

“The Divine Call”

At a Voters’ Meeting one day the president of the congregation stood up to share a letter of response from the fifth man they had called to be their pastor. Like those before him, he too had turned down the Call, much to the disappointment of the members present. However, the president shared a letter submitted by one man, stating his “qualifications” for the position they were so desperately seeking to fill. It read:

Dear Friends In Christ,

I understand you are looking for a shepherd to give spiritual guidance to your congregation. I would like to be considered for the position.

Since I am not currently serving any congregation I do not have a permanent residence. Basically, I wander from town to town. I have a difficult time getting along with people, as can be seen by the fact that I’ve been thrown out of a lot of those towns I enter. In fact, numerous times I’ve been beaten and was once stoned by the people who heard me preach. I’ve also served a number of years in prison, have gone hungry many times and been severely rejected by those people with whom I’ve shared God’s Word.

I don't have a wife or children—I can hardly support myself in my constant wandering from town to town. If you would consider me, I'd be willing to serve you as your shepherd.

After the president read the letter one member piped up, “What kind of qualifications are those for a pastor?!” Another one added: “We need someone respectable to be our pastor—**not a bum!** And especially not a jailbird!” One by one members expressed the deep felt need for a pastor who is personable, dynamic, tactful, has a good reputation and can get along with people.

After a mass confusion of discussion, someone finally asked, “Who would submit a letter like that, anyway?” So the president read the salutation. It read: *Grace and peace to you . . . the Apostle Paul.*

In light of such an example of looking at the Office of the Public (or Pastoral) Ministry from such human considerations, we can be thankful that the Scriptures teach us about the Divine Call which is extended by the congregation through the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, rather than an application process of hiring! Otherwise, if we focused only on our own wants and desires rather than on the LORD's desires for **His** ministry, we may turn down those servants whom the LORD wants to serve. From the human perspective we look for the gifted men to call while the LORD gifts those whom He calls into service.

So where does this whole teaching of the Divine Call come from anyway? Last week in the sermon I spoke about “the ministry of the Gospel and the Sacraments” which Jesus has given to His Church on earth. In the administration of this ministry together Scripture instructs us in 1 Corinthians 14:40 → *All things should be done decently and in order*. The direct context of this instruction is how we function together in the worship setting. We have the freedom to worship with many different styles. However, it must be done in a fitting and orderly way.

Based on this command, the Augsburg Confession (one of the official confessions of our congregation) says in article 14: “It is taught among us that nobody should publicly teach or preach or administer the Sacraments in the church without a regular call.” (Tappert, T. G. (1959). *The Augsburg Confession: Translated from the Latin* (p. 36). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.) Let’s look at the Biblical teaching behind such a statement of faith.

When the Augsburg Confession uses the word “publicly” it is not used in the sense that we think of “public.” It is speaking within the context of the local congregation and their worship together. Therefore, “publicly” refers to administering the Gospel and the Sacraments to the whole congregation gathered together in worship. In this sense the pastoral ministry is referred to as the Office of the Public Ministry.

In order for the church to fulfill its ministry publicly as gathered believers in Christ in an orderly manner, it is God’s will that the church

call pastors. The command is given in Titus 1:5 *to appoint elders in every town*. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders on behalf of the Church for the Christians of Asia Minor in each congregation while on their missionary journey. (cf. Acts 14:23)

You may ask: “Sure they appointed elders but what about pastors?” Good question. In the New Testament various words are used to describe various leaders in the church. The titles of “elder,” “bishop” (which means “overseer”), and “pastor” (which means “shepherd”) appear to be used interchangeably in reference to the same position in the church. (cf. 1 Peter 5:1-2) They are titles which we embrace in our concept of “pastor” in the Christian Church today.

The Office of the Public Ministry (i.e. the Pastoral Office) is set up by Christ **through the Divine Call extended by the congregation**. During his “farewell” to the elders of the church in Ephesus while on his way to Jerusalem Paul told those pastors in Acts 20:28 → *Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which **the Holy Spirit has made you overseers**, to care for the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood*. The Pastoral Office is established by the Holy Spirit.

We see an excellent example of the Holy Spirit extending a Call through the believers in a local congregation in Acts 13:2-3. *While . . . the church in Antioch was worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I*

have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. Notice the Holy Spirit instructed the congregation to do the setting apart for **His and the Church’s** missionary work. The Holy Spirit called them to this service through the body of believers present in that place.

Referring to the office of the high priest who served Yahweh on behalf of His people in the Old Testament, Hebrews 5:4 stresses the fact that *no one takes this honor for himself, but **only when called by God.*** This Call comes through the Christian congregation—the people in which the Holy Spirit dwells. (cf. Ephesians 2:22) Also, the qualifications of the Pastoral Ministry as recorded in various parts of Scripture show the importance God places on the Office of the Public Ministry in His Church. (cf. 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9; 1 Peter 5:1-3)

The Call which the congregation extends to a man to serve as it’s pastor is a Divine Call because it comes from a divinely established congregation. The office of the Public Ministry is chosen from among the priesthood of all believers (i.e. the Christian congregation). Therefore, when the pastor administers the Word, Sacraments, and Office of the Keys he does so **on behalf of** the congregation. The congregation has transferred to the pastor their authority to administer these functions on their behalf in a public or orderly manner. His authority to perform this ministry does not come because of anything in him but rather as a gift

entrusted to him through the congregation.

Thus, when he proclaims the Gospel, baptizes, pronounces absolution and distributes the Lord's Supper it's actually the congregation performing these acts. They have simply called him to administer these means of grace on their behalf in an orderly manner. The pronouncement of absolution in Divine Service, *Setting Three* in our hymnal acknowledges this Divine Call when it says: "Upon this your confession, **I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word**, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Since the authority to administer the Word, Sacraments and Office of the Keys was not given to the pastors but the priesthood of all believers, there can be no Office of the Public Ministry apart from the priesthood of all believers. A man cannot appoint himself as a pastor. Since the congregation of believers has called the pastor and transferred their authority to him, the pastor **and** the congregation are to hold that Office in highest honor according to God's Word:

1 Timothy 5:17 → *Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, **especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.***

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 → *We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and **are over you in the Lord and admonish you**, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.*

Hebrews 13:17 → *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*

All of these verses and others in the Scripture reflect the importance of the Divine Call which is extended by a Christian congregation. Therefore, when a pastor receives a Call to be shepherd of another congregation **he must consider that Call seriously in light of the ministry of the Gospel and the Sacraments.**

The Call is divine only because it comes from a divinely established congregation. In fact, if the pastor is currently serving a congregation at the time he receives a Call to a different congregation, he is actually considering two Calls: the one to the congregation he is currently serving as well as the one to another congregation.

Considering a Call is a serious, prayerful process. It is not about making a “job” change. It’s not about pay, situation, living conditions, promotions, etc. Rather, it’s about determining where the Holy Spirit

desires this man to be Christ's servant to His Church. The man called to serve as pastor does not deserve that Call. Rather, the privilege to serve in the Office of the Public Ministry is a gift given by the Holy Spirit through His Church, bestowing the privilege of working together in ministry to fulfill Christ's Great Commission. (cf. Matthew 28:19-20)

So, in your prayers during the consideration of the Calls in my hands, pray for the LORD's Will to absolutely be accomplished according to His promise in Psalm 37:4 → *Delight yourself in the LORD, and He will give you the desires of your heart.* No . . . He's not necessarily going to give you whatever you want. Rather, He will give you the very desires themselves, desires for His good and gracious Will to be accomplished in His Church. Amen.

(Pray together the prayer on page 310 entitled "For the Holy Spirit")

Almighty God, send Your Holy Spirit into our hearts that He may rule and direct us according to Your will, comfort us in all our temptations and afflictions, defend us from all error, and lead us into all truth that we, being steadfast in faith, may increase in all good works and in the end obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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