

COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY AND CHURCH RELATIONS

DOCUMENT

The Divine Call and Christian Freedom

THE DIVINE CALL AND CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

Introduction and Practical Questions

The impetus for this paper comes from a resolution of the 2000 convention of the East District of Lutheran Church–Canada, asking for clarification concerning the nature of the divine call as it relates to the ministry, particularly of theology professors and of elected administrators. Do human time limits (periodic re-election or renewable contracts) and full time service in positions not directly involving ministry to congregations call into question the divinity of the call of those who hold such offices?

The Augsburg Confession states that no one is to preach or teach publicly in the church unless he is validly called (Latin *rite vocatus*). This gives rise to a series of questions as to how congregations and synods in the church on earth proceed in issuing calls and appointments in the context of the freedom the church has in the Gospel. What is a valid call? Who determines this? Who is or is not a public teacher or preacher in the church? What determines that? We recognize that God today mediates his calls through the church. But what, then, is church? Does the office of public ministry apply only to those who serve as pastors of congregations? Is it only the congregation that can validly be called “church” and hence exercise the authority to issue calls? Or is perhaps “church” also larger than the local congregation? Might the exhortation not to forsake assembling together (Heb. 10:25) be a reference to the fact that congregations are expected to join together in “trans-parochial” fellowship, and did not the apostles and elders come together at the council in Jerusalem in Acts 15? These are not insignificant questions. They are of great concern in Lutheran Church–Canada in light of the fact that not only do our congregations call pastors, but also our districts and Synod have deigned to call men, men who have been prepared and certified, and who have had (for the most part) substantial experience as parish pastors, into other posts of service in the church, such as that of university or seminary professor, Synodical or district executive, or Synodical or district president. Can the appointments of these men, usually designated as “calls,” legitimately be said to be valid calls, or are they in fact temporary appointments which entail no reference whatsoever to “public ministry”? Can any truly divine call have time limits set on it?

Church Fellowship and Trans-parochial Organizations

As Lutheran Church–Canada has operated, with her heritage from The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, we have clearly assumed that *God* has *called* the men who hold administrative and teaching offices to the office which they hold. They remain on the “clergy roster” and they are often invited to congregations to preach and to teach. Our customary way of operating seems to distinguish between these teachers and administrators and those who are on candidate status, deeming the former to hold valid calls and the latter to be “without a call”.

While it is true that the local congregation is the place at which word and sacrament are administered and people are brought into the faith and sustained in it, there is no question but that “trans-parochial” fellowship among the congregations, particularly those with common confessions, was and is meant to be. The Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15) took upon itself to give advice to the churches in Galatia concerning the Judaizing controversy, and Paul urged the many house churches of Rome to “welcome one another” (Rom. 14:16). Also, Luther did not see his ministry in Wittenberg in isolation from the rest of Christendom, and, particularly after the Reformation, in isolation from the rest of the congregations which supported reformation teaching. Perhaps this-worldly organizations of congregational and confessional fellowship (synods) did not, and do not, belong to the *esse* (being, essence) of the church, but trans-parochial fellowship is a divine given, and such this-worldly organizations certainly belong to the *bene esse* (well-being) of the church. Even if the way the church on earth can organize itself is a matter of Christian freedom, the biblical understanding of “church” includes the expectation that congregations will not exist in isolation from others.

But if the this-worldly organization of congregations into synods, fellowships, “denominations,” etc. does not belong to the essence of the church, can those who serve in these organizations be declared to have valid calls? Or can only the individual congregations, the people of God gathered in one place, issue divine calls?

The Office of the Holy Ministry

Study of the biblical material leads one to recognize one office of holy ministry, the various specific responsibilities of which may be invested in various individuals. St. Paul says that God's gifts are that there be apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers (Eph. 4:11); he does not divide the office of the ministry, though it is clear that each individual in the office may exercise somewhat specialized responsibilities of the office.

Study of the Confessions, furthermore, reveals the same understanding. In the discussion of the one office, the Confessions note that the distinction of degree between bishop and presbyter or pastor is by human authority, not divine (citing Jerome, Tr. 63). "One thing subsequently created a distinction between bishops and pastors, and that was ordination, for it was arranged that one bishop would ordain the ministers in a number of churches. However, since the distinction of rank between bishop and pastor is not by divine right, it is clear that an ordination performed by a pastor in his own church is valid by divine right" (Tr. 64-65). Certain responsibilities (e.g. ordaining a pastor), then, can, by human agreement in the church on earth, be assigned to bishops. Does it not follow that a synod, by human arrangement, has the right to assign the preparation of pastors to particular people who have been ordained into the office, and to assign administrative tasks and the exercising of oversight for the purposes of doctrinal discipline to others? Even if the organization is by human right, this does not require the conclusion that those whose particular work is primarily to carry out those responsibilities are not part of the "ministerium" and do not have divine calls. In fact, since what these men do pertains to the office of the public proclamation of the Gospel, does it not follow as a necessary consequence that their call to their position is a valid call (AC XIV) to the Holy Ministry of the church?

Testimonies of Lutheran Fathers

But can an office whose responsibilities are delegated by human authority in a this-worldly church organization carry a divine call? It can only do so by the way of the Gospel; that is, in recognizing that in the freedom for which Christ has set us free (Gal. 5:1) God has tied His will to the church's will, so that when the church makes decisions regarding the carrying out of God's mission to the people of this world, if those decisions do not contradict the Gospel God has given us, then God binds in heaven what the church has bound on earth (Matt. 16:19), for where Christ's people gather and agree on anything, He promises that it will be granted, for He declares that He is in their midst (Matt. 18:19-20).

The theologians of the Lutheran Church have always recognized the divine call of theological professors and superintendents, whether or not they were simultaneously parish pastors.

Luther is an example of one who considered his position as doctor of the church to be a divine call. It is true that he was also pastor of the Castle Church in Wittenberg and preached there regularly. But he did not consider his office of university professor to be derived from his call as congregational pastor. He declares: "But perhaps you will say to me, 'Why do you, by your books, teach throughout the world, when you are only preacher in Wittenberg?' I answer: I have never wanted to do it and do not want to do it now. I was forced and driven into this position in the first place, when I had to become Doctor of Holy Scripture against my will. Then, as a Doctor in a general free university, I began, at the command of pope and emperor, to do what such a doctor is sworn to do, expounding the Scriptures for all the world and teaching everybody. Once in this position, I have had to stay in it, and I cannot give it up or leave it yet with a good conscience, even though both pope and emperor were to put me under the ban for not doing so. For what I began as a Doctor, made and called at their command, I must truly confess to the end of my life."¹

Luther certainly saw his position as a doctor of the church as giving him the right to preach in congregations throughout the church, and not just where he was the parish pastor. Luther comments on Galatians 1:1: "It is not lawful

¹Martin Luther, "Psalm 82" (1530), *AE* 13:66=WA 31¹:212 (on Ps. 82:4). Martin Chemnitz also notes that at times the emperor might be involved in a call or ordination. He cites the church historian Sozomon, who says simply of the call of Ambrose, that "he was elected by the people with the confirmation of the emperor and the laying on of the hands of the bishops." Thus we see the entire church involved in the placement of a particular individual into the office of public ministry. Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, trans. J. A. O. Preus, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989), 705.

for me to forsake my assigned station as a preacher, to go to another city where I have no call, and to preach there. (As a doctor of divinity, of course, I could preach throughout the papacy, provided that they let me.)”²

Francis Pieper declares that the public ministry presupposes congregations, and that congregations establish the public ministry. The church has the authority to call, elect, and ordain ministers. He notes that only after the congregation was established on Crete did Paul command Titus to ordain elders (Titus 1:5). Compare this to Acts 14:23 on establishing the office in the congregations of Asia Minor.³ However, he also notes that “public” means not just in the public assembly, but as one entrusted with an office for service and for the good of the people, so ministry to a single soul in a congregation is “public” in that sense.⁴ By implication, “public” ministry can then take place when congregations join together to do things that they cannot conveniently do on their own, such as prepare pastors. Indeed, that is one of the reasons that congregations joined together as a Synod.⁵

It is important to note further that, according to Pieper, the church has called these men as professors to teach according to their office. They are called to be teachers for the church to prepare others for the office of teacher, and the Church entrusts this responsibility to them. Note that Pieper declares that the term ‘theology’ refers first and foremost to the knowledge all pastors must have, and secondarily to the specialized knowledge held by those who prepare pastors.⁶ All pastors are the resident theologians in that place to which they have been called, to the people to whom they have been called. Yet not every one has the time and specialized knowledge to prepare his successor. Synod as confessional fellowship comes together and, on the basis of the Scriptures, the Confessions, and sound reason, agrees on common standards necessary for competence in the office and establishes the manner of certification so that the office will be filled with qualified men. Though the manner by which this is done is by human right, the work of preparing pastors is divinely mandated, and therefore done by people called for that purpose.

Kurt Marquart notes that the Synod has always understood itself to be church, and thus having the right to call men to its institutions. In his work *The Church: And Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance*, Marquart gives a concluding excursus discussing views in Missouri and Wisconsin Synods throughout their history. He makes these important statements, refuting the idea that Pieper and Walther, and indeed the Synod itself, did not see Synod in non-churchly terms:

(1) He cites the 1875 proceedings of the Northwest District on the power of the keys, which follows the sequence of universal church, then all “visible church fellowships” (that is, “trans-parochial” fellowships) which retain the Word and Sacraments “essentially” (thus not only the orthodox Lutheran church), and finally, “therefore every single local congregation” has such power.

²Martin Luther, “Lectures on Galatians” (1535), *AE* 26:18=WA 40:59.

³Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950-53), 3:439. Here the word “congregation” is a translation of *Gemeinde*, described by Pieper in this context as the church in a particular place. See German edition, 3:502. It is important to note that congregations do not establish the office itself, but establish it *in their midst* by calling a pastor. The office is God’s ordinance. So also, the responsibilities of apostle had been designated directly to Paul by Christ, and congregations had been created through his preaching. Indeed his mission work was by both direct call from Holy Spirit and by the mediated call through the congregation in Antioch, which sent him out and sponsored his missionary work (Acts 13:1-2). See Pieper’s comments in *Lehre und Wehre* 71, no. 12, 425, mentioned below.

⁴Pieper, 3:440.

⁵The compelling reason, of course, is biblical: the fellowship of the one church.

⁶Pieper 1:42-44.

(2) He notes that in 1874 the Synod held that the Convention could call teachers to its institutions since “the whole churchly power of the congregations is represented in the Synod when it is assembled.” (LCMS proceedings, 1874, 59).⁷

(3) *Lehre und Wehre* 9:179 is quoted by Pieper in 71, no. 12 (December 1925), 425, where he argues that missionaries called by Synod or Districts should be called and ordained. Here Pieper notes that such missionaries have received and accepted a divine call just as much as those called to parish-pastoral activity to already existing congregations. The earlier work cited states that the ministry (*Predigtamt*) goes into the world in a twofold form, in a missionary and a parish-pastoral one.⁸

Marquart also notes that the confessions use the term “teacher” to refer to the theologians of the church. “Our teachers” in AC XX,1 means “our theologians.” Ap IV,90 lists Paul, Athanasius, Augustine among the “teachers of the church.” LC preface 7, 19 warns preachers against wanting to be doctors (teachers) prematurely. FC Ep Rule and Norm 1 shows that “teachers” are the public ministers of teaching God’s Word. “Our churches and schools” in the preface to the FC refer to theological schools of higher education. “It is interesting to note in this connection, that the members of the theological faculty in Wittenberg in Luther’s time were considered to be ‘ministers of the Gospel of the church in Wittenberg.’”⁹

David Webber notes, concerning AC XXVIII, 5-8, “This helps us to understand why the confessions do not limit the one office of the ministry only to those who serve in the parish as ‘pastors and preachers’ . . . (LC Longer Pref.,1), even though the congregational pastorate, to which all of the “offices of the ministry have been entrusted, is the most comprehensive and foundational expression of this one office. The specific ‘offices’ of the ministry are vocationally divisible, and according to the needs and circumstances of the church they can be vocationally apportioned to various men in various ways, individually or in select combinations. As the Treatise declares, the ministry of the New Testament “exists wherever God gives his gifts, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers (Tr 26).

“A professor of theology, for example, has not been called to carry out the specific offices of baptizing or administering the Lord’s Supper on a regular basis, but the one office of the ministry has nevertheless been entrusted to him because he has been called to carry out the specific office of preaching and teaching, in a concentrated and specialized manner.”¹⁰

Robert Preus also affirms that the call of the theological professor is a divine call. In his monograph on the doctrine of the divine call he notes, regarding the term “ministry”, or “servant”: But at times it refers to a special, leading teacher of the church, a doctor, most often a professor. In some cases such a *doctor ecclesiae* would have a

⁷This is point 14 in the agreement between the Wisconsin Synod and Missouri Synod concerning the preparation of teachers. *Da die ganze kirchliche Gewalt der Gemeinden in der Synode, wenn dieselbe ihre Sitzungen hält, vertreten ist . . .*

⁸Kurt Marquart, *The Church: And Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics 9 (Fort Wayne, IN: International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1990), 221-22.

⁹Marquart, 142. It should be noted that the office of theological professor is not an auxiliary office to the ministry of Word and Sacrament, but is a function of that office. Those called to professorships are public teachers of the church called to exercise that specialized function.

¹⁰David Webber, “An Examination of Apology XXVII,22 in Its Confessional Context,” *Logia* 10, no. 3 (Holy Trinity 2001): 44. Webber notes that David Chytraeus, one of the principal authors of the Formula, was a duly called professor of theology, even though he was never the pastor of a congregation. “And as Martin Luther was faithfully ‘writing, preaching, and lecturing every day’ (SA Pref., 4), he too, both as a pastor and as a theological professor, was fulfilling the duties of his sacred office.”

congregation; at times he might be a bishop or superintendent . . . and pastor of a congregation; in other cases he would be simply a professor. He was called to his professorship. Almost all the old dogmaticians were professors (Hollaz was an exception). Luther was called to the University of Wittenberg through the offices of Staupitz, his superior, and the elector. He also, interestingly, regarded his doctor's degree, which he never sought, as a call by which he was justified in being a teacher to 'the whole church' and reforming the church.¹¹ Although this opinion of his did not affect the doctrine of the call, it furthered the notion that professors of theology were to be called, and, like parish ministers, they were called, but to be teachers (doctors) of the whole church.¹²

Preus goes on to state, "All the Lutheran dogmaticians have a section in their works on the validity of Luther's call, even after his excommunication and ban. When God places a man in the ministry of the Word, no one and nothing can set this divine work aside."¹³ He adds, "Doctors came to be called the 'representative church' (*ecclesia repraesentativa*) and performed the role of teachers of the whole church. Thus, the great Lutheran universities rendered opinions on all kinds of theological questions; their opinions were published and shared through all of Lutheranism, and their opinions were valued and respected. Their calls as professors were not merely to teach men, to administer the Sacraments, or to prepare them for the ministry, but to teach the whole church."¹⁴

Preus later says, All those who followed Luther discussed the call he received by gaining his doctor's degree. He had, as it were, a twofold call from God, to preach in Wittenberg in the churches and to the university to preach to the whole church. This argumentation, which was Luther's, Gerhard develops into a lengthy discussion of the "estate of a professor." The office is by divine right and can be traced back to our Lord's ministry as a Rabbi and to the twelfth century when doctors and masters were called to teach theology to the church at the universities. In Luther's and Gerhard's day, the office was often combined with a pastorate. Only rarely did one teach theology who was not called into the ministry (e.g. Melancthon; Martin Franzmann in our day); and that was under unusual circumstances.¹⁵

According to Sasse, what may be said of the theological professors may also be said of the one who supervises the Synod or a part thereof, whether he be called bishop or president. In discussing the fact that a bishop serves as a superintendent by human right, Sasse says, "A bishop may be entrusted with the task of seeing to the running of a great diocese. But the meaning of such an assignment can only consist in this, that he thereby gives room and support to the church's ministry. His actual office is the office of pastor, also when he is a pastor for pastors. By human arrangement he may have the work of superintendency. By divine mandate he has solely the office of preaching the forgiveness and justification of sinners for Christ's sake."¹⁶

Conclusions

¹¹ Hermann Sasse notes this in *Here We Stand: Nature and Character of the Lutheran Faith* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1938; reprint ed. Adelaide, Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1979), 73, and Luther in WA 30³, 386.

¹²Robert Preus, *The Doctrine of the Call in the Confessions and Lutheran Orthodoxy*, Luther Academy Monograph 1 (n.p., 1991), 16-17.

¹³Preus, 17 n. 26. Of course, God can take back the investiture of the Office of Holy Ministry, as when a man is defrocked—by church overseers following God's word.

¹⁴Preus, 17-18.

¹⁵Preus, 40-41, citing LW 40, 388-389, Gerhard XII, 128, 142ff.).

¹⁶Herman Sasse, "Ministry and Congregation" (July 1949), in *We Confess the Church*, trans. Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 71-72..

God gives his church the authority to call servants. Those calls are never apart from congregations, whether those called are called to serve specific congregations, or called to serve institutions established by fellowships of congregations. Even if the institution is created by human right, if the work is mandated by God, it is God who puts the person in the office. Note the nature of the call: looked at from this side, the church calls and God ratifies. This is the only way the church can be sure that *any* call is valid.

Compare this to the authority to forgive sins in Matt. 16:19. What the church binds or looses on earth is bound or loosed in heaven. So also it is with the call: If the one called by the church (at the invitation and command of God to call men into the public ministry) does those things God says the public ministry is to do, and this is done within the Scripture's definition of what is church, then the call to teach and to administer is a divine call. God, after all, does give the church the freedom to organize itself by human right, and God (again, viewed from this side) has declared that He has accommodated Himself to that, then the call must be a divine call. Note, for example, that the church of the Reformation did not deny that the bishops of the Roman church had valid calls. It denied that they held a separate office from the one office of preaching and public administration of the sacraments. Though their calls were special calls of supervision not held by divine, but by human right, they were nevertheless divine calls. Thus, it is the church who calls, and those whom the church calls are called by God.

What of temporary or time-limited calls? Both C. F. W. Walther and Francis Pieper saw such a concept as undermining the divinity of the call. God calls. Only God has the right to determine when such calls come to an end, but this may happen through decisions of individuals in collaboration with the church. It may happen when the individual receives and accepts another call, when he retires, or when the individual is removed from office, either for false teaching or for living an immoral life. God is at work when such decisions are made prayerfully and with due reverence.

While rejecting the concept of the temporary call, Pieper did note the validity of calls for temporary assistance under certain circumstances.¹⁷ Both Walther and Pieper would strongly agree that the call of a pastor to a congregation should have no arbitrary time limits set upon it.¹⁸

Walther desired both to safeguard the call of the pastor and his protection as he faithfully carries out his duties, and that of the congregation to remove pastors who are unfaithful or who bring shame upon their office.¹⁹ As calls are issued and terminated, it is clear that the church (both as congregation and as Synod) is simultaneously human and divine, and that God acts through human decisions and collaboration to exercise His will.

There may, however, be legitimate situations in which an individual may be called to a position in the church which may itself have a time limit set to it, for the church has the right to organize itself in Christian freedom, particularly in relation to certain specialized fields of service.²⁰ When the Synod and district presidents who are elected allow their names to stand for re-election, the church has the right to make a different choice, or to re-elect them. This is not an arbitrary process, but allows the church the opportunity for reflection. Professors may be removed for false teaching, and their suitability to continue in their position is ratified at the time their contracts are renewed. So also there

¹⁷Francis Pieper, "*Einige den Beruf zum Predigtamt betreffende Fragen*," *Lehre und Wehre* 44 (1898): 339

¹⁸Walther, quoting Joachim Mörlin, warns against seeing the pastor as a hireling who is given a contract "of the kind made with a cow- or sow herder." C.F.W. Walther, *Americanisch-Lutherische Pastoraltheologie* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1906), 427. See the discussion on the topics in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Theology and Practice of "the Divine Call"* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Commission on Theology and Church Relations, February 2003), 19-21.

¹⁹Walther, 427. See discussion in CTCR, 21-25.

²⁰CTCR, 39-41 discusses several types of such calls, such as theology professor, missionary, and intentional interim pastor.

may be situations where congregations and/or the wider church recognize a need for certain duties of the public ministry to be exercised for a time: Christian freedom would allow them to issue a time-limited call in such a situation. The strictures for all of the above are agreed to beforehand through the development of due process, as laid out by the *Handbook* of the Synod, to which churches that have organized themselves into a confessional fellowship subscribe. Whenever such calls are issued, care must be taken that the reasons for ending the calls or abolishing the position be for the sake of the Gospel and its spread, and not in order to reduce the pastor or specialized servant to the position of hireling.

In summary, given the nature of the divine call and given the realities of life in the church (and the life of the church in the world), Christian freedom can and does allow for certain duties of the office of public ministry to be carried out outside of the congregation, but in service to congregations in fellowship. The authorization of men to carry out these duties by the church may validly be deemed to be divine calls, whether they are open-ended or with prescribed time limits.

Vernon Harley summed it up very well when he said:

The New Testament certainly leaves no doubt about this matter. It presents our Lord training apostles, and giving prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, to the church (Eph.4:11f.). It allows for new offices to be established as needs arise (Acts 6) and has the Lord providing gifts to the church for the benefit of all (1 Cor. 12), but expecting these gifts to be used for the edification of all in decency and order (1 Cor. 14). When new offices are established in the church, obviously the needs, the gifts supplied by the Lord, and the welfare of the “whole flock” are to be taken into consideration. All that is “wanting” is to be supplied; but the church is at liberty to organize and distribute responsibilities, services, and manpower as God opens doors and provides the gifts to fill the needs. All, of course, is to be done by common agreement (Matt. 18:18-20, 1 Tim. 5:16).²¹

²¹Vernon H. Harley, “God’s Ministers, Their Calls, and Their Relationship to Each Other,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 43 (October 1979): 290-91.