

Daniel F. Lewis
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Engaging with the Ordination Questions

Will you fulfill your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?

I will confess that this fourth question has sometimes seemed redundant to me. As I have asked it and answered it many, many times over these years in ministry, I have sometimes thought in the back of my mind, “Haven’t we already covered this in the first three?” The short answer is yes. The first three questions discuss the lordship of Jesus Christ, the authority of the scriptures, and the guidance of the confessions in more than adequate ways. And yet as I have stopped sometimes to consider not just the individual questions but their overall affect, their cumulative weight, I have given thanks for the way this fourth question succinctly and clearly places the first three in proper relationship to each other. This has seemed ever more important to me as I have over the years trained more and more elders to understand their ministry as first and foremost a matter of ultimate trust in Jesus Christ, with the scriptures as the primary tool for learning about him, and the confessions as the guidance of a flawed but faithful Church through the ages.

Keeping these sources of insight and guidance in their proper order and relationship has never seemed more important than when the changing world around us has forced the Church to ask new questions and seek new ways of faithfulness to the Risen Lord. As I have watched the Church struggle through various theological and social issues – and as I have sought to interpret these things for the congregation I serve – it has seemed vitally important to me that we understand and uphold this careful hierarchy of authority. We must remember that there is only one name in heaven and on earth that is deserving of the title Lord and Savior. And he is the only one, as the Barmen Declaration says, whom we must trust and obey in life and in death. Even the scriptures, sacred as they are – or the confessions, important as they are – are not to be trusted and obeyed in the same way as the Living Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. This is not to say that we seek to place these three in opposition to each other, only that we should remember that it is neither the witness of generations past, nor even the witness of the scriptures, that saves us. God alone in Jesus Christ holds our lives and our futures safely in hand.

Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?

What a beautifully challenging vow this is! The four nouns toward the end of the sentence are so all encompassing and balanced as to have a person continually examining and re-examining his or her service to the people. Sometimes we may bring the energy of enthusiasm and new ideas, but if we lack the intelligence to apply these things in healthy directions, we may end up hurting the church rather than helping it. On the other hand, we may seek to serve the people with a great deal of intelligence and imagination, but if we lack the energy to follow through, our ideas will remain only theories. Finally – and there is scriptural support for this (1 Cor 13) – if we exercise our ministry with the richest intellect

and the most tireless spirit and the most creative ideas... and yet fail truly to love the people we serve... then all our work will be for nothing. It is truly a daunting thing to answer this question, and only a fool or a liar would claim to possess all four things in sufficient amounts all the time. Which is perhaps why a few years ago we added the note about prayer – that we should pray for our people and for ourselves as we do ministry with our flawed and broken selves. There is never in us or in our churches quite enough energy, intelligence, imagination, and love to accomplish all that we will. But God blesses and breaks what we offer, and multiplies it, so that by grace it becomes a rich feast.