

INTO THE THIRD MILLENNIUM:
PASTORAL CLARITY FOR A CHURCH
CATHOLIC AND CONFESSING*

by

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Texts for Reflection: Isaiah 40:6-11 and Romans 10:13-17

It is an honor for me to deliver the Dean E. Walker lecture for he was a man of deep faith whose teaching reflected an abiding trust in the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ for the world. I also recognize that I stand here today not only on the shoulders of his witness, but also on the shoulders of a long line of scholars and preachers who have addressed issues facing the church. I also have fond memories of a summer's teaching at Johnson City, and time spent with brothers and sisters in Tübingen. For all of this I am grateful. Now to the task at hand.

I am deeply concerned with the renewal of the church for the sake of its mission to the world. My work in recent years has been devoted to the renewal of the ministry for the sake of the church. My concern is for the recovery of vocational integrity, identity, and clarity among those of us who are pastors, so that all of us in the *laos* of God can take our part in the mission of God's love for the world. But I believe we are caught in a vicious cycle of confusion because the concept of the church has become so enculturated. If the church does not know what its identity and mission are, how can the ordained ministry know what it is to be about. And if the ordained ministry of the church does not know what it is to be about, how can the church know what it is and is to be about? The loss of vocational clarity, of calling, poses a serious problem and dangerous temptation for many of us who are pastors. It also poses a clear and present danger for the church facing a pluralistic world in the third millennium.

This confusion, particularly rampant in American Protestantism, is aptly illustrated by the responses of a Jewish Rabbi, a Roman Catholic priest, and a Protestant minister to a difficult question. The Rabbi responded: "The tradition says!" The priest responded: "The church teaches!" The Protestant minister responded: "Well, it sort of seems to me...!"

There really is a crisis in pastoral clarity and ecclesial identity. Yet, I believe more strongly than ever in the vital importance of Christian community. Perhaps the building of authentic Christian congregations, local churches, genuine communities of faith, is the most important theological, ethical, social, pastoral, and ecumenical work we have before us as we face the next millennium. But what do we mean by church and what do we mean by pastoral ministry? It simply doesn't do any good to talk about programs, propaganda, agendas, gimmicks, pep rallies, etc. What is critical is the rediscovery and renewal of authentic Christian community with faithful pastors, preachers, teachers and laity. We speak of gospel realities such as sin and judgment, forgiveness and grace, love and unity, hope and justice, prayer and spirituality, but are these realities incarnate in our clergy and in our communities? I am reminded of those wartime shops along Oxford Street in London during the hard days of World War II. The display windows were full of beautiful and tasty items. But because of the hard times and rationing, there was a little sign in the corner of the window that said, "These goods not available here." Are "the goods" available in our churches? Do we even know what "the goods" are in this time of vocational confusion?

Well, yes and no. Someone has said the Anglicans, when they run into confusion, have at least the liturgy, in which the gospel is told and retold each Sunday. The Roman Catholics, when they run into problems, have at least a long history for identity. The German Lutherans can draw on a deep and vast theological tradition. The church in what were the Iron Curtain countries at least had a persecution that threatened their Christian existence and humanity.

The Latin American churches have a clear mission of liberation and justice in face of oppressive regimes. But what of the North American church--the tendency toward "shake-and-bake" church that is non-liturgical, a-historical, non-theological, without a clear sense of mission, and, God knows, unpersecuted? With what do we face the next millennium?

And, specifically, what of us in our own heritage within the Christian Church, the Disciples of Christ, the Churches of Christ? What of our own theology, liturgy, historical sense, commitment to mission, and reflection of an accepted cultural Christianity, unpersecuted and unthreatened?

With concern for loss of members, with denominational struggles for survival, with the disappearance of any real denominational loyalty or understanding, with cultural wars rampaging within and without the church, what is to be our vocation, our calling, our commitment, our future? Two ways have emerged in the last part of the 20th century which have attracted churches in our tradition. Neither of them do I feel is either viable or faithful.

The one direction is for our enculturated churches to become lost in what I call the Protestant ghetto. The Protestant ghetto can manifest itself in a number of ways. From one perspective, it is to be a part of old line liberalism in which business is done as usual--a sort of social gospel that addresses the latest social issue without much theological integrity, long term commitment, or gospel message. Here the social worker is preferred to the pastor, the change agent to the servant, the therapist to the spiritual friend. From another perspective, the Protestant ghetto is simply a reflection of American cultural values, a kind of establishment religion, a kind of bland and easy going way of life in which the church doesn't look much different than any other community organization. It simply has pious overtones that challenge nothing, question nothing, proclaim nothing, suffer nothing.

Any kind of deep spirituality and life of prayer is virtually non-existent. The genuine missionary spirit is a matter of embarrassment. Grace is cheap, discipleship is absent, the story is forgotten, there is nothing to teach, and religious timidity or confusion is abundant. Just keep the institution running. And what kind of gospel is that?

The other direction many of our churches are opting for is the model of the "contemporary" church espoused by many mega churches. This is seductively attractive because it tempts us with success--growth in numbers, growth in budgets, growth in services. The real and not so hidden agenda and criteria is not the gospel which challenges culture toward repentance and transformation, justice and holiness, but "meeting the needs of the people." What there is of Christology in the mega churches, the church growth churches, the churches that encourage the homogeneous quotient in order to grow and be successful is not a Jesus who comes as God's silent whisper upon the earth speaking of and demonstrating the reign of God, and finally giving his life on the cross of suffering love, but an individualistic and privatistic Jesus who comes to meet the needs of the people. Blatantly put, give them what they want. Give them what they want in worship. Give them what they want in social events. Give them lots of choices. Cater to their tastes. Such churches are fundamentally non-theological, a-historical, traditionless, and liturgically shallow. They represent a kind of wholesale sellout of the connection between Christology and Ecclesiology to pragmatism and the church as consumerism. Ecclesiology is marginalized and demythologized into management and therapeutic models. In this consumerist religion for a consumerist culture, there is a kind of "fast-foodism" about the whole enterprise. It might be thought of as McChristianism or in terms of Burger King's slogan, "Have it your way." Ignoring the fact that the messianic banquet is not a fast food restaurant, the church becomes understood as simply another place to receive goods and services. The church of the cross centered in a theology of the cross is exchanged for the church of the good life of

the American dream rooted in a theology of glory. Accommodation to the clanging beat of pop music or the banality of the empty-headed droning of "praise bands," accommodation to the non-existent attention spans of gen Xers, and accommodation to Americanism's horror of critical and reflective thought and the place of spiritual wisdom, will "only further damage the souls of those the church pursues by such accommodation." (Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology, Summer, 1998). Accommodation to an entertainment model of worship makes one wonder if there will be anything left from the rich orthodox worship tradition to sustain people through sickness, sorrow, suffering and death. I believe the day is not far off when "accommodation," foisted off as evangelism, and "meeting the needs of the people," foisted off as gospel, will come to be seen for what they are: fishing with broken nets.

In one direction there is pure ghetto. In another there is pure boulevard. If the Protestant ghetto offers cheap grace, the contemporary "give them what they want consumerist church, the pure boulevard church, offers an imitation of cheap grace. It is like the hucksters of \$4 Rolexes--a cheap imitation of the real thing, but it looks good on the outside. Is there another option which, once upon a time, was called "The Way?"

In this time of disestablishment for North American churches, in this time of post-Constantinian, post-denominational, post-liberal, post-modern, and post-authoritarian confusion; in this time of cosmic ecclesial paradigm shifts and rejections; in this time of non-reflective "give them what they want," "shake-and-bake" church experience; in this time of pluralism-gone-to-seed-factionalism; in this time of vocational and ecclesial lack of clarity, I would argue for a way ahead for the community *en Christo* that was once called "The Way," to a new sojourning vision of a church at once *catholic* and *confessing*. We have the opportunity of moving from a Christianity of place to a Christianity of way, and from a Christianity of possession to a

Christianity of relinquishment. Leaving behind the place of power, privilege, hierarchy, imperialism, patriarchy, racism, and wealthy comfort, we will begin to pay attention to the geography of the terrain of the Way's journey. In this Way, our theological explorations which accompany our faith sojourn will have to become radically contextual-paying careful attention to the local. But the local will not be parochial because there will be a genuine and authentic dialogue across all boundaries, including the boundaries of faith and unbelief, as has always been when the church is truly catholic and confessing.

The Church Catholic

What do I mean by a church *catholic* as we move into the third millennium? At its heart, I mean the true universality of the church, not a universality that is defined by those in power and with wealth. The gospel did not begin with us and will not end with us. The catholicity of the church refers to the whole church, the church universal, and includes all the years of its history, including both its bright side and its shadowy side. We stand in a catholic faith. We confess a catholic creed. We go by a catholic name. We preach a catholic gospel. We administer catholic sacraments. Unless, that is, we are governed by narrow and sectarian ideology rather than generous and universal gospel. It is a catholic faith that can free us from a parochial narrowness, blindness, and exclusivity. It is a catholic faith that will free us from the factionalism of special interest groups, one-issue oriented theologies, cultural war ideologies used as litmus tests for conversation, and socioeconomic and cultural domestication of the faith. It is the church catholic that should broaden our horizons and deepen our sensitivities and expand our suffering involvement in mission. A church that is catholic recognizes that the community *en Christo* transcends all natural and historical boundaries and will live to manifest that. A church that is catholic recognizes that it is the whole world, the *cosmos*, indeed the universe of all creation, that is the object of God's suffering love. A church

catholic hears its confession of faith as one voice sung in many languages, forms and cultural expressions--one body in *diaspora*. Catholicity is connected to the call of Jesus Christ to the whole world and the sending of the called into the whole world.

You hear, of course, in this affirmation, the third article of the Nicene Creed: "I believe in the one holy catholic and apostolic church." In these "marks of the true church," catholicity is joined by the marks of oneness, holiness, and apostolicity. A brief word about these other "marks."

The oneness of the church is in Jesus Christ and reflects our Lord's prayer that "they all may be one." Unity is not to be understood sociologically, organically, or parochially, but theologically. It is not an ideology or a principle to be achieved, but a gift that is given. According to Ignatius of Antioch, martyred around 110 c.e.: "Where Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church." The unity of the church is found in the one who *calls* the church--the "one Lord Jesus Christ," according to the Chalcedonian formulation. If we as Christians take our "ministry of reconciliation" as a way of being in the world, and take it seriously, then we cannot be blasé in the face of factionalism, sectarianism, and a plethora of institutionalisms that are distrustful, hateful, and arrogant. We live in very practical ways the expression of hope that is the *relös* of God's reunification of all that is divided, separated, marginalized, and alienated.

How can we speak of the holiness of the church when it is made up of sinners like you and me--sinners morally, ethically, religiously, intellectually, and doctrinally? Do we not confess that we are Christians because we are sinners who need forgiveness? Just as unity must be understood theologically rather than organizationally, holiness must be understood theologically rather than perfectionistically. The term itself means to be set apart for a special

purpose and service to God. The setting apart is not an end in itself. The *ecclesia*, the called out, is not called out as an end in itself. The setting apart and the calling out are for the purpose of being sent back into the world of God's primary love. Holiness therefore has to do with the *mess*, the *mystery*, and the *mass*. We see the *mess* we are in and that God was not aloof from the *mess* but entered the *mess*. This is the *mystery* of the incarnation. When we recognize this *mystery* and are held by it, we celebrate the *mass*. And the *mass* means to be sent back into the world. The holiness of the church is in the one who entered the *mess* and *calls* the church. And his holiness was lived in the midst of the unholy for the sake of God's suffering love--among tax collectors and sinners. This brings us back to the church as "the way" that is *en Christo* for the sake of the world of God's love. Holiness is not to escape the world, but to be in the world while not being of the world. We are reminded here that we are *simul justus et peccator*--at one and the same time righteous and sinful. The holiness of the church is impossible without the humility of the church. The choice here is between the politics of purity and the community of compassion. Jesus practiced indiscriminate eating and socializing. His holiness always violated the purity codes with the politics of compassion.

The apostolicity of the church is clearly envisioned in Paul's affirmation: "you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone." (Ephesians 2:19-20) This means that Christian origins and the apostolic witnesses will always be of vital importance to the Christian way. The church catholic is the church apostolic--the church and the faith are historical realities, not disembodied ideas. Rather than apostolic witness, the church today too often engages in religious small talk and numinous gossip. To be apostolic is to be historically connected through collective memory to the origins of the church. This means being a hearing and responding fellowship to Holy

Scripture. It means being informed by the historic creeds which were "nothing more or less than an ordered summary of what their formulators understood to be 'the basics'; they are rudimentary systems of theology signifying what is believed to be the essence of apostolic tradition." (D J Hall, Confessing the Faith, p. 84)

"A faith whose foundations lie in historical event does not despise some organizational ordering of the community that attempts, through the passing on of the credentials of authority from one generation to the next, to safeguard the continuity of the present and future with the normative past." (ibid.) The creeds, of course, both define and distort, and are products of their own historical circumstances. But the scriptures and the creeds are part and parcel of the historical quest for a continued connectedness between a living church and a normative original. Ultimately, the apostolicity of the church is connected to the search for the voice of the one who calls the church into being, and therefore a careful listening to the first witnesses. In Jerome's words, "Not to know the scriptures is not to know Christ."

I must offer here one caveat, the content of which will have to be explored another day and by the multitudinous communities that make up the "catholic way" in all of their varied contexts. All of these "marks of the church" have a shadow side, not the least of which is the shadow of Roman imperial rule which fell over some of the early councils. But to be a church catholic is to be able to live with the ambiguities of light and shadow that make up the history of a living community. The crisis that is the judgment of God always begins with the household of faith and its misuses and abuses of power in the critical analysis of the received tradition. At the same time, these "marks of the church" have been provided to help Christians in each succeeding generation to distinguish the essence from the accidents of the Christian way in the world. As Douglas John Hall argues, "...at a time when there is once again a strong danger that Christianity will disappear into a thousand factions with colliding emphases and ideologies, such traditions ought to be considered providential in a

quite practical sense.”

For example, compare these historic marks with much of today’s experience.

Rather than the one, historic church we have what I call “shake-and-bake” churches in which there is no history, no tradition, no theological and spiritual wisdom. We want a church for every sociological group. Did we not learn at Antioch that when we form separate tables it just isn’t church any more? Apparently not. For we have black church/white church, straight church/gay church, traditional church/contemporary church, man church/woman church, iconoclast church/icon church, social issue church/religious issue church, youth church/elderly church, Xer church/boomer church, conservative church/progressive church, *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseum*. Is it not critical to learn to talk across boundaries, believe across generations, share wisdom across cultures?

Rather than the holiness of the church, defined by the community of compassion, we have the relevant church, defined by the “with it” experience.

Rather than the catholic, ecumenical and universal church, we have the local church gone to seed, the parochial church doing its own thing, forgetful of the prayer of Jesus.

Rather than the apostolic church, we have the contemporary church built around the personality cults of its pastors, the hype of its superstars, and the “friendliness” of its congregations.

In this time of the disestablishment of the churches, the goal of the church catholic would not be to move toward the re-establishment of ecclesial power but the renewal of the catholic vision. This vision will renew our understanding of what it means to “be

church”--not just a voluntary organization for doing good things or meeting the needs of the people. Renewing our understanding of the body of Christ will refocus the church’s life together in its constituting act--the Eucharist, the table of the Lord. Here we come to the deepest mystery and the greatest meaning of the Christian faith. The Eucharistic bread is the body of Christ. The church is the body of Christ. We are in a realm where bread is body and body is church. Incarnation and ecclesiology are reunited. The catholic vision reminds us we are not Manichaeism or Platonist, pitting the spiritual against the physical, but Christian. The catholic vision calls us to be more Augustinian than Pelagian. The catholic vision reminds us that we are more Jewish than Western. It calls us to more of an Elizabethan spirit than a Victorian spirit--we, as human beings, really are “of the earth.” The catholic vision moves us away from the ideational and ideological toward the mystical and sacramental.

And what is the point of this catholic, sacramental vision? To bring together again the body of Jesus of Nazareth broken and offered in history, with the body of Christ in the Eucharistic bread broken and offered in presence, with the body of Christ the church broken and offered in service. In this realm of mystery where bread is body and body is church, and both are sacramental and based on the word of the Word incarnate, then we learn that all is offering, all is participation in the body and blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 10), all is connected to the suffering love of God and the sufferings that are present in the world, and all of life is worship.

And this unites the church *catholic* with the church *confessing*.

The Church Confessing

The word confession means fundamentally “to acknowledge together.” To be a people of faith in the disciple community is “to

confess"--it is to acknowledge together through the way we live, the way we speak, the way we suffer, the way we celebrate, the way we serve. Confession is not simply religious self-expression or enthusiastic and joyful affirmation in words. It is both word and deed, it is both personal and communal. It is the church's vocation and it is not an option. Neither is it the self-promotion or self-aggrandizement of the church or the public relations department of the church. For Christ to increase, the one confessing must decrease.

The word confession, in the context of Christian faith, is used in two different ways, but both share a common reality. We say we confess our sins. But we also confess "the faith"-- we confess Jesus as the Christ. That is, we acknowledge together whom we believe Jesus to be. The commonality between these two uses is that each has to do with telling the truth, as we perceive and understand it. Confession neither makes the sin nor makes Jesus the Christ. But until both are "owned" by the one confessing, an entire dimension of truth is missing. To be a confessing church is to acknowledge together both our sins and our faith. There is no room for pride in either act. Both are borne of humility. The purpose of confession is to disclose the truth to those for whom this truth is intended.

In order to be a confessing church, five things are required of us.

COMMUNITY

The first requirement for being a confessing church is to be a true community of Christian disciples. Not pseudo-community, not voluntaristic association, not social club of like-minded people, not establishment institution, not tax exempt organization, not pious reflection of the surrounding culture, but a true "in-commonness" of Jesus-movement people, a covenant community constituted by being hearers and doers and celebrators of the Word spoken by Jesus of

Nazareth.

CONTEXT

Secondly, confession of faith in the confessing church is always context specific and context sensitive. We do not just "broadcast" the faith in general. This at best is profession and at worst is propaganda. The Christian faith has always been context specific, addressing the real life issues of the day and the real conundrums and confusions, hurts and longings, brokenness and alienation of the people. Just as there is no such thing as "generic spirituality," there is no such thing as "generic confession." The confessing church is always thrust into explicit worldly engagement and specific worldly suffering, usually against its own inclinations and desires for self-protection. Each congregation will be required to confess the faith contextually, speaking and acting in relationship to the specificity of its own setting, addressing the realities of worldly suffering that do not make room for life, grace, healing, justice and redemption.

CONTENT

Thirdly, there must be a content to Christian confession. In a time of pluralism turned to factionalism, what is it that the confessing church confesses? It is not some kind of general religiosity, general truth, general beauty, or general good. According to 2 Corinthians 4:5 "What we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." The content of the church's confession is rooted in the core narrative of the *evangel*--the good news of the gospel. Without identity, a person is "nobody's nothing," according to Anna Freud. Without identity in Jesus of Nazareth, the church is "nobody's nothing," which, ironically, leads it to try to be "everybody's everything." Only from the depth of the content which the church confesses, can the church engage in mission

and dialogue in a pluralistic world. The content of the confession is not a matter dogmatic pride, but of clarity of identity. The core narrative of the Christian faith is the lens through which we look at, interpret, and interact with the world.

CORRECTION

A fourth requirement of the confessing church is to be able to offer a correction for what is "wrong" with both the church and the world. Judgment always begins with the "household of God." The confessing church knows that the church is always in need of correction, reformation, and renewal. Returning to a concept of the church as "the way" implies that we are always on a journey, that we are always a work in progress, that we have never "arrived." This is confession in both senses of the term--confession of sin and confession of faith. But not only is the church in constant need of correction, so are things in our specific contexts that are out of joint with God's love for the world. As the formulators of the Barmen Declaration knew, true confession not only involves affirmations but corrections, not only beliefs but damnations, not only the "we believe," but the "we reject." And this is extremely difficult for a church whose pastors, as Carlyle Marney observed, "are unable to say 'boo' to a church mouse, let alone 'damn' to a culture that is antichrist." In order to contextually shape the good news for the culture in which the church lives we must name what the bad news is!

CROSS

Finally, at the center of the confessing church will always be a cross. This is the starting point of the Christian faith and Jesus on the cross is the revelation of God's identification with the suffering ones. We have been baptized into Jesus' death (Romans 6:3). To be a suffering church, something almost anathema to North American visions of a "successful" church, is to be a confessing church.

Without entering into the sufferings of the various contexts of our world, we can hardly be "a church of Jesus Christ." At the same time, entering into suffering is not to be understood as masochism or the legitimization of human pain. Rather, to take up the cross is to do so in the conviction that the purpose of God is healing and reconciliation and joy--that is, the end of such a way is life.

A church catholic and a church confessing is rooted in the one who calls the church and the one whom the church confesses. How is that call to be heard and that confession made in our current context of pastoral and ecclesial confusion?

For the church to be both catholic and confessing, it will take pastors who are catholic and confessing. In other words, it will take pastors who can read both words and worlds. It will take pastors who passionately know both the content of the catholic faith and the context of the world in which the confessing church lives. In borrowing, elucidating, and extending some insights from Douglas John Hall, I would offer the following. (See D. J. Hall, *Confessing the Faith*, pp. 195-6). The church catholic and confessing does not need managers, it needs thinkers. It does not need promoters, it needs preachers. It does not need public relations experts, in needs pray-ers. It does not need the "hip" but the holy. It does not need communicators who know all the skills of modern communication but have nothing to communicate beyond these methods and skills. The church catholic and confessing needs people whose knowledge of the scriptures, traditions, histories, creeds and contemporary Christian scholarship is more deeply developed than has been required of pastors in the past. It needs teachers, theological pastors, rabbis: learned persons who can prevent the faith from being reduced to platitudes, ethical truisms, and pious reflections of the ruling cultural "values." It needs the tradition of the prophets and the tradition of wisdom. The ministry of the confessing church, if it is to reflect Christ's ministry today and not just bourgeois religion in its lowest

common denominator expression, needs learned laity and learned pastors. Not, it is hoped, men and women who are made pompous by their learning, but persons in whom those who hunger and thirst for truth will be able to recognize something approaching depth of understanding and curiosity. There is already such a slide toward anti-intellectualism and religious *kitsch* that the trend can be altered only with the greatest of effort. Perhaps for the majority it cannot be altered. Nevertheless, the effort must be made, because the alternative is the further trivialization of the faith, and, finally, its relegation to sheer religious froth. And that is a fate too melancholy to contemplate for a faith that could move the intellects and hearts of an Augustine, an Aquinas, a Luther, a Campbell, a Stone, a Simone Weil, a Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Dean Walker, and countless others.

In another time of pastoral confusion and ecclesial upheaval and in answer to the question "what, who, and where is the church," Luther posited seven *notae ecclesiae* in the third section of his *On the Councils and the Church*. These seven marks are: 1) the preached word of God, 2) baptism, 3) communion (the altar), 4) absolution of sin, 5) ordered ministry, 6) prayer, 7) suffering (or the cross). I offer these marks of the church as the quintessential job description for today's pastor of the church catholic and confessing. Preaching the word with context sensitivity, baptizing, forgiving sins, communing, praying, moving the church into places of suffering (along with the study, catechesis, teaching, spiritual direction, visiting, solitude, and collegiality that support these tasks) is, believe it or not, a full time job, demanding all a pastor has to give. Ministers of word and sacrament, a shorthand way of talking about this job description, or preferably, this vocation, is no abstraction. The pastor who is focused on the call to word and sacrament will simply have to say "no" to many good works and just causes in order to say "yes" to this call.

The church catholic and confessing will require pastors whose work leads to and from the liturgy of word and sacrament. The

faithful pastor will know that the heart-beat of congregational life sounds from the chancel rather than the church office or the committee room. A pastor who is calling people from their daily lives to committee meetings, workshops, and work sessions more often than to prayer and worship is serving the present confusion about the true nature and identity of a catholic and confessing church in the world.

The vocational clarity of the pastor is not simply good for pastors; it is essential for the whole people of God. Clarity begets clarity. The pastor's clarity about the pastoral vocation will serve the vocational clarity of the lay people in their priestly work in the world, in their discipleship, in their worldly confession of the faith, and in their own cross-bearing.

Finally, the clarity of a pastor's vocation and identity turns out to be a matter, not primarily of time-management, of administrative brilliance, of professionalism, or of more self-discipline, but rather a matter of faith in Jesus Christ. To refuse to rest and work within the limitations of the call to be a public minister of the Word is to doubt the promise of Jesus Christ in baptism and ordination. To doubt the personal, communal, and political efficacy of the publicly preached Word and celebrated Sacrament, to doubt the efficacy of the church's worship, and so to seek relevance or fulfillment or justification in and by some other work, is to disobey Jesus and to doubt his promises. To abandon patient, prayerful meditation on the Word in search of some spiritual secret of pastoral success and effectiveness, represents a loss of faith in Jesus Christ.

Such is my understanding of the critical nature of pastoral clarity for the church catholic and confessing as we move into the third millennium. Without such clarity on the part of the church and its pastors, we will end with a church with no identity, indistinguishable from the myriad cultural voices that call to us today

in the larger world.

Let me then leave you with this vision, based on the texts in Isaiah and Romans with which we began.

*How are they to call on one in whom they have not believed?
And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?*

From the ear to the heart to the viscera to the mouth--and then to another's ear. That's the way the gospel makes its way. From hearing to believing to confessing to hearing. If salvation were a system of knowledge, then we know God by the insight of the mind. If salvation was founded on morals, then we would come to God by the power of our moral will. If our salvation were a this-worldly achievement, then we could know it by our seeing. But since our salvation comes from beyond our seeing and knowing and willing, then we must know God by hearsay. We must come to know God only by hearing a word that comes from afar. The saving and liberating truth of God travels through history and round the world and around the parish, not as a theory to be comprehended or moral program to be enacted or a puzzle to be solved, but as tidings to be believed.

*But how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?
And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet [literally, the arrival] of those who bring good news."*

How beautiful the pastoral vocation, lived with clarity and integrity. How beautiful the intelligence soaked (literally baptized!) by daily discipline in the words and images of Holy Scripture, so that it may hear and speak the mysteries of God's saving and transforming work into specific, complex situations. How beautiful the mind transformed by Scripture into a genuinely pastoral and theological

intelligence for the sake of the confessing community in the world. **Not that the intelligence claims any beauty of its own. For the human intelligence will wither and fade but the Word of our God will stand forever.**

How beautiful the passionate heart bent every day toward the needs of the people who are famished for the word of God. Not only the faithful who gather but the wandering ones, the marginalized ones, who have no pastor, no hymns to sing, no real community where they belong, and who have not heard the story of their Savior. **Not that the preacher's passion has any integrity of its own. Our passion and compassion will daily wither and fade, but the word of our God burns hot forever.**

How beautiful is the ministry that really trusts and reposes in the Lord's means of grace--the Word and the Sacraments; and which does not worry overmuch about gimmicks, techniques, methods, public relations, or programs. **For the gimmicks quickly wither and fade, and tomorrow are thrown into the fire, but the Word of our God stands forever.**

How beautiful is the personal and moral struggle suffered for the sake of the pastoral call. The struggle to despise all charismatic appeal except the true charisma of the gospel; the struggle to embrace obscurity and the hidden disciplines and to be faithful when no one is watching; the struggle to be pure in heart and body; the struggle to be an example to others, to be faithful in a liberated obedience to God's word; the struggle to allow something of the beauty of the call to penetrate your person. **Not that the power of this ministry rests in our own moral integrity; it withers and fades under the perfect judgment of God's Word which stands forever.**

How beautiful the pastoral journey from Lord's day to Lord's day. How beautiful the feet that really stick to the path leading back

and forth from prayer, study, catechism, pastoral visitation, preaching, baptizing, celebrating the Eucharist, and confessing. Which, as I have said, turns out to be at least a full-time job and doesn't really require a lot of extras to keep you busy or make you feel legitimate. **For our feeling good and self-legitimization will wither and fade, but the Word of our God stands forever.**

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