

# Accepting My Role as Acceptor

Edward H. Schroeder

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## ABSTRACT

*Professional church workers are specifically fingered for the church's unique role of administering God's Christ-connect acceptance of the world. Yet, there are barriers to accepting one's role as "acceptor," which include: (1) lack of measurable success; (2) feelings of inadequacy and guilt; (3) myopia about goals; and, (4) isolation. Still, ministers are equipped for their role as mediators of acceptance. They are able to recall that they themselves are the very gift God would give as was Christ. Their task is specifically defined as ambassadors of acceptance authorized uniquely to administer the forgiveness of sins. Their goal is to be joined to God's restoration of all creation to God as all of Christ's merits and benefits are being trusted by faith. As Christ trusted God's Word to sustain, so ministers in solidarity with all (even and especially the world's outcasts) can find their hope in that same life-giving Word of promise. (Stephen C. Krueger)*

Accepting my own role as a responsible acceptor: That title may sound like a bit of gibberish, but I think it means continuing in the direction we began to travel at the Institute, viz., focusing on what is involved in acceptance, but now directing it to people who like yourselves are the professionals, the "pros" in the work of the church. It is you who have as a life-time job

(at least one for which you are currently being paid a salary) this task of administering the acceptance that God has initiated and brought into the world with Jesus Christ, an acceptance destined not to remain just with Him or just with you, but with the entire world to whom He originally came and to whom He wants to come via you and me. This is true of every Christian. But in special measure it is the professional church worker who has the responsible role, who has been singled out by his Lord through fellow church members. The finger has been put on you and now you are the one who has the special responsibilities.

The topic, "Accepting my role as acceptor," might at first seem similar to trying to convince a person that he ought to like his job or that he ought to love his wife. Actually, that cannot be done by someone from the outside. You cannot get some outsider to convince you that you ought to love your wife, or that you ought to like your job, because if such dedication to wife or to job comes at all, it comes about from the internal factors of being married to that particular person, or being involved in that particular job. Thus it is impossible for some outside force to wave a magic wand and bring something to pass which the internal dynamics have never been able to achieve. So I as an outsider will most likely not be able to convince any of you that you ought to accept the particular role you have as a responsible acceptor in God's ministry of acceptance. If it happens, it will come by re-encounter with that very task itself. In this respect an "outsider" may help and that is what I am going to be trying to do this afternoon – to see what it means to be God's responsible acceptor.

I have divided this into three parts. The first one is the barriers that get in the way of being a responsible acceptor. The second is some biblical material on the role of the responsible acceptor and the role of the professional church worker in the ministry of acceptance. Finally comes an excursus

into the ministry of Jesus Christ himself with the hope that in looking at His ministry from the perspective of acceptance we may see parallels, guidelines, and hints that we can draw from His ministry for our own.

## **BARRIERS**

What are some of the barriers to my own acceptance of my role as a responsible acceptor? My list is not exhaustive. What is here is mainly my own awareness of the several places where I find barriers to my own professional ministry as being one of God's responsible people administering the acceptance of Jesus Christ.

## **LACK OF SUCCESS**

This is a big barrier to any man's joyfully, willfully taking on his task and saying, "yes, this is my job and I am glad I am in it." It has become popular in our generation to be critical of the success motif, especially in the work of the church. There is indeed validity of such critique. On the other hand there may also be a positive place within the church for the success motif. For if the Christian faith is not merely **theory** but is **practice**, then there is a large measure of utilitarianism in it, then it is not completely out of place to raise the question about success. Then there may indeed be legitimate discussion of success and legitimate concern when success is not there. But the important question is: "Just what constitutes success in my role as God's responsible accepting minister?"

Here I suppose most of you are plagued by the same things that plague me. We adopt our own criteria for God's success and, sure enough, we do not see people responding the way we think they ought to respond in terms of all the good things we have obviously been doing. In my own case I frequently mistakenly limit my area of vision when I am measuring response to what is

normally called the “second table” of the Ten Commandments, to external moral improvement. This is not to say that there should not be evidence of success here, but it is interesting that the Lutheran Confessions regularly assert that I first of all must look for success in that area called the “first table” of the decalogue, namely, the fear, love, and trust of God increasing in the people with whom I work. Of course this is difficult to measure, but in the last analysis it may be no more difficult to measure than one’s keeping commandment numbers 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 either, especially if the essence of these is that “we should fear and love God so that.. .” Is it an accident that the New Testament (especially the Synoptic Gospels) regularly focuses on “success” in the “first table” behavior of the people whom Jesus meets rather than on the second?

One exception is when Jesus comes to Zacchaeus. Yet even His new “good works” are not positive improvement in moral behavior but rather restitution, the undoing of the bad things he did before. When Jesus’ own ministry is effective upon a person, the point where the change occurs (the success) as Jesus Himself evaluates it is in the “first table,” at the point of faith – “Thy faith hath made thee whole.”

The success of faith is where a man who previously has not been fearing, loving, trusting God above all things (and probably has been living the moral life to prove it) now starts to fear, love and trust God as he never did before, even though his moral life may not yet catch up to “prove” it.

The New Testament gospels for all their urgency never direct our attention to the new ethical and moral life of those who come to “faith” to show whether Jesus’ ministry with that person was really successful. For all the rather Philistine characters that Jesus hobnobs with, the prostitutes and the publicans, the “syndicate” personnel, the people that in our times the vice

squads would be chasing all the time – for these people we have no single episode (outside of Zacchaeus) which gives any hint of success in their subsequent moral life. But there was great success in their faith. They now began keeping the first commandment which was not the case before.

One factor that we Christian “pros” must keep in mind is the valid measure of our success. A successful ministry does not mean that the thief immediately stops stealing, or that the reprobate husband and father immediately becomes a wonderful family man. But it means first of all that the poor father who is surfeited with problems has stopped to some extent trying to justify his own life (perhaps by drunkenness or cruelty to his wife and children) and in some measure (even though the external things did not change too much initially) has started pouring his own heart and his own troubles back on to God rather than pulling them in upon himself or taking them out upon other people. Even in the later works in the New Testament, the epistles and the pastoral letters, when morality becomes an extreme problem as it does for example in Corinth, the apostle does not say: “You have the gospel all right. You are fearing, loving and trusting God, but your ethical life is still in bad shape; therefore, we have to concentrate on that.” But the apostle Paul himself comes back and says, in effect, “We have to concentrate on the first table areas, your fearing, loving, trusting God. Your relationship with God itself is what is wrong and therefore you have these problems with the second table of the decalogue. Where morality, where the second table seems to be the problem, the apostle regularly focuses it back to unfaith, distrust of the gospel itself. The remedy is to “preach the word” in these areas because without pure gospel there will not be pure lives. There will not be the real life of God in a man and without the real life of God in a man he will not be fearing, loving, trusting God with all his heart, soul and mind;

he will not be loving his neighbor as himself.

## **PERSONAL INADEQUACY AND GUILT**

If the first barrier arises when we are doing everything we can and it just does not seem to work, this second one arises when we are not doing everything we can, whether it works or not. Our first response when we run into our own inadequacy is to feel guilty about it. The simplest form is the guilt of cheating on your own paycheck, that just on a human moral level you are not really doing what you are getting paid for.

As we move into the area of race relations, another form of guilt, a kind of corporate guilt, can also be present. This is what some of the spokesmen say who are more knowledgeable in this area than I am – that we as a race, as white people, are responsible for the suffering of others and unconsciously find ourselves compelled by guilt into situations where we are working with minority groups for their betterment. Somewhat amorphous and hard to put one's finger on but nevertheless present, this sense of guilt is another sign that I live "after the fall." Here too I have not and apparently have not been **able** to live up to what I ought.

The theological problem of guilt is not so much that I cannot accept that person or that I cannot throw myself joyfully into a ministry to unacceptables. Instead, the initial focal point is that I am not able to accept my own guilty self. The guilt itself becomes the barrier I may try to leap over or bulldoze my way through. But in the last analysis I cannot be free to be God's accepting man if I am shackled to my own "unacceptable" self. In terms of our theme for the weekend this means having to accept yourself so that you can be a responsible acceptor of others. It means "faith" so that there can be "works."

The notion of a **responsible** acceptor has the word **respond** in it. I cannot fully, freely, 100% respond to another human being if involved in my relationship with him there is a concern about myself. Even if that concern for self is my concern for my guilt, I am not 100% free to serve my neighbor. Dr. Caemmerer talked about this at last year's institute in his essay "Free Through Christ." He moved out from Luther's little treatise on Christian freedom with its insight that if a man is not 100% ship-shape with God, he will be wrapped up with himself and therefore unfree, therefore structurally unable to be 100% open, 100% available for responding to another human being. (Being 100% open and 100% available is one of the biblical insights about the Christian's ministry to be treated in the next major section. The minister of God's acceptance does not just pass on a gift, but he is the gift and to be a gift I have to be 100% free as gifts are.)

There may be a whole raft of things that hinder me in being 100% available for my ministry. Besides such quantitative ones (as not having enough gray matter, or even when I get a good idea not being able to put it into words, or not mastering the educational and psychological mechanics of human relations or not having sufficient intestinal fortitude to put it across persuasively), there is the qualitative percentage reduction that comes from the "saintly" sins that every Christian is stuck with. Because we are leaders in the church, that somehow gives us the notion that we are supposed to be at least one cut above average and yet we find ourselves so often being exactly at the same cut as the people we have to work with. Who among us really fears, loves and trusts God enough? And who among us endures patiently enough the affliction that God has sent?

Who among us does not often wonder whether history is really governed by God's concern or whether it is just a matter of chance? Who among us does not often doubt that God really

listens to us and hears us? Who among us does not complain that the wicked do have better luck than we devout ones as we notice the wicked always getting ahead? And – to get back to the responsible acceptor – who of us really lives up to the full requirements of his calling?

The sins that still plague the saints, still plague the leaders of the saints. When these inadequacies become the focus for measuring my ministry, the theological root of such perspective of the ministry is legalism. It is the “Pharisee heresy” applied to the pro. It is my measuring myself by my performance, by the qualities for performing that I do or do not have in me, and by the gumption, the drive, the push with which I get those qualities for performing into action.

In his first letter to St. Timothy the apostle discusses this very fact and uses these very words about a legalistic ministry. The apostle’s point here is that in veering away from the authentic ministry of the acceptable acceptor, the people whom he is criticizing here have become legalistic ministers. This is the most debilitating barrier raised by personal inadequacy and guilt. It can trick my “flesh” to evaluate myself by my performance and make of that the ultimate evaluation. That is the “Pharisee heresy,” and it always barricades God’s ministry of acceptance.

## **MYOPIA ABOUT GOAL OF MINISTRY**

A third barrier to accepting my ministry is loss of the vision of where the whole thing is going. It is perhaps easy, once you have been in the game for a few years, to have a sort of daily or weekly agenda: this has got to be done, that has got to be done, and by late Saturday night the sermon, the Bible lesson, etc., has to be ready. But in the whole business the vision gets blurred. When there is no vision, it is not only the people who

perish, but it becomes very difficult for the people's leaders to accept their roles as God's responsible acceptors.

Many of the observers of the church's professional ministry today in all its various forms are emphasizing how it is becoming much more difficult in our day to have and keep a single focus than it was a decade, a generation or a century ago. Because of the variety of demands which apparently with some legitimacy are placed upon the professional church worker, not only the pastor but also those other professional workers within the church are more and more acquiring multiple lists of things that apparently have got to be done. Joseph Sittler has coined the phrase about the "macerated minister," the one who is all chewed up in little bits. Because a little bit of him has to be doing that and another bit that and that, there is not a whole man left. Consequently, there is not a whole ministry left either and therefore it is almost impossible to see a single goal of responsible acceptance of the ministry of Jesus Christ. Perhaps you have sometimes looked back longingly to the idyllic days of St. Paul's ministry when he said that he was able to go at his ministry like an athlete focused on the goal, laying aside the incidental things, not running aimlessly in all directions as we often seem to be and sometimes even in all directions at the same time. He says he was not like a boxer, who was, to be sure, flexing his muscles, but the blows were falling in all directions of the compass. But with his running and with his boxing he was always driving at a target, a specific target.

More and more it has become easy for the professional churchman to just keep the machine going at a variety of levels – the whole synodical structure, the machine of a given parish, or maybe just the machine of my office. I am not saying that what you have to do is just throw the whole machine overboard, but the machine, whatever form it takes, tends more easily to blur

our vision. If we have to work with some sort of machine-like organization, then we will have to work harder to keep our eyes on the goal, to get the vision and to hang on to it. If our ministry is really God's ministry of acceptance, then there are, at the deepest level, non-mechanical elements about it, things that cannot be done by the machine. Human relations cannot ultimately be programmed or mechanized. You cannot just send somebody a recording where a voice sings out, "I accept you," and expect the recipient to say, "Oh, I am accepted." This has to come in person-to-person encounter. This we have to remember especially when we use or produce "programs" of "canned" materials.

It is a healthful exercise for one's Christian imagination to envision what would happen if we would shut down all the publishing houses for one year and every professional church worker had to do as St. Paul had to do, either create his own "materials" or get along without any. Now this would be hard to carry through because we all have backlogs, huge file cases full of things and we would all be grabbing back to it all the time, but it must be worth some consideration that, in the initial age of the church's ministry, the church expanded and apparently spread like wildfire, without canned "materials" coming from perhaps talented and authorized and competent experts, but where every man was by nature his own theologian. I think this is directly connected with that insight that the ministry of Jesus Christ does not function **en masse**, but it functions person-to-person, and that one person can finally only minister to one person, one at a time. Just to regain this vision can be an aid in overcoming the ministerial myopia that makes it tough to accept responsibly your ministry of acceptance.

## FRATERNAL AND THEOLOGICAL ISOLATION

Another barrier to joyful acceptance of one's ministry is a ministry in isolation. For some men it is just plain geographical isolation – separation from fraternal friendly contacts for theological conversation and spiritual uplift. This can work debilitatingly upon one's consciousness and willing grasp of his acceptable role. I know very little about Joe Ellwanger's personal history, but my image of his ministry is that in large measure he has exercised his ministry in isolation, if not geographical isolation, then theological isolation. By this latter isolation I have in mind the occasions in which we have gotten insights, or something has burst upon us, (perhaps the real role of the church, or a new understanding of what the gospel of Jesus Christ really is all about, or how in one specific situation the gospel really makes sense), and then in conversation with other fellow Christians we bubble over with this big disclosure, we meet with stony silence or no comprehension and they say, "Yeah, so what else is new?" This usually does not mean they have discovered it before, but rather that it makes no sense to them. This can be very demoralizing and make the ministry very difficult.

But Jesus Himself, you know, said to His disciples on one rather climactic occasion, "Will you also go away?" and, of course, they did finally leave Him in geographical and theological isolation. St. Paul was not just making converts, you remember, but he was also regularly losing some of his best friends – John Mark, Barnabas, Demas. The Lutheran reformers were plagued by the same sort of thing. Some of Luther's best colleagues and best pupils were the ones who turned out to be anti-nomians and Anabaptists and sacramentarians, leaving him in theological isolation too. On more than one occasion this made Luther wish that he could get rid of his ministry as he sensed himself being forced into the role of lone wolf. St. Paul's own personal

correspondence reveals his need for fraternal theological contact. If such contact is denied us in specific geographical situations, we must all the more seek it out in conversation with the saints past and present in their written word.

It is hard to accept your role as God's acceptable minister when you are simply "plumb tuckered out." Here is one place where Christians must remember that they are not simply spirits floating around in this world, but that they are God's spirited **bodies**, and that therefore the rules of bodily behavior are ones that we do not dare ignore, at least not for very long. The routine of daytime work and night-time sleep is still probably closer to the divine pattern than the other way around. Some of us, especially here at college, occasionally try to turn day and night around. And some of us (probably because of some Pharisee-heresy or some other kind of compelling guilt) think we have to work both day and night. But just plain human fatigue can finally make you say, "I know it is right, and I would like to do it, but by golly, I just cannot any more."

Indirectly, the New Testament has something to say to this. Jesus by no means worked day and night. In fact, the one or two occasions which indicate that He was sleeping, indicate that He was doing it during the daytime when He should have been pulling an oar and helping His disciples. This repose was not because He had been up all night. I think it was siesta. So also when He departed alone into the mountains, I do not think that it was **just** to pray. It might also have been his "preacher's Monday." For as God's incarnate Son He did not try to act as though the rules of human biological existence did not apply to Him. If fatigue is your barrier, take a vacation. You might even go as far as Luther in allowing God to perform His work at times without you. – "When Philip and Amsdorf and I take time out for a glass of beer, God sees to it that the gospel keeps on going."

# THE ROLE OF THE RESPONSIBLE ACCEPTOR

Just what is the responsible role that the professional church worker has, of being God's acceptor? Mainly for my own clarification, I have this divided into three questions which I personally want to work on in the Epistle of 1 Peter, which is going to be part of our Bible study during the course of this workshop. Question No. 1: Just who are you? No. 2; Just what is the real task; in other words, what is the real ministry? No. 3: Where is it all going to end?

## QUESTION 1

Among the words that the New Testament uses for labeling the role that you and I have, are words like "steward." A steward is one who is in charge of someone else's property, someone else's goods. In the classic phrase in 2 Corinthians 5, the role is that of an "ambassador," which also points back to someone else whose spokesman I am. Two other prominent terms are "slave" and "diakonos" (deacon, minister, servant). All of these words, steward, ambassador, slave, minister, are occupational designations, pointing back to the someone else to whom I stand in the steward, ambassador, slave, minister relationship. They answer the question, "Who am I?" by telling me who I am working for. They say: you are God's steward, God's ambassador, God's ministering servant, God's slave. These words remind me of my relationship to this other one, whose sub-agent I am. They also hint at the type of work and at the posture I occupy in the middle between God and some task out here.

All of these terms apply to any Christian, but there is a special term that St. Paul uses in Ephesians when referring to the professional clergy. While speaking about Christ and His work, the apostle says that Christ's gifts the church were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some

pastors and teachers, so that they could equip the saints to do the work of the ministry which is the building up of the body of Christ. Paul here calls us "pros" Christ's gifts to His church. He does not just say, "you people have a gift and now put it to use." That is basically the steward motif, one who has been entrusted with some talents by his master, and now he is supposed to put the talents to work. In Ephesians 4 St. Paul is even more radical and says, "You yourself are the gift, God's gift to His church, to other people."

One thing that comes to mind from this kind of statement is that the initial focus is not on what we **do** in the ministry of acceptance, but on what we **are**. You **are** a gift. Not what you **do** for someone else, but what you **are** for someone else is the main point. The whole purpose of a gift is that it becomes the property of the intended beneficiary. The whole purpose of a gift is that it gets **from** this person, **to** that person. The notion of **being** a gift for someone else constitutes a substratum throughout the whole Old and New Testaments. It is the notion that apparently from God's perspective human beings can not only **do** things for someone else but actually be for someone else. The clearest example of this is the substitutionary atonement of our Lord Himself, when (and regularly such language is used) "God made Him to **be** sin for us who knew no sin, that we might **become** the righteousness of God in Him." In God's economy there is the possibility of human substitution. One human being can actually **be**, can actually substitute for another human being. This motif is present in the Old Testament in the notion of substitutionary atonement where even an animal could **be** the object on which the sins of people were passed. The high point of Old Testament substitutionary human existence, of course, is the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. This is worth more discussion, but I just mention it here as a prime term that churchly professionals ought to think about in their

understanding of their vocation. The notion of being a gift pops up in the pastoral epistles where an old apostle is advising a young professional church worker how to use his own life and ministry. Regularly the word “gift” occurs, in some cases understood as gifts that he has. In one place he speaks of “remembering the gift that is in you” and indicates that the man himself is God’s gift to people. Our first inclination would be to reserve such language to Jesus Christ. Not only does he **bring** God’s gift, but He **is** the very gift of God to us. Since we as ministers of acceptance are related to the heart and center of His accepting ministry, we should not be surprised that this very same kind of language is applied to us.

## QUESTION 2

Just what is the real task? We can begin to answer this question by recalling the last sentence of the preceding paragraph, that what is said about Christ is also said about Christ’s ministers. What is the real task? The New Testament has a variety of metaphors and phrases for answering this. One that we looked at over the weekend is the classic in 2 Corinthians 5, “God has committed to us the ministry of reconciliation,” but we must keep in mind what precedes this thought in that chapter, viz., that God was in Christ reconciling the world. This comprehensive term “world” is what has to be kept before our eyes as we move on to contemplate our own place in this ministry of reconciliation.

John’s gospel in the 20th chapter, the Easter Sunday evening appearance of our Lord, puts more specific content into the task of the ministry of reconciliation – “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” Here is one of the places where His ministry and our ministry are tied together and where you can make some deductions from His to ours. If He is sent as God’s sacrificial lamb, then so are we. If He is God’s gift, then we,

too, are God's gift to people. One might interpret this passage as calling for some kind of imitation. But **imitation** is a weak second compared to the more frequent notion of participation (koinonia) used in the New Testament to relate to the ministry of the chief **diakonos**. When He says, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you," he is ordaining His disciples into partnership in His own project. Jesus always remains head of the church, to be sure, and no other human being can ever usurp that role, but just as the finger on my hand is a full-fledged participating member of this physical organism, even though it does not have the leading position that my head has, so also Christ's disciple is a whole partner with all the rights and privileges that any other member of the organism has, and by virtue of that participation he too finally is engaged in the one major task that this whole organism does. I dipped into St. Paul's vocabulary for the term "koinonia" (partnership in, having a share in, and being a partner with) and for the body of Christ concept, but his organismic notion is also a key perspective in St. John's chapter 15, where he talks about it with the vine and branches motif. Jesus Christ Himself always remains the vine, the stem, the stalk (and you could probably spell out the metaphor even further as John 15 suggests by saying that this stalk is itself rooted in the Father, the soil, the source of life from which this vine comes) but in the organization of the living organism now other human beings are grafted in as branches. Therefore they now become full fledged, fruit-bearing, productive pieces of this living organism, connected by that main stem to the source of all life Himself, God the Father.

So what is the real task? The real task is to be a partner, a participant in the very same thing that Jesus Christ is and does. But just what is it that Jesus is and does in His ministry" Here I shall make the heretical-sounding assertion

that we have to keep in mind the very **limited** nature of the ministry of Jesus Christ. In John chapter 20, where this phrase occurs, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you," the immediately following two verses read: "And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'" Period. That is the narrow limit and the incredible extent of the ministry into which He sends them. Here in Jesus' own exhortation is the totality of His ministry which He now passes on to the disciples as full-fledged partners with Him. He commissions them only for one thing: "You, having received the same Holy Spirit that I have (not just in the same sense, but in the same reality as I have) are now commissioned to be sin-forgivers." And He makes this very radical and says, "If you forgive the sins of any, if you are involved in passing on forgiveness to people, then their sins are going to be forgiven. What **you** do has the same authorization as my forgiveness had. The Father counts it as valid." But He says, "If you do not do it, it is not going to happen."

We are frequently prone to look at this passage as the proof passage for the "office of the keys," often narrowly comprehended as though the church has now the right to turn the lock, open up, let sins be forgiven, or turn the lock, shut off, and not let sins be forgiven. But this passage is much more startling than even that. Jesus is saying in effect, "It is now dumped on your shoulders, this ministry, and if and when you do it, this sin-forgiving business, then it will be happening, but if you do not do it, it will not be happening. That is how radical your assignment is, that is how radical your ministry is! If you cease to do it, My own ministry remains dormant." That human beings are empowered to do God's work, God's radical, vital, life-giving work, is what this section in John's gospel

says, and it is not accidental, I am sure, that this is recorded on Easter Sunday because to be communicating this rash, rare, radical forgiveness is to be communicating resurrection life, raising men from the dead. John closes this chapter with the words, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples which are not written in this book, but these are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, that believing, **you may have life in His name.**"

God wants men to have life. That is the way John's gospel started out in the prologue and the whole twenty chapters are there to say "This is where the life **is.**" "It is in His name." When you get people connected with Jesus Christ then you are connecting them with eternal life, with the very life of God. This notion that human beings can do that is indeed surprising, astounding, incredible, but that is precisely what Christ's human beings are authorized to do.

A synoptic parallel to this is Matthew 9, the first episode in which Jesus explicitly engages in sin-forgiving, the paralytic let down through the roof. You recall this creates a bit of a hub-bub amongst the by-standers because they say, "What, a human being! Trying to pretend that he can do **God's** work! Forgiveness of sins can really happen; but we all know that God's the only one who can do that!" Jesus responds in the rest of the dialogue to show that He, a man, does have this authority, this authorization. And the paragraph closes with "when the crowd saw it they were afraid and they glorified God who had given such authority (authorization) to men." The plural "men" is used here, perhaps reflecting the later life of the church in its interpretation of this passage, that what Jesus was passing on in this one episode is what the church itself is now authorized to be passing on. It, too, has this radical authority to patch up men's relationship with God although one would theoretically say, "But that is something that only God can do."

Perhaps the reason I am emphasizing this is that the church must always keep in mind

(and her professional workers especially so), "What are we specifically authorized to do – specifically as Christ's church?" The New Testament does not say that the church is the only agency authorized to do God's work. Lutheran theology has always said it is dangerous if the church starts thinking that way – as the medieval church had frequently done. Lutheran theology has seen in both the Old and New Testaments that God has a lot of work to do in the world, but not all of it is the church's work. God has **other** avenues, other channels, whereby He **does** get His work done. Even if it is a channel like Cyrus of Persia (and Persians were pagan), Cyrus is God's workman. Luther constantly called attention to God's good work being executed by the Muslim rulers, judges, parents without a single Christian present in the whole society. In other words, the church and its professional church workers must always be reflecting on "What is our special task" – namely, what has the Lord of the church authorized **us** to do, **specifically**, us as "church" over and above his "regular" authorization of everyman, whether Christian or not, to care for the welfare of his neighbor.

Now the time may come (and perhaps in our age we are seeing such a one) when the other non-churchly channels that God has designed to carry out some of His other works (His work of justice, His work of civil righteousness. His work of ordering and nurturing the creation, His work of just keeping chaos in check) are, for some reason or other incapable of doing their job. When these other channels (family, school, government) are not intact, the church as church **may** in some fashion have to move in and take this over for a while. This would be the other side of the coin of Luther's call to the German princes to reform the church since the church was not intact enough to initiate its own return to its divine commission. But the church

should always be reminded of its specific authorization to be communicating the life of God via forgiveness of sins and if for a time it must be engaged in secondary or tertiary tasks with no tie-in to this specific authorization, it should always be aware of what is really primary for it and of what it has specifically been authorized to do. This institute operates on the premise that the tie-in between concern for social justice and the new life of God via forgiveness is possible, in fact that the former is a consequence of the latter. But all of us have met people who have attained the former without the latter. Thus we see that God can and does exercise **His** concern for social justice via other channels apart from the church.

Some of the literature from well-meaning Christian sources on questions of social justice frequently seems to be based either on the conviction that the church has already taken care of the primary task completely and therefore has leisure or spare time now to devote to these others, or on the implication that “merely” to be devoted to the church’s authorized task really is not sufficient. Both attitudes may be nothing less than lack of faith in the life-giving gospel of forgiveness itself. Maybe it is just lack of understanding of the real greatness of this one “limited” ministry which Christ has authorized for **His** church. But such lack of understanding is seldom merely limited vision, but invariably limited faith, i.e., **unfaith**: “the gospel is not enough, so we have to do something else. Only if a “peripheral” concern can be integrally related to the communication of the life-giving Gospel is it then a legitimate concern for **His** church. In other words, **as churchmen** we must constantly review our concern for “peripheral” questions lest this concern become a vote of “no confidence” in the gospel itself. It does not **have** to be so, but in the history of the church it has been a live and tempting possibility.

So the main task of any restored image of God is to let that God

and that message and that voice which He wants to have heard **be** heard. Concerning God's action in what Lutherans call the "realm of the left hand," or the kingdom of the law, the kingdom of justice, there is no "special" mandate to Christians. Christians are best equipped to see what God is doing and wants done, but even if there were no Christians, this work of God would proceed almost "automatically," as Luther saw it happening in 16th century Muslim society.

But the ministry of the gospel does **not** go on automatically via these channels, and therefore it has to be consciously, and conscientiously exercised, remembered, refined, restored, grasped again. Because if **we** are not doing, if **somebody** is not doing what St. John says in Chapter 20, if someone is not presenting the resurrected Jesus Christ, so that men can have life in His name, then people will not be getting any life in His name. In God's left-hand realm the law of God operative via extra-churchly channels, however, does in large measure work **automatically**. There is social justice even if Christians are **not** concerned about it – as the last decade of our own history shows, much to our embarrassment. And especially is there divine justice effectively operative here "automatically" without churchly implementation. For example "The soul that sins, it shall die." No churchman has to go out and implement that. It will happen to everyman "automatically," by the "laws" of sickness, disease, traffic accidents, or old age. But "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and ye shall be saved" – that will not happen automatically, unless someone is out there promoting this Lord Jesus Christ and the life that is in His name. When the church is aware of its limited task and concentrates on its one task, it can begin to realize how big this one task really is. It can then draw the legitimate lines from the gospel to the "peripheries," and if no such line can be drawn, it drops the issue and honestly says: God is interested in that issue all

right, but the church is not His vehicle for action here. But when the line is validly drawn, when the tie-in exists, the church must move on that line, for that is its one and only commission.

### QUESTION 3

Where will it all end? As soon as you ask any question of goals, even in your own little life, you are asking for a philosophy or a theology of history because you are asking the question not just where ideas end but where human history ends. My favorite material for this comes from Ephesians. In the letter to the Ephesians the apostle works with a theology of human history extending from creation to the final coming of Christ. He says that history is going some place, to be sure, and that initially, at the beginning of creation, all of reality was connected with God. Its value was positive. It was plus, and as Genesis 1 repeats over and over, it was good, it was good, it was good. Even the human creation was good. With the fall, however, creation gets disconnected from the Creator's goodness, and God's point of "positive contact" with creation is narrowed down to the slim point of the promise and that little minority group called the people of the promise. This people plod their way through the Old Testament, and yesterday's Epistle Lesson says that even with most of **them** God was not very well pleased, so that on one occasion 23,000 were slain and on another occasion fiery serpents killed others. But there is this "skinny" piece of creaturely reality that is connected with God and upon which God's positive evaluation rests.

This skinny piece of reality, that carries God's promise and with whom God is well pleased, moves on through history until it meets the end of the old age and the beginning of the new age, namely, the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. And from that time on God is explosively at work, getting back all the rest of

created reality to being His “good” reality, getting all of creation back into being **His** creation. Terms appropriate to this run through the whole letter to the Ephesians. Since Christ has now come and triggered the Father’s grand plan, things in heaven and things in earth in an ever-widening angle are being brought into connection with the Creator via the Lordship of Jesus Christ. This expanding angle that is moving from Christ’s first coming toward His final coming constitutes the history of the church. The job of the church in this interim between Christ’s two advents is (Eph. 3:10): “That through the church, the manifold wisdom and mystery of God might be made known to these principalities and powers,” to the rest of creation, you might say, that is **not** yet connected with God.

So the task of the church and the goal of the churchmen, at least as Ephesians presents it, includes an understanding, not just of my little job, but an understanding of world history. God’s work to restore all creation back to himself, although initiated way back in Old Testament history, reaches a grand explosion in Jesus Christ. But it is not finished yet. The merits and benefits of Christ have not yet gotten to the entire world. And here is where God has fit in the church as working partner for His plan. “Go ye into all the **world**” does not mean go and get a few souls that have not yet been saved, but go ye and put the whole creation back into connection with God. An overwhelming assignment, yes, but one for which we are authorized and have the necessary authority.

## **EXCURSUS INTO CHRIST’S OWN MINISTRY**

As we look at the very life and ministry of Jesus Christ Himself, we can see things that are relevant for understanding our own ministries. The first thing that ought to be said is that if you look at the ministry of Jesus Christ you can see that His sort of ministry is not easy. In His life, ministry

meant suffering. "The Son of man came, not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life." In other words, not to be the object of other people's ministry, but Himself to be the minister and to give His life. To be a minister means giving your life and giving your life is always painful because it entails death and death always hurts.

In another presentation we concentrate on the role of suffering and how it fits in with

His ministry and how it can correctly fit in with our own. This is the first point. Christ's ministry was not easy, it involved suffering. Subsequent ministers of Christ must reckon, then, with this. St. Peter tells us not to be surprised when the fiery ordeal hits us, as though something brand new came upon us of which we had no inkling. If we are Jesus Christ's minister, we can expect that.

Secondly, His ministry is regularly done with authority, with authorization, which always recalls the author who is behind both the authority and the authorization. His ministry has God's authorization and because He is conscious of this, that God authorizes it, He possesses a certainty and a sovereignty even when He faces opposition. His is not a superman kind of sovereignty which says, "Well, you know, I am really above it all and nothing can faze **me!**" but His is a sovereignty which is finally born of faith itself. To all appearances, and to us, too, if we had seen Him there, He looks like an apprentice carpenter from Galilee and no authorized minister. But His faith buoys Him up in the conviction of His authorization and authority. And what that faith is we must examine for a moment. This faith is His constant recurring (literally running back) to the one thing that always gives **any** child of God faith, namely, the word of God itself, what God the author specifically says to Him. We see this throughout His ministry. He does not just hang on to what He once upon a time remembered God said, but He is in

regular communication with the Father. Never are we told what Jesus and the Father talk about in those moments when He pulls away and goes into retreat. But there are a few places where the New Testament does reveal to us some very limited communication between the Father and the Son. The first one takes place at His baptism. There the assertion is, "You are my beloved Son. I am well pleased with what you are doing." This very assertion, however, that gives Him His identity, that puts Him in relationship with the Father, is what gets attacked immediately, as you know, as He goes into the wilderness and the tempter says, "Oh, so you are the Son of God, eh? Well, if you are the Son of God, then why are you starving here," etc., etc. Throughout His ministry He is presented to us in the gospels as being in conversation with the Father. Another time, at His Transfiguration, this same voice comes and says, "You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased," a direct repetition of the first one. At other times in His ministry, e.g., at Gethsemane and at the end of the wilderness temptation, mention is made that angels came and ministered unto Him. God's special messengers came and did something to Him. The most likely guess, if one wants to guess at all, is that these ministers carried the very same message to Him that the Father **personally** had carried in the voice from the cloud at transfiguration, or in the voice over the Jordan at His baptism. Recurring to "what the Father says about me" – that is what gave Him the sovereignty, the certainty to go ahead and face the mobs, even the unbelief of His own disciples. This faith is the third item in Jesus' own ministry which we must keep in focus.

Being constantly on the receiving end of the word of the Father, He is able to carry out the very distinctive character of His ministry. This is the fourth and final item. He receives sinners and eats with them. Because of the Word of the Father in His life He is able to be the gift. Because of His total acceptance

with God and His **recurring** to that word of acceptance, especially at times when an alternate ministry is so tempting, He is able to endure. Jesus does not appear strong, you know, in the Garden of Gethsemane. He is weak like us and He needs the ministry of the word of God to sustain Him in full fellowship with the Father. He needs this as every human being with whom He identifies needs this very same word of God. Because of this He is able to be the 100% gift, to put Himself right there beside the prostitutes and publicans and be the "friend of sinners."

Perhaps in our own age we are, strangely enough, getting much closer to this very kind of sociological circumstance present in Jesus' own ministry, wherein the "worthiness" of the unworthy people can be seen nowhere else but in that they were worth everything that God had in Jesus Christ and that God through Christ expended for them. In the radical stratification of some sections of our society, we have whole blocks in our bigger cities that are almost exclusively inhabited by the riff-raff sinners whom Jesus befriended. Therefore, much more than a generation ago or a century ago, we are in analogous circumstances to go in without blinders and be Christ's own man where the very unworthiness of the most unworthy people is apparent. For as He did there, we, too, finally have to do here, namely, keep that good word of God's good gospel vocal and audible.

The curse, sin, retribution, law, and death – these things will happen automatically, and we dare not forget that God is at work in these "channels," giving men their just deserts. But you and I have been called to be little Christs in the twentieth century and not to just let things happen automatically, but to consciously, conscientiously and concertedly make this strange but life-giving word of God vocal and audible. This is the word that He Himself spoke to this very kind of people and that He also speaks to us, "You come unto Me."

Edward H Schroeder

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