

Ministers of Christ¹

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¹ The six *Ministers of Christ* devotions were delivered at the 2017 General Pastoral Conference of the Church of the Lutheran Confession. Knowing this context will aid the reader with some of the “local color” in the devotions—references and illustrations that might otherwise not have a clear connection.

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Fear, Weakness, and Trembling

“When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power” (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).²

Fellow Ministers of Christ:

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

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

Admittedly, there were times when I considered other callings or occupations—a doctor, lawyer, fireman, astronaut, President of the United States, but the desire to minister never left me. Even though I didn’t always return to Immanuel Lutheran College and Seminary for theological reasons—sometimes the reasons were classmates, basketball, and yes, girlfriends—I did keep returning. As the hymnist wrote, “God moves in a mysterious way.”

Finally, in 1978, along with my two classmates, I graduated from the seminary and became what I had always wanted to be. More importantly, it was what I had always believed God wanted me to be—a minister of Christ. It was precisely then, when I stepped from the classroom into the realities of ministering, that I asked myself for the first time and not the last, “Why did I want to be a minister?”

Perhaps you’ve never asked that question. Conversely, perhaps you have asked it after a contentious voters’ meeting, or after a casual observation like, “Pastor, that wasn’t your best sermon,” or after struggling with a sermon text late into Saturday night, or after any number of congregational or pastoral challenges.

The apostle Paul told the Corinthians: *“I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling,”* (1 Corinthians 2:3). Frankly, I can’t imagine any minister of Christ not saying the same.

Fear, weakness, and trembling arise at the accountability of the pastoral office. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:2-4, *“Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by*

any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me." That's the accountability.

Fear, weakness, and trembling arise at the responsibility of pastoring the people of God—people redeemed with the blood of Christ and precious in His sight. Paul admonished the elders of Ephesus, Acts 20:28, *"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."* That's the responsibility.

We face fear, weakness, and trembling at the magnitude of life's heartaches and losses. During my first year of ministry, I received a phone call shortly before dawn. Scrambling to the kitchen, I snatched the receiver from its cradle—this was long before cell phones—and said tentatively, "Hello, this is Pastor Weis." At first I heard only sobs and gasps. Eventually, I realized that I was talking with one of the members of my congregation. Through the broken syllables and incomplete sentences, I finally understood six words: "The baby is dead. Please hurry."

Thirty-eight years have passed. Yet, I will never forget the look on the parents' faces. I will never forget the grandfather saying, "Pastor, what did we do wrong? Why is God punishing us?" I will never forget how, amid the grief and weeping, the small mobile home still smelled like baby powder. I will never forget the weakness, fear, and trembling in which I prayed, "O God, please give me the right words to say."

On our own, who among us is up to such a task? No one. Certainly not me. Not even the apostle Paul, who reminded the Corinthians, *"I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling."* Yet, dear brothers in Christ, is it not in our personal and pastoral weaknesses and fears and trembling that almighty God has again and again demonstrated His strength?

This blessed reality led Paul to write in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, *"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."*

The overall theme of these devotions is "Ministers of Christ." I'm under no illusion that I can tell you anything new. Rather, I'm merely privileged to share Biblical encouragements of which we, as pastors, need to be reminded—in our weakness, in our fear, in our trembling.

The Means Is Scripture

“When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God” (1 Corinthians 2:1).

Fellow Ministers of Christ:

Sometimes, the smallness can be humorous. Years ago, I conducted a midweek Lenten service in a member’s home. Only three people were in attendance. The first, our accompanist, sat with her back to me because of the location of the piano. The second sat attentively listening, except when checking the pie in the oven. The third sat contentedly sleeping in a La-Z-Boy recliner. On the drive home, I had to smile.

At other times, however, the smallness can be discouraging. Our small congregation in Cape Coral, Florida, has only nine members. Recently, we canvassed 1,500 homes and distributed 1,500 door hangers. Of the people we contacted, some expressed mild interest. A few said they would definitely be in church the following Sunday. And one woman even asked about membership.

Because Easter was approaching, we ran a color ad in the local newspaper. In part, the ad read: “Grace Lutheran Church is a small congregation with a big commitment to proclaiming the Bible in all of its fullness and truth. We are new to the Cape Coral area and would be delighted if you and your family joined us as we celebrate the resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ.”

I was excited and hopeful, not only because of the results of canvassing, but because visitors often attend church on Easter. I had visions of packed pews and placing folding chairs in the aisles to accommodate the overflow. When Easter came, the pews were as empty as always. Not one visitor attended—not even the woman who inquired about membership. Admittedly, I was discouraged.

Amid such discouragement—the empty pews, declining memberships, small budgets, and lack of visible results—the temptation, though we know better, is always to question the efficacy of simply proclaiming the Scriptures. *“Preach the Word,”* Paul told Timothy (2 Timothy 4:2). “Yes, but I have preached the Word Sunday after Sunday with no increase in membership. Perhaps the Word alone is not enough. Perhaps I need something more appealing to the general public: bake sales, bingo games, live bands. Perhaps if I were a better speaker, if I had a better vocabulary, if I used better metaphors and better gestures.”

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *“When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom”*—more literally, “superiority of words or wisdom.” Paul’s reference was likely to the philosophers and orators of ancient Greece with whom the Corinthians were no doubt familiar.

As early as the fifth century B.C., traveling teachers known as Sophists taught a discipline they called rhetoric—from the Greek word, ῥῆμα, meaning “words” or “that which is spoken.” The goal of this early rhetoric was to persuade and even to

manipulate listeners through powerful speeches, practiced gestures, eloquent vocabularies, flowery metaphors, appeals to emotion, dramatic pauses—and all of this was often at the expense of the truth. All presentation. No substance.

Similar rhetoric is still used in the speeches of silk-tongued politicians who dance around the truth, or in TV commercials where the true cost of a product is buried in the illegible print at the bottom of the screen. Sadly, the same can be said of some churches today who hide or twist the truth of Scripture because they are more interested in membership than in ministry. For good reason, in Romans 16:17-18 Paul warned against self-serving false teachers, who *“by smooth talk and flattery . . . deceive the minds of naïve people.”*

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

Does this mean that as ministers of Christ we should give no thought to our sermonizing, that we should not strive to improve our styles, vocabularies, gestures, and delivery? Of course not. Every sermon should be as good as it can be—not good for the sake of good, but good for the sake of glorifying God. Not as a testament to the skills of a preacher, but as a testimony to God’s grace and salvation in Jesus Christ.

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

Did the apostle feel overwhelmed at times? Did he experience disappointment and frustration? Undoubtedly. But this is what God told Paul: *“Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city”* (Acts 18:9-10). Does the same God not say the same words to us? “Keep on speaking. Do not be silent. I am with you.”

So, dear brothers in Christ, amid all the smallness, all the frustrations, all the disappointments, may the Spirit of God remind us that the means to ministry is always Scripture. For Scripture is the means through which the Spirit of God has chosen to work.

The Message Is Christ

"For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Fellow Ministers of Christ:

Joel Osteen pastors the largest church in the United States: forty thousand attendees over five weekly services and millions of supporters watching on television. Yet, incredibly, there is not a single cross in Osteen's church complex, there are few mentions of the cross, if any, in Osteen's sermons. Instead, his focus is on feel-good themes, positive thinking, and material prosperity. "We don't talk about the cross," Osteen said in one interview, "That's too negative."

Or consider this quote from George Stallings, a former, now excommunicated, archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church. Stallings said: "We have realized that, as expressions of faith, there are certain symbols that have stood in the way. The cross has served as a barrier in bringing about a true spirit of reconciliation between Jews and also between Muslims and Christians; and thus, we have sought to remove the cross from our Christian churches across America as a sign of our willingness to remove any barrier that stands in the way of us coming together as people of faith."¹

Compare the words of Osteen and Stallings with the clear, unflinching words of the apostle Paul: *"For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."* Not that these were the only words Paul preached while in Corinth, rather, that "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" was always the focus of Paul's message—as he explained in 1 Corinthians 1:23-24, *"[B]ut we preach Christ crucified; a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."*

Early in my ministry, someone advised me to look for Christ on every page of the Bible. I wish I could remember the source because that godly counsel helped shape my entire ministry. Look for Christ on every page. Let Christ be preeminent in all your thoughts, words, deeds, priorities, and ministries. Not surprisingly, Martin Luther offered much the same advice, saying, "The Bible is the cradle wherein Christ is laid."² In another place, Luther remarked, "If you want to interpret well and confidently, set Christ before you, for He is the Man to whom it all applies, every bit of it."

"For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." But how can we preach "Jesus Christ and him crucified" without preaching the reason for His crucifixion?

And how can we preach the reason for His crucifixion without preaching about sin?

And how can we preach about sin without preaching that we ourselves are

sinner?

And how can we preach that we are sinners without preaching that we cannot save ourselves?

And how can we preach that we cannot save ourselves without preaching about our desperate need for the Savior?

And how can we preach about the Savior who came to save us without preaching about God's love?

And how can we preach about God's love without preaching about its incalculable cost?

And how can we preach about the incalculable cost of God's love without preaching about the cross?

All of these blessed teachings are connected, and their focus is Jesus Christ.

"We preach Christ crucified," declared Paul, and by the grace of God, Paul's declaration is ours. We don't preach watered-down messages devoid of such words as *sin, punishment, Hell, sacrifice, or cross*. We don't preach messages that present God as a doting, slightly senile grandfather, who cares nothing about the behavior of His children so long as they stop by His house on Sunday mornings.

We don't preach messages about a generic God who can be stretched, distorted, and manipulated to fit any conception of Him. We don't preach about God's love without connecting it to God's immeasurable sacrifice. Our message is not simply, *"God loves you,"* but *"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son"* (John 3:16).

We don't preach a so-called prosperity gospel in which Jesus Christ is more of a banker than a Savior. Rather, we preach a gospel that promises the infinite riches of God's forgiveness and salvation to all who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

We don't preach self-righteousness—that salvation may be earned by good works or trying harder or resisting less. Instead, we declare, *"it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast"* (Ephesians 2:8-9).

We don't preach entertainment. Our proclamation is, *"the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 6:23).

We don't preach that all roads lead to Heaven. We do preach that Jesus Christ alone is *"the way and the truth and the life"* (John 14:6). And we don't preach that following Christ will eliminate persecution, but rather, that in many instances following Christ will bring persecution. *"If they persecuted me,"* said Jesus in John 15:20, *"they will persecute you also."*

Finally, we don't preach from Einstein's Theory of Relativity or *Reader's Digest* or the *Works of the World's Great Philosophers* or the *Guinness Book of Records* or the *Koran* or *Time* magazine. No, we preach from the Bible because it alone is the inspired Word of God.

When we preach, we preach “Christ crucified,” because He alone is God’s promised salvation and He alone is the only way to be saved.

The Power Is God's

"I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow" (1 Corinthians 3:6-7).

Fellow Ministers of Christ:

"How can I grow this congregation?" I've asked myself that question many times over the years. I've asked the question after preaching to half-empty pews. I've asked the question after counting names in the guest ledger and after reading the treasurer's report. I've asked the question after wondering why a visitor never returned to church and after driving past the crowded parking lots of other churches on Sunday mornings.

"How can I grow this congregation?" If this is an understandable question, it is also a misleading question—misleading, because it contains entirely too much "I" and too little "God." How can I grow a congregation? When did God ask me to grow anything except to *"grow up into Christ" (Ephesians 4:15)*, and *"grow up in our salvation" (1 Peter 2:2)*, and to *"grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18)*—and even these are *His* doing, not ours.

When Jesus commissioned His Church, He said "Go," not "Grow." He said, "Go out," not "Bring them in." He said, "All authority in heaven and on earth is given to Me," not to you. *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).* The going is our responsibility. The growing is God's responsibility. If we could only remember this distinction, our ministries would be even more joyful and less stressful.

Paul wrote, *"I planted the seed."* Have you ever planted a seed? Most of us have. After planting the seed, exactly what did you do to make the seed grow? Yes, you chose the location. You scooped out the soil and dropped in the seed. You covered the seed with dirt. You faithfully watered, weeded, and fertilized. And when no one was looking, perhaps you spoke encouragingly to the seed: "Come on, little seed. Grow. Mature. Bear fruit." But what did you personally do to make the seed germinate and sprout? The answer, of course, is nothing. You did nothing to grow the seed, because the power to grow always resided in the seed and never in you. So it is with the seeds of God's Word.

In Mark chapter 4, Jesus told a parable about a growing seed. He said, *"A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself (αὐτομάτη, automatically) the soil produces grain" (Mark 4:26ff).*

What part did the farmer in the parable play in growing the seed? Night or day, awake or asleep, he had nothing to do with growing the seed or producing the fruit. God did the work. He gathered the harvest. What a relief! What a blessing! So,

a seed does not grow because of us, but in spite of us. This is true in nature. It is also true in ministry. The power to grow faith or effect change does not lie in the one sharing God's Word, but in the Word of God being shared. As Paul wrote in Romans 10:17, *"Faith comes by hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ."*

At times, the Word of God may appear small when compared to the heartaches and challenges of life. Perhaps this is why Jesus likened the Word of God to a seed and its growth to the growth of a mustard seed. In the world of gardening, what is smaller, more ordinary-looking, and less promising than a mustard seed? And in the real world, what is seemingly smaller, more ordinary-looking, and less promising than the old, tattered family Bible? Yet, there is no greater power on earth to make things grow, from a struggling faith to a struggling congregation.

How did God create the universe in its vastness? Through His Word. How did Jesus heal the ten lepers and the centurion's servant? Through His Word. How did Jesus calm the storm on Lake Galilee? Through His Word. How did Jesus raise from the dead Lazarus, the daughter of Jairus, and the son of the widow of Nain? Through His Word. How did Jesus promise to grow the Christian Church? Through His Word. *"On this rock,"* He said, referring to Peter's confession of Him as Lord and Christ, *"I will build My Church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it"* (Matthew 16:18). *I will build,* He said, *not you.*

Rest assured, ministers of Christ, that God is working through the proclamation of His Word and through the ministry of your congregation. How do we know? First, because He Himself has told us so, saying in Isaiah, *"As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is My Word that goes out from My mouth: It will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it"* (Isaiah 55:10-11).

But we can be certain that God is mightily working through His Word for another reason, and that reason is you. Sometime, someplace, someone—a parent, pastor, teacher, friend, or even a stranger—planted a gospel seed in you, and God made it grow.

"I planted the seed," said Paul. *"Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow."*

Compelled to Preach

"Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Corinthians 9:16).

Fellow Ministers of Christ:

For nearly thirty years, the apostle Paul proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ to kings and commoners, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, free and slave, even to Greece's finest philosophers—some of whom called him a σπερμαλόγος, a "seed picker."

During that time, Paul made three extensive missionary journeys and by some estimates traveled more than 25,000 miles. Along the way, he faced fierce opposition and endured many hardships: hunger, thirst, cold, nakedness, sleeplessness, betrayal, beatings, stoning, persecution—and all of this while struggling with that mysterious *"thorn in the flesh"* (2 Corinthians 12:7).

Surely, at our busiest, we've all still marveled at Paul's tireless commitment to preaching the gospel. *"For I am compelled to preach,"* he said. Compelled. The Greek word is ἀνάγκη and means "necessity." Literally translated, Paul said, "a necessity is laid on me." But what was that necessity? What compelled Paul to travel so far and to endure such hardships in order to preach the gospel of Christ and to the point of exclaiming: *"Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!"*? The answer, I believe, is fourfold.

First, Paul was compelled by his divine call, that is, by the fact that God had chosen and privileged him to serve as an apostle of Jesus Christ. Remember, ministry was not Paul's chosen profession. Before his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul was a prosecutor and persecutor, not a preacher. That Paul became an apostle of Christ was by God's design, not his—a fact that Paul stated in nine of his thirteen epistles, including 1 Corinthians, *"Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God"* (1 Corinthians 1:1).

Second, the "necessity" of which Paul spoke in 1 Corinthians 9:16 was not an outer coercion, but an inner conviction worked by the Spirit of God—a burning, unquenchable desire to preach Christ even should there be no one to hear. Each of us, fellow ministers of Christ, have felt that same inner necessity. It's what led us to the seminary. It's what compels us to go on ministering and proclaiming Christ despite our personal or congregational circumstances— whether successes or failures, good times or bad, packed pews or meager attendance.

In the first devotion, I raised the question, "Why did I want to be a minister?" But despite frustrations and occasional doubts, as ministers of Jesus Christ we all know the answer. Rightly understood, the answer is that we had no other choice, meaning that for us there was only one choice because of the deep conviction worked in us by God's Spirit. In this regard, the compelling need we feel to proclaim God's truth is no different from Paul's and no different from Martin Luther's, who said at the Diet of Worms, "Here I stand. I can do none other. God help me! Amen."

Charles Spurgeon wrote: "A man who truly has within him the inspiration of the Holy Spirit calling him to preach cannot help it. He must preach. Like fire within the bones, so will that influence be until it blazes forth. Friends may restrain him, foes criticize him, despisers sneer at him, yet the man is resolute. He must preach if he has the call from heaven." ¹

Third, Paul was compelled by the urgency of his calling. Preaching the gospel of Christ was a necessity for Paul because there is no other way for lost sinners to be saved. This is what led the apostle to write in the same ninth chapter of 1 Corinthians, *"Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible"* and again, *"I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings"* (1 Corinthians 9:19, 22-23).

Are there more lucrative callings than being a minister of Christ? Absolutely. But there is no more important calling or rewarding calling, for God has given each of us the privilege of preaching His gospel—the gospel, as Paul reminded the Romans, that *"is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes"* (Romans 1:16). How privileged we are indeed! How compelled we should be!

Finally, Paul was compelled to preach the gospel because of the blessings that very same gospel brought to him. It is a deep, personal appreciation of what Jesus Christ has done for each of us that above all else compels us to preach Christ to others. *"For Christ's love compels us,"* Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:14.

And the apostle's humble gratitude is unmistakable in his words to Timothy: *"I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst"* (1 Timothy 1:12-15).

Compelled to preach. Yes, we are—by God's call, conviction, urgency, and grace. It's what we always wanted to do, because He always wanted us to do it.

Therefore

“Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Fellow Ministers of Christ:

I attended Immanuel Lutheran High School, College, and Seminary from 1968 to 1978. Looking back, those were such happy, carefree years. Basketball games. Tour choir. Field Day. The banquet. Louis the Lancer. *Cantate Domino*. Lilacs blooming in Spring. At this school, I made lasting friendships. I received an education second to none. I only wish I had studied harder and had told my teachers “thank you” more often.

On graduation day, 1978, I walked across the stage in the Fieldhouse next door, received a theological diploma, and then walked out through the Fieldhouse doors which are just down the hall—into the bright sunshine, into my life and future, into things I expected and things I did not.

Thirty-nine years later, this campus is still a respite for me, as I’m certain it is for all of you. For the past three days, we’ve enjoyed its beauty and serenity, but more importantly, to paraphrase the words of Acts 2:42, we’ve “devoted ourselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship.”

Now, however, it is almost time to leave, to pack our belongings and learnings and return to our homes, congregations, and ministries. Whether we are pastors-elect or pastors-emeritus, whether entering the ministry or retiring from it, how we pass through these doors today—into the bright sunshine, into our lives and futures, into things we expect and things we do not—will depend on whether we view these doors merely as *exits* or as *therefores*.

Therefore is an important word. It is a word of transition, explanation, inference, summary, and conclusion. It often provides the reason and motivation for moving forward by looking back to an accomplished fact, and so defined, there are many great “therefores” in Scripture—each one grounded in divine fact.

*“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. **Therefore** we will not fear” (Psalm 46:1-2).*

*“**Therefore**, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1).*

*“**Therefore**, there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).*

*“**Therefore**, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17).*

*“**Therefore**, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess” (Hebrews 4:14).*

There are multitudes of other examples, though surely none are more comforting than the great *therefore* of 1 Corinthians 15:58, especially for ministers of Christ. This *therefore* is also grounded in divine fact—the glorious fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Before writing the word *therefore* in verse 58, Paul wrote the following words in verses 56-57: “*Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

On at least three occasions, Jesus forewarned His disciples of His impending suffering and death, and with each warning He gave the certain promise of His resurrection. “*The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life*” (Matthew 17:22-23).

Yet, on the first Easter, the disciples were not anticipating a living Lord but mourning a dead Savior. Women hurried to the tomb wondering who would roll away the stone. Mary Magdalene was so distraught she confused the risen Jesus with the cemetery caretaker. Peter and John equated the empty sepulcher with body theft not bodily resurrection. Thomas insisted on viewing forensic evidence. The two disciples shuffling sadly toward Emmaus lamented, “We thought He was the one.”

But then they all encountered the risen Jesus. The fact of His resurrection changed everything—their lives, their deaths, their ministries—and to such an extent that after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the same disciples who once huddled behind the locked doors of an upper room boldly proclaimed the resurrected Christ in the very city in which He was crucified. “*Therefore,*” said Peter, “*let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ*” (Acts 2:36).

Now, what of us? What of our work as ministers of Christ? I can’t speak for others, but I’ve come to realize that whenever I view “*labor in the Lord*” as futile, unproductive, a losing effort, or, to use Paul’s words, “*in vain,*” whenever I despair at empty pews or small budgets, or presume that I must somehow supplement the power of the gospel with power of my own, then and there I’m acting more as if Jesus Christ were still dead and buried than living and reigning.

But Jesus Christ *is* living and reigning. That is a divine fact. It is the fact of His resurrection that transforms these fieldhouse doors today from mere exits into *therefores*.

Whatever our personal or pastoral challenges, as we adjourn our conference and walk through these doors—into the sunshine, into our lives and futures, into things we expect and things we do not—let us do so in boldness and hope, rejoicing with the apostle Paul and saying: “*Thanks be to God! He give us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Corinthians 15:57).

“Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”