprove. There is a very

²⁷ *Constitution and Bylaws of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod*, amended July 2011, Constitution Article VI, Section 2, p. 6.

²⁸ *ibid*, Bylaws, Section 2.00, a, p. 9.

²⁹ *ibid*, District Constitution, Article VII, Section 1, p. 41.

³⁰ *ibid*, District Constitution, Article IX, Section 1, p. 43.

³¹ For that reason it would be a shame if circuits, for the sake of getting more quickly to a break from convention business, thoughtlessly elected or re-elected a circuit pastor.

³² We primarily speak of a pastor being *called* to serve a congregation, not *elected*, though that was the mechanism by which he was called.

great difference between judging sin and having knowledge of sin. You may certainly know about a sin, but you should not judge it. I may certainly see and hear that my neighbor sins, but I have no command to tell others about it. If I were to interfere and pass judgment on him, I would fall into a sin greater than that of my neighbor. When you become aware of a sin, however, do nothing but turn your ears into a tomb and bury it until you are appointed a judge and are authorized to administer punishment by virtue of your office.³³

The following, then, would seem like a good process to follow when a pastor becomes aware of a brother's public sin: First, he would want to speak to the brother privately about the matter, hoping to win the brother over and take care of it in the quietest manner possible. Then, if his attempts failed, realizing that he does not have the office to reprove publicly, he would reach out to the circuit pastor. The circuit pastor would then discuss the matter with his brother. In many cases, the circuit pastor would alert the district president to the situation even before he has spoken with the brother, because of his role as the district president's representative. Should those attempts fail, the district president would inform the Conference of Presidents of the situation. At some point, as the Lord grants wisdom and competence to those he puts in positions of high trust, the circuit pastor, district president, Conference of Presidents, or synod president would reprove the man publicly. They would do so with the twin goals of regaining the brother and preserving the flock from false doctrine or practice.

Those whom the Lord has given the office of reproofing public sin will deal with the brother patiently. They may not work as swiftly and efficiently as others might like, just as a pastor and elders may not deal as swiftly and efficiently with a straying member of the congregation as others might like. However, as Professor Bivens has wisely taught his students over the years: "Patience and love trump swiftness and efficiency any day when dealing with real souls and real issues."³⁴

The brothers who have participated in Conference of Presidents' meetings would likely acknowledge that the meetings are hardly models of swiftness and efficiency. Please do not take that the wrong way. By no means do I wish to disparage the leadership of the man the Lord has called to serve as chairman of the group. He does an excellent job of allowing free discussion while still keeping the members on task. But the matters these men are asked to address often take significant time and discussion.³⁵ Items are regularly pushed to the next teleconference or next face-to-face meeting, because the participants are committed to doing what they are convinced is best, even if that means thinking, studying, and praying more about those issues.

In an "ideal" world, some might think, those called to reprove public sin would quickly announce a decision and then communicate all the details. However, for the sake of preserving reputations and not unnecessarily causing offense, much information will be considered confidential and not made public. There will no doubt be occasions when the resolution of a matter may not be exactly what an individual pastor might have done had he been placed in the office to address it.

³³ Large Catechism, The Ten Commandments, paragraphs 265 and 266. Kolb, Robert and Wengert, Timothy J., ed. *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 421.

³⁴ Or at least this is the report that has come to me. Pastor Mark Hayes, who serves as my circuit pastor, quoted Professor Bivens to that effect in his thought-provoking paper, "Applying Law and Gospel in a Mission Setting." You can find it at wlsessays.net.

³⁵ It helps me to think about how differently issues are handled at a council meeting and an elders' meeting. At a council meeting, as we deal with the business of the congregation, we aim for efficiency and swiftness. Elders' meetings, though, are nowhere near as efficient or swift. And that's fine. Good, even.

It comes down to this: honoring, respecting, and trusting those that have been entrusted with the work of publicly reproving those who serve in gospel ministry. The writer to the Hebrews encourages us, “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Heb 13:17). That, of course, is not a blank check that allows those called to serve in leadership positions to do whatever they wish, whether it agrees with Scripture or not. At the same time, we ought not have as a guiding principle, “Power corrupts, so we have to be watching our leaders very closely.” Give them the benefit of the doubt. Take their words and actions in the kindest possible way. Trust that they aim to promote the proclamation of the truth and the spread of the gospel. Acknowledge that you may not be aware of the details the way they are.

If a pastor has difficulty understanding why a particular matter was resolved in the way it was, he ought to talk directly to the district president involved. The district presidents are good, God-fearing gentlemen who love the Word, love the brothers, and love the souls for whom Jesus shed his blood. Talking to them would be far better than complaining to others about the way it was handled and thus doing damage to that district president’s reputation and others’ confidence in the leadership of the synod. Though the district president may not be able to share all of the details, he can probably provide some insight into the way the matter was handled.

Since district praesidia and district presidents may err, the Conference of Presidents and ultimately the president of the synod would have the God-given responsibility of dealing with that issue.

FOCUS TIME

Spend a minute and a half talking with brothers at your table, with this question as a guide:

What would be some of the consequences of short-circuiting the system in place to admonish brothers for public sin?

How to receive admonition

Do you remember the agony of it all? You had just delivered your first sermon in junior homiletics. You had done fairly well – you needed only two prompts. When you sat down afterwards, however, you realized that the worst was still to come. The critique. What you had deemed a homiletical masterpiece, worthy of at least a 9.5, actually hadn’t risen to that level. And it wasn’t just the Russian judge, either. Both your classmate and your professor pointed out ways in which the sermon and the presentation of the message could have been improved. Though you agreed with some of what was said, and may have appreciated the suggestions, part of you was hurt. You wanted to hear only positive feedback, because you knew the time and energy you had invested in that sermon.

The same holds true for many as they serve in public ministry. They want to hear only positive feedback because of the significant amount of time they have dedicated to ministry. Love for the Lord and for the souls Christ redeemed compels them and guides every decision they make. Words of criticism, even if meant constructively, are viewed almost as if they were an attack from an enemy. Admonition, even if

genuinely offered for the good of the gospel and of the ministry to which the man has been called, is considered judgment of their love for the Lord or for souls.

Let me say this most positively. Receiving admonition is an area in which there is great potential for growth in our circles. I say that not as one who has mastered the task. I speak as one who knows only too well the challenge of receiving constructive criticism and admonition properly. The question is worth asking: how should we receive admonition from a brother in ministry?

Humbly. Consider the brother who admonishes you to be better than yourself. Don't adopt the attitude of "Who exactly are you to talk to me, when your ministry is far from a shining light and has yet to be featured on the WELS Connection?" The Lord's command, "Don't show favoritism" (Jas 2:1), applied to this matter, would mean being willing to accept admonition and constructive criticism from those who may not be dressed in the fine clothes of synodical success and may not be leaders in the annual statistical report. While a brother pastor probably does not know the situation in which you serve as well as you, he may have something you lack about the ministry to which you have been called. Objectivity. Because you are so close to it and have invested so much in it, you may not see how a practice you have adopted either conflicts with God's Word or gives others a faulty impression. He may have much to offer you that you need to hear. Respect him for the courage he has shown in talking with you about the matter directly. It would have been far easier for him simply to talk to others about it and thus damage your reputation.

Receive admonition gently. Assume the best intentions of the brother who approaches you. He has not come to you because he thinks himself better than you. (Maybe he does, but you cannot read hearts. Your Lord would have you take your brother's actions in the kindest possible way.) He has not come to hurt your feelings simply for the sake of hurting your feelings. He has come to you in love. He wants what is best for you. He wants what is best for the body you are called to serve. His love for the Word of God compels him to speak to you.

What too often happens when a brother admonishes us is that the New Man, who welcomes admonition and constructive criticism, gets shoved into the closet. The Old Adam prepares himself for battle, using every weapon he can get his sinful hands on. He immediately pulls out his ministry planner/organizer and points to his diligent labors for the kingdom. Then he asks to see the person's badge, contending that he only needs to listen to his circuit pastor and district president and no one else. Finally, he draws the divine call from its holster and begins to wave it in the face of the brother who wishes to admonish him: "I have been called by God to serve in this ministry. With all due respect, you have not. What the leaders of this congregation and I decide to do is our God-given responsibility, not yours." Though cloaked in the language of Scripture, that is the Old Adam talking. The New Man is more interested in the glory of the Lord and the benefit of souls than in demanding the rights supposedly assured him by a call. Finally, it's not the validity of the call at issue; the concern is the individual's conduct in the call.

The Old Adam continually engages in a campaign to demonstrate to God and to others his importance. He works long and hard to be recognized as an excellent pastor, whom God's people are blessed to have serving them. Admonition stands to undo all the work the Old Adam has done. He simply cannot allow the words to stand, for fear of what might happen to his campaign. He portrays every comment offered by a brother as an unprovoked confrontation. Hoping to preserve his self-worth and self-esteem, the Old Adam leads the pastor to tune out his brother. He thinks almost exclusively about his feelings and very little about what is being said to him.

At its core, the inability to accept admonition from a brother is a spiritual issue, not just a personality flaw. Defensiveness arises from a value system that is completely out of line with what God says in his Word. What makes you valuable is not your ministry success or how many brother pastors respect you or how much your congregation appreciates you. Your value is based exclusively on God's declaration of you in Christ. Though you are by nature sinful, unable in any way to please God or gain his praise, God chose you in eternity to be his own. He sent his Son to live and die in your place. By the work of his Spirit, connected with the name placed on you in Holy Baptism, the Lord adopted you as his child. Your name is written in heaven. You are loved by God himself. "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" (1 Jn 3:1) That's what makes you valuable. Your value does not come from your service to God's people, but from God's perfect service to you in Christ.

The answer to our sinful defensiveness is a daily acknowledgement of just how foolish we are to find our value in what we do for God in public ministry and how well we do it. The antidote to defensiveness is a Spirit-worked recognition that even that sin has been forgiven. Without that daily contrition and repentance, without that repeated killing of the Old Adam, defensiveness will reign. As a result, good and useful admonition will go unheard and the focus will be more on the glory of the pastor than the glory of the Lord.

But what if the admonition is done improperly? What if the brother reproves you publicly without speaking to you privately first? What if he doesn't have the God-given office of reproofing you publicly and does so anyway? What if he attacks you, assuming the worst of you instead of the best? What if he approaches you with such condescension that you are made to feel like a first-grader instead of a grown man? One might argue that the case should be dismissed with prejudice. You need not listen to a person who doesn't show you the respect of following proper protocol. After all, the argument goes, you would only be encouraging him to act that way with others if you listened to him. One question comes quickly to mind: Since when have the people of God looked for loopholes?

Listen to the brother's concerns, even if they were not addressed to you directly or properly. View it as an opportunity to take a careful look at your public teaching and practice. See where you might show love to others by changing what you have been doing. Should you, after serious reflection, remain convinced that the Scriptures do not prohibit the practice you have adopted, you ought still consider giving up the right to continue with the practice. Though you may have taken as a motto, "I will do anything for the sake of spreading the gospel," that doesn't mean you must continue with a practice that others consider contrary to a reasonable application of the Scriptures to contemporary ministry. Particularly is that true if more than one should express concern about an approach that they think might compromise the truth.

Christian freedom is not the freedom to do whatever God doesn't forbid in his Word. That is a caricature of the teaching. Christian liberty is first and foremost the great freedom that I have in Christ from the guilt and punishment of sin and from the foolish idea that I must gain God's favor by my obedience. In relationship to the world in which I live and the brother alongside whom I serve, Christian liberty is the freedom to serve God as I serve my neighbor. In love I will want to give up my "rights" for the sake of a brother. I will want to change my practice for the sake of showing love to a brother who may be troubled by it. If I am asked by a district president or the synod president, for the sake of unity and peace, to discontinue a particular practice, I will want to do so, even if the practice might be defensible. They wouldn't make that request simply to demonstrate their authority, but for the greater good, for

the sake of unity and peace. Persistent disregard of encouragement to give up a right could reveal an attitude and approach that would also need to be admonished.

Fostering an atmosphere in which brotherly admonition is humbly given and thankfully received

Any pastor who has had the privilege of counseling couples experiencing marital difficulties knows how it goes. Each spouse is able to articulate clearly and completely the flaws of the other. While acknowledging in a general way that “I’m not perfect,” they do not see their own flaws anywhere near as specifically. In fact, any flaws they have would almost certainly disappear if the spouse would just change. When it comes to the state of brotherly admonition in our ministerium, it is entirely too easy to view it in the same way – “though I am not perfect, the real flaws in the process of admonition belong to others, not me.” Just as the Lord directs husbands to focus on their own task in marriage, so the Lord would have each of us focus on his own task instead others. He would have each of us, with the strength of the Spirit, help foster an atmosphere in which brotherly admonition is humbly given and thankfully received.

That begins with daily contrition and repentance. As I humble myself before the Lord acknowledging my failure to be the pastor he has called me to be, and as I hear in his Word or from a brother that all of my sins have been forgiven, I am ready to deal with my brothers. I know my sinfulness so thoroughly that I can only look up to them as better than I. Confident of the Savior’s free forgiveness and unconditional love, I am prepared to be a servant who accepts admonition without feeling attacked. This is yet another reason for a pastor to make his Savior’s Word his constant companion.

The pastor who knows the blessing and power of prayer would want to include this on his list each week. Unity is a gift of God, worked by his Spirit through Word and Sacrament. Pray for unity in doctrine and practice in our church body. Pray that brothers will recognize their responsibility to one another and carry out their duties with joy. Pray that the Lord will enable you to be a brother to those who need one and to respect your brother enough to listen should he reach out to admonish you. While you seek those blessings from the Lord, remember with thanksgiving the gifts he has given you. Your brothers in ministry are a gift of his grace. He has given them to you to encourage you, to support you, and to admonish you, for your benefit, that you might be a useful instrument in his hands.

In thanksgiving for the gift of the brothers the Lord has given you, respect them. Respect is hard work. It is far easier for me to brand pastors, with handy labels like “out of the box” or “out of touch” or “stuck in a rut.” Gently encourage others to stay away from that branding, too, and make it your practice to speak positively of your brothers. In so doing, you are working towards an atmosphere in which brothers can be brothers with joy and without fear.

One of the most practical steps to strengthening the bonds of the brotherhood is getting to know your brothers. That requires an investment of your time. Make a point of attending circuit meetings and pastors’ conferences. You’re busy; we understand. Everyone else is, too. Every pastor could find other things to do with the time required by conference attendance.³⁶ Commit yourself to attending because you recognize that you need your brothers and your brothers need you – that is the way the Lord designed his church to be. As we worship, pray, and study together, we build one another up and strengthen the bonds. Time spent together off the conference floor is invaluable. Talk with brothers

³⁶ If you think conferences are time-wasters, seek to be part of the solution. Help work towards more profitable study topics or better discussion. Talk to the chairman. Volunteer to work on a committee to plan conferences.

about ministry. Find out how their families are doing. Think about striking up a conversation with someone you don't know all that well. You may find your ministry enriched and your thinking broadened. When you have invested time in those relationships, you will be that much better prepared to be a brother. You will not be viewed as an enemy on the attack, but as a concerned friend. That's the environment in which admonition is more likely to be thankfully received, as Solomon recognized, "Wounds from a friend can be trusted" (Pr 27:6).

As you work on establishing and strengthening relationships with brother pastors, there is another blessing. You will increase the number of brothers who could approach you to admonish you. Given the sinful nature that clings to you, you may well need a brother on occasion. The people the Lord of the Church has entrusted to your care will be blessed by the work of your brothers. "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Pr 27:17).

A closing prayer

You are your brother's keeper. Your brother is your keeper. Thanks be to God for his grace in giving us brothers whom we can serve and by whom we can be served! May the Lord help us, by his Spirit, to recognize our serious responsibility, to carry it out as he directs, that we might be a blessing to our brothers and they to us, and that through it the Lord might graciously bestow on us unity and peace!

SDG

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