

# The Doctrine Of The Divine Call And Current Practice

[Presented to Lake Lutheran Teachers' Conference, St. Paul's Lutheran School,  
Round Lake, Illinois, February 24, 1994]

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The world is not taking much note of this conference today. There are no reporters or cameramen. I doubt that there will be any mention of this gathering on the evening news. There are many other things happening in the world today which seem much more important.

I, however, consider it a distinct privilege to be here. I consider it a privilege because this gathering of God's people has asked me to present a doctrinal study, a study of the truths of God's Word. I have received a call from you to serve in this way.

Our Lord is taking notice of this meeting today. Wherever his people gather in his name, he is there with them. He is also taking notice of this meeting because it is a gathering of individuals whom he has called into the public ministry to assist his people in a special way in the work that he has given to every Christian. That work is the privilege of proclaiming the gospel to a world lost in sin.

But what is the public ministry? What does it involve? Who has the right to serve in it? How does one enter the ministry? The answers to these important questions involve a proper understanding of the divine call. That is the subject of our study. In this paper we will examine the doctrine of the divine call by (1) reviewing the scriptural basis for the call, (2) looking at the comfort of the divine call, (3) suggesting proper calling practice and (4) considering the practice in some other denominations.

## I. What does Scripture teach?

To understand the scriptural teaching of the divine call we need to understand what the Bible teaches about church and ministry. The doctrine of the call makes little sense without a knowledge of what the church is and does.

*1. The church is the sum total of those who trust in Jesus as their Savior. Since only believers are members of the church and we cannot see faith in a person's heart, the church is essentially invisible.*

The Greek word which we translate as "church" is *ecclesia*, literally, those who have been called out. The church is comprised of those who have been called out of unbelief to faith. It consists of those who trust in Jesus as their Savior. That can be seen in the way that St. Paul addresses the church in Corinth. He writes, "To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus...." (1 Co 1:2). St. Peter, addressing God's elect...who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit (1 Pe 1:1), reminds them, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pe 3:9).

The church consists of the elect who have been called out of the darkness of unbelief and sanctified in Christ Jesus. Therefore only those who have been brought to saving faith are members of the church. Because we cannot look into someone's heart to see faith, the church is invisible to human eyes. The members of the church are known but to God. "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Ti 2:19).

But if the church is essentially invisible, how do we know where the church is? How do we know when the church is present?

*2. We recognize that the church is present by the marks of the church the gospel rightly proclaimed and the sacraments rightly administered. These marks don't make the invisible church visible, but indicate its presence*

Only those who believe in Jesus as their Savior are members of the church. How do people come to trust in Jesus? The Holy Ghost brings them to faith through the means of grace, the gospel in word and sacrament. As

Paul writes to the Romans, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? ... Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Ro 10:13-14; 17). Through baptism the Holy Spirit creates new life (faith) in us. “He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior” (Tit 3:5-6).

Wherever the gospel is rightly proclaimed and the sacraments are rightly administered the Holy Spirit will be doing his work of bringing people to faith. As the Lord assured his prophet Isaiah, “My word....will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isa 55:11). This truth is so certain that Luther declares,

And even if no other sign than this alone, it would still suffice to prove that a Christian, holy people must exist there, for God’s Word cannot be without God’s people and conversely, God’s people cannot be without God’s Word.<sup>1</sup>

The reason that we say “rightly” taught and “rightly” administered is to emphasize the truth that the Holy Spirit doesn’t work through false teaching, but only through his word. As our WELS Theses on the Church and Ministry explain:

We rejoice in the fact that God in His grace and mercy can and does awaken, sustain, and preserve believers also in the midst of erring congregations and church bodies. 1 Kings 19:18. We remember, however, that he does so not through the errors that are taught and condoned there, but only through the true Gospel message that is still heard in these erring churches.<sup>2</sup>

*3. It is God’s will that Christians gather around the means of grace to carry out the tasks assigned to the church, but he has not prescribed the specific forms of those gatherings.*

The writer to the Hebrews encourages us, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10:25). Christians recognize the importance of gathering together with other Christians for mutual admonition, encouragement and growth in the knowledge and understanding of God’s Word.

The Bible encourages God’s people to gather together, but it never prescribes the forms those gatherings are to take. Whenever and wherever people are gathered around the gospel or on behalf of it, the church is present. As our Savior assures us, “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I with them” (Mt 18:20).

*4. God has given the church and every believer in it the keys of the kingdom and the authority to administer those keys. The exercise of the keys is the gospel ministry.*

St. Matthew records this conversation between Jesus and his disciples:

“Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus replied, “Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Mt 16:13-19).

When Jesus walked this earth he caused a stir because of the miracles he performed and because he taught with authority. Everyone had an opinion about who he might be. When Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was, Simon Peter spoke for the group and made a marvelous confession of his faith in Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of the world. Jesus declared that he would build his church on the precious truth that

Peter had confessed. He then gave to Peter and to all who confess that same truth the *keys of the kingdom*, the authority to forgive and retain sins.

It is clear from Scripture that the *keys of the kingdom of heaven* were not given to Peter alone. On Easter Sunday evening Jesus appeared to his disciples and gave to them all that same special power and authority. As St. John records, “Again Jesus said, Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that he breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (Jn 20:21-22). The authority to retain and forgive sins is the authority to proclaim the law and the gospel.

Nor was that authority given merely to Jesus’ first disciples or to the clergy, It is the possession of the church wherever the church is present. Our Lord assures us, “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.... For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Mt 18:18,20).

Every believer has the authority, responsibility and duty to proclaim the gospel, to announce God’s forgiveness to sinners. St. Peter writing to “God’s elect” (1 Pe 1:1) declares, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may *declare the praises* of him who called you out of his darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pe 2:9). To praise someone is to tell others about the good things he has done. To praise God is to tell sin-sick souls that Jesus died for them. To praise God is to tell sinful human beings that God has declared them not guilty because he declared his own Son guilty in their place. To praise God is to proclaim the gospel. That is the privilege and responsibility of every one of God’s elect. That is the *ministry* God has given to the church.

Ministry (*diakonia*) is service. A minister (*diakonos*) is one who serves. The gospel ministry is the service of proclaiming the good news of forgiveness of sins in the crucified and risen Savior.

*5. The public ministry is the exercise of the keys in the name and on behalf of other Christians. God has established the public ministry for the welfare of his people. God has not, however, prescribed the forms the public ministry is to take.*

When we use the term public ministry we do not mean public in the sense of in a crowd or in a public place. By public we mean representative. The public ministry is representative ministry. A public minister is one who represents God’s people. He serves in their name and at their request. Prof. John Meyer put it this way:

The terms *public* and *private* must here be determined by the relationship to the church. Anything is to be considered public as soon as the church is connected with it, while the same thing remains private if the church is not connected with it, no matter how public it may be in the ordinary sense of the word ....

Now all men who preach or teach the Gospel, not as private citizens, but because a group of Christians appointed them to do so in their stead, do it *publicly*. They represent the church in their work.<sup>3</sup>

The public ministry is a special way practicing the one ministry of the gospel that belongs to every Christian.

The public ministry did not simply evolve through human effort nor is it merely a convenient human arrangement. God instituted the public ministry for the benefit of his people. We see that in the way he established qualifications for those who serve in the ministry (1 Ti 3:1-12). Those in the ministry are *gifts* that God has given to his church. As St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “It was he (the ascended Savior) who *gave* some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:11-13).

Notice that in apostolic times there were a variety of offices in the public ministry. Yet we will search in vain for any command establishing any particular form of the ministry. God instituted the public ministry, but he

did not prescribe forms for the ministry. There is no ceremonial law or Levitical priesthood in the New Testament. God gives his people amazing freedom to establish offices to fit their needs.

*6. No one has the right to exercise the keys in the name of other Christians unless he is properly called. God calls people into the public ministry through the church, but he has not prescribed the calling procedure. The church has the right to establish different forms of the public ministry to meet various needs and circumstances.*

Since all Christians possess the keys equally, no one has the right to exercise the keys in the place of others within a group of Christians or in their name or on their behalf unless they ask him or her to do so. To assume an office in the public ministry without being called to do so would be arrogance and an imposition on God's people.

Although every Christian has the authority to proclaim the gospel, every Christian is not equally qualified to do so publicly. God has given different gifts and abilities to different people. While every Christian has the authority to proclaim the gospel and to administer the sacraments, it would be disorderly for each Christian to exercise that authority in a gathering of Christians. Since God commands that in the church "everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (1 Co 14:40), a group of Christians will designate an individual or individuals to exercise the keys in their name.

When the church calls an individual into the public ministry, it is actually *God* who is calling that person through them. St. Paul indicates that when he writes that those in the public ministry are *gifts of God*. "It is he who gave some to be apostles, some to prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers...." (Eph 4:11). Paul encourages the elders at Ephesus, "Guard yourselves and all the flock of which *the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*." (Ac 20:28). God issues the call through his people. That is why we call it a *divine call*. *God* places the individual into his office.

Our Lord, however, has not prescribed the calling procedure that the church is to follow. We hear no command of God establishing the method we are to use. We see a variety of patterns in the early church. The elders on Crete were appointed by Titus at Paul's direction (Tit 1:5). When calling for deacons to take charge of charitable work in Jerusalem, the assembly defined the scope of the call and set qualifications. "So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom" (Ac 6:2-3). The congregation chose the seven and the apostles installed them into their office in a ceremony with the laying on of hands.

Though God called the apostles directly (an *immediate* call), we have no promise in Scripture that he will continue to do so today. If someone claims an immediate call, he has to be able to confirm that call with signs and miracles. "The things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance" (2 Co 12:12). His miracles would have to be confirmed by comparing his teaching to the teaching of the apostles (I Jn 4:1,6).

We can properly speak of an inner call only in the sense of someone having the desire to serve in the ministry. Those who desire the ministry desire a noble task, Paul writes (1 Ti 3:1). But that desire does not give a person the right to impose himself on a group of Christians.

God calls people into the ministry through the church (a mediate Call). The right to call is implied in the keys and is necessitated by the command to do all things in a fitting and orderly way (1 Co 14:40). Paul recognized calls issued through human beings in his apostolic practice as legitimate calls (Ac 14:23; 2 Ti 1:6; 2:2; Tit 1:5).<sup>4</sup>

God has given the church amazing freedom to establish different forms of the public ministry to meet its needs as circumstances dictate. A variety of forms of the ministry is assumed in the "apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers." Paul speaks of in his letter to the Ephesians. The ability to establish forms of the ministry is evident in the calling of the seven deacons (Acts 6) to do charitable work in the Jerusalem congregation.

*7. God calls sinful human beings into the public ministry to serve him by serving other sinful human beings.*

No one deserves the privilege of serving in the public ministry. We don't even deserve to be called God's people. From the moment of our conception we are not what God demands that we be. From that moment we are sinful. We lack the perfect righteousness that God requires of us. By nature we are alienated from God. We are under his wrath and condemnation.

In eternity, however, God planned our salvation. He chose us to be his own. He sent his Son to be our Substitute. Jesus lived a perfect life for us. He took our place before God's judgment seat and was declared guilty for our sins. On the cross on Calvary he bore the full brunt of God's righteous anger over our sins and suffered the penalty that we deserved. The sinless Son of God died and was buried. But God raised him from the dead as a demonstration that he accepted his sacrifice as payment in full for our sins. God has declared the whole world innocent or forgiven, because he declared Jesus guilty in our place.

In his mercy God has called us to faith in our Savior through his word and sacraments. Through faith we have received all the benefits of Jesus' work of atonement. When our heavenly Father looks at us he no longer sees our lives of imperfection, but he sees the perfect righteousness of his own Son. He remembers our sins no more.

Yet until the day we die we remain sinful human beings. There is a constant struggle within us between our sinful nature and our new man. As St. Paul puts it so clearly, "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have a desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (Ro 7:17-19). That is why we pray every day, "Forgive us our trespasses."

In spite of our sinfulness, God has given us an amazing privilege. He has called people like you and me to the most glorious work on earth, the work of proclaiming his gospel of salvation. He could have chosen his holy angels to proclaim the gospel. He gave that privilege to them on a few occasions. He sent them to announce our Savior's birth to the shepherds near Bethlehem and also to announce his resurrection to the women at the tomb. From a human point of view it would certainly make more sense to entrust that precious message of salvation to those perfect and powerful creatures. But God has entrusted the task of proclaiming that message to people like us. He has condescended to call sinful human beings like you and me into the public ministry. What an amazing honor and privilege!

St. Paul puts it this way: "For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake....But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Co 4:5,7).

The great Lutheran theologian of the past century, C.F.W. Walther, recognized the glorious privilege of the ministry. The words he addressed to the seminarians entrusted to his care are equally applicable to teachers or to those serving in any other office of the public ministry.

When a place has been assigned to a Lutheran candidate of theology where he is to discharge the office of a Lutheran minister, that place ought to be to him the dearest, most beautiful and most precious spot on earth. He should be unwilling to exchange it for a kingdom. Whether it is a metropolis or in a small town, on a bleak prairie or in a clearing in the forest, in a flourishing settlement or in a desert, to him it should be a miniature paradise. Do not the blessed angels descend from heaven with great joy whenever the Father in heaven sends them to minister to those who are heirs of salvation? Why, then, should we poor sinners be unwilling to hurry after them with great joy to any place where we can lead other men, our fellow-sinners to salvation? <sup>5</sup>

When we recognize the privilege God has given us in calling us to be his representatives, the work he has given us to do will be central in our thinking. The geographical location or outward circumstances of the congregation will make little difference.

It is important for those of us in the public ministry always to remember who we are—sinners declared innocent for Christ’s sake. It is equally important to remember that the people we are serving are also sinners declared innocent for Christ’s sake. We are not serving perfect people. The children you teach are young Christians. That means that they are immature. They will make mistakes. It also means that they have both an old Adam and a new man which are in conflict with each other. Sometimes they will lose the struggle and fall into sin. Sometimes they will behave in a most “unchristian” way. But remember that the struggle is not between them and you. It is between them and them—between their old Adam and their new man. Your work is to help lead them toward the goal of Christian maturity. You do that by patiently admonishing them and by announcing God’s forgiveness. God has entrusted to your care those precious souls for whom Jesus died. What an awesome responsibility and privilege!

8. *God has established qualifications for the public ministry.*

Although the gospel ministry (ministry of the keys) belongs to every Christian, not every Christian is qualified to serve in the public ministry. God has established the qualifications that he requires in those who serve. In his first letter to Timothy St. Paul speaks of qualifications for overseers, those who have a call to the broadest form of the public ministry. Today that would be roughly equivalent to the pastoral ministry. Next he lists qualifications for deacons, those “who took care of collecting and dispersing the congregation’s finances looking after widows and the sick, in general administering the affairs of the congregation.” The qualifications in both cases, however, apply in a general way to all who serve in the public ministry.

Now the overseer must be above reproach (KJV—blameless), the husband of but one wife temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to much wine, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap. Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons (1 Ti 3:2-10).

Those in the public ministry are to be above reproach. The King James Version translated this term as blameless. It is important to note that

blamelessness must not be confused with sinlessness. Sinlessness is a qualification that could be met by no one except through Christ. Blamelessness implies that one cannot be blamed for offenses by which either those from without or within would be disturbed or hindered in their faith.<sup>7</sup>

Some of the qualities which make a person above reproach are being temperate (not give to extremes), self-controlled, respectable, not given to much wine (not a drunkard or an addict), not violent or quarrelsome or having a tendency to fly off the handle, but gentle. The public minister is to be the husband of but one wife. That is, he is to be innocent “of anything that even hints at inappropriate sexual behavior.”<sup>8</sup> He disciplines his children. He is not to be greedy or materialistic. Those who are lovers of money are really serving a master other than Christ.

The called worker should not be someone new in the faith, but one who has been tested. He is to be a mature Christian.

Those in the teaching and preaching ministry are to be *able to teach*. Teachers need the natural gifts of basic intelligence to grasp the truths that are to be taught and they need the ability to *communicate* those truths. Being able to teach also implies enhancing those natural gifts through training and education.

Nowhere does the Bible forbid women to serve in the public ministry. When the ministry, however, involves the exercise of authority over men, God requires that men alone serve (1 Co 14:34-35; 1 Ti 2:11-14).

Gifts and abilities will vary among called workers. Visible results and success may not always be evident in the ministry. But pastors and teachers can take comfort in the fact that the most important requirement for the ministry is faithfulness—faithfulness to God’s Word and faithfulness in carrying out the responsibilities God’s people assign to them. As the Scriptures declare, “So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (1 Co 4:1-2).

*9. The call confers the office of the ministry and establishes the scope of the office.*

Through the call God’s people delegate the work that belongs to all of them to an individual who acts in their name and on their behalf. The call, therefore, establishes what work is to be done in their name. That is the pattern that we also see in the New Testament. Let’s look again at the congregation in Jerusalem. When the Christians there chose seven deacons, they specified what they were asking the deacons to do.

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against those of the Aramaic speaking community because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Ac 6:2-4).

The deacons were to be responsible for the charitable work in the congregation, particularly in regard to providing for the widows.

In our circles the call of the parish pastor is broadest in scope. The pastor usually is given oversight of virtually every aspect of the congregation’s work. My call as a seminary professor is much narrower in scope. The synod through the seminary board of control has called me to teach our future pastors in two specific subject areas. Your call may be to teach first and second grade or sixth grade or to serve as principal. In each case the call determines the scope of the work which is to be done. Understanding what is meant by the scope of the call will keep us from interfering in another person’s area of responsibility.

We will not, however, hide behind the scope of our call when asked by the congregation to do something by saying, “That’s not in my call!” since the ministry by definition is *service* and a *privilege*, we will express that spirit of willing service in our relation with those who have called us.

When we speak of the scope of the call we are not implying a difference of rank among called workers. The idea of rank in the ministry is foreign to the very concept of ministry.<sup>9</sup> Jesus warns against that spirit.

But you are not to be called “Rabbi,” for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth “father,” for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called “teacher,” for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted (Mt 23:8-12).

A person enters the public ministry through the divine call. Ordination is an ecclesiastical rite that is a public confirmation or ratification of the call. It is a public declaration that the candidate has the qualifications necessary for the office to which he has been called. However, ordination does not make a person a pastor or teacher. The call makes a person a pastor or a teacher. When a person retires or resigns from a call he ceases to be in the public ministry.

*10. The calling body owes respect, cooperation and sufficient financial support to those whom it calls to serve in the full-time ministry.*

God's people are not in competition with each other, but are working toward the same goal. When a congregation calls someone to serve in their name, it is self-evident that they stand ready to cooperate in the work they have called him or her to do. Called workers can encourage cooperation by displaying an openness toward the congregation and a willingness to listen and to serve. As St. Peter writes, "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not *lording it over* those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Pe 5:2-3). Called workers will remember that they do not demand respect or trust, but earn it by their work, attitude and character.

While the called worker will avoid every impression of being "greedy for money," the calling body will recognize that "the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel" (1 Co 9:15). The congregation will also remember that "the elders who direct the affairs of the congregation are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching" (1 Ti 5:17).

As Prof. Armin Schuetze explains:

Thus the manner in which the church provides for those who serve well is a way of showing honor. Put into today's terms, by the salary it pays and the benefits it provides, a congregation shows honor and respect for its called workers. It hardly shows "double honor" if their support is kept at poverty or minimum subsistence level. Neither should the pastor expect, however, that "double honor" requires that those he serves make him a man of wealth.<sup>10</sup>

Our willingness to serve doesn't depend on our salary but on our recognition of the privilege God has entrusted to us.

## II. The Comfort of the Divine Call

As called workers we can expect problems in the ministry. We should not expect our society or the news media or the entertainment industry to honor us as we carry out our Lord's commands. As Jesus warns,

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you, "No servant is greater than his master." if they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also" (Jn 15:18-20).

Satan will do his best to disrupt our work, to undermine our ministry and to throw roadblocks in our way. He knows that he can cause great harm if he can interfere with the work of the ministry. He is clever and wily. He knows our weaknesses and the weaknesses of the people we serve. He sometimes succeeds in leading us to act our worst. The children we teach, the people we serve and our colleagues in the ministry are sinful. Sometimes they will greatly disappoint us. Sometimes they will cause us problems.

Our own sinful nature also hinders us. It makes us prone to complain and feel sorry for ourselves. It makes us quick to criticize others and make excuses for ourselves. It makes us long for recognition and power. In addition to everything else, we are all good Americans. We have learned to measure success statistically. We have become bottom line oriented. That can cause problems for us because success in the ministry can't necessarily be measured statistically. When we don't see any results for all of our hard work, we can become frustrated. When we make careful plans and they don't work out, we can become discouraged.<sup>11</sup>

The doctrine of the divine call offers us comfort. When we have accepted a call we can be certain that God himself has placed us into our office. He wants us to be in this particular place at this particular time. He has also given us the means for accomplishing what he wants to accomplish. He has given us the means of grace, the gospel which is his power for salvation (Ro 1:16). We have his promise that his word will not return to him empty but will accomplish what he desires and will achieve his purpose (Isa 55:11). We can be content and leave the results up to him. Our Lord requires faithfulness of us (1 Co 4:1-2). In eternity we will see what he accomplished through the work he entrusted to us.

On the basis of statistics our Savior's earthly ministry was not very successful. After his bread of life discourse many of his followers were quite upset with his teaching. They said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it? .... From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (Jn 6:60, 66).

The great prophet Elijah once complained, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too" (1 Ki 19:10). In a very dramatic way God reminded him that the power of God in the ministry lies in the gentle whisper of his word (1 Ki 19:11-13). Elijah thought that he was the only believer left in Israel and that all his work had been in vain. The Lord reminded him that success in the ministry often is visible only to God. The Lord informed Elijah that he still preserved "seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him" (1 Ki 19:18).

We can't always see God's purposes. We can't always see the results of our labors. As ministers of the gospel, however, we can be certain that the Holy Spirit will accomplish what pleases *him*, not necessarily what pleases us. We can carry out our work in confidence knowing that the final outcome is in God's hands.

### **III. Calling Practice and Procedures**

God has not spelled out for us the methods we are to use in issuing calls or what our exact procedures are to be. He leaves much to our Christian freedom. And yet the way we issues calls or deliberate calls or accept or decline calls will flow out of our understanding of the principles stated above.

#### **Extending a Call**

In our synod we have established a practice for issuing calls which reflects the scriptural understanding of the divine call. Since we are all members of the same synod, we follow the established procedures for the sake of good order and common courtesy.

When a congregation is in need of a teacher, the chosen representatives of the congregation inform the district president and describe the work the new teacher will be asked to do. If the congregation is asking for a graduate, it authorizes the district president and the assignment committee to choose the teacher in the name of the congregation. If a congregation wants to call from the field, the district president obtains a list of qualified candidates from the synod's Commission on Parish Schools. He then forwards the list to the congregation with basic information about each candidate's education, experience, strengths and interests.

Congregational members have every right to add other names to the list of candidates, but wisdom suggests that the names be cleared first with the district president. By virtue of his office the district president is usually in a better position to assess the qualifications of the candidates than are the members of the congregation. He has access to more information than they. Since the district president is responsible for doctrine and practice in his district, he has to answer for the qualifications of those who serve in the congregations who have elected him. It is, therefore, not only common courtesy but also good order for a congregation to seek his authorization before calling anyone.

The list with the pertinent information about each candidate is presented to the congregation's voters. They have been entrusted by the congregation with the task of extending the call. The assembly votes by secret ballot. The candidate receiving the majority of the votes cast after one or more ballots is extended the call. The assembly will usually then make the vote unanimous. Otherwise the impression would be given that the call is being issued in the name of only a portion of the congregation.

The congregation through its elected representatives then sends a diploma of vocation stating the scope of the call and the congregation's obligations to its called worker. A personal cover letter giving further information regarding the congregation and school accompanies the diploma of vocation.

#### **Accepting or Declining a Call**

Seniors at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and Dr. Martin Luther College express a willingness to serve wherever the Lord through our synod's assignment committee calls them. The assignment committee is informed of the strengths and abilities of each candidate and prayerfully fits the candidate to the requirements and needs of each congregation. The assignment committee is also made aware of any health problems or other mitigating

circumstances that might hinder a candidate in a particular assignment. Our graduates express a marvelous understanding of the divinity of the call and the privilege of serving in the ministry in the way they willingly leave the decision of where they will serve in the hands of God.

When a call is extended to someone already serving in the public ministry, that person is faced with a decision. The individual must decide between the call of the congregation he is currently serving and the call just received. He can show our respect for the ministry and the seriousness of the call by acknowledging receipt of the call by return mail. He will also immediately inform his congregation and district president.

Since a person is not always the best judge of his own strengths and weaknesses, he is wise to seek the advice of others in the ministry. He will especially want to take the matter to the Lord in prayer, asking for God's guidance in his deliberations. After weighing the needs in both congregations, he will base his decision on his answer to this question: Where can I with my gifts best serve the interests of God's kingdom?

Out of consideration for the calling body and the congregation he is serving, the called worker will usually not want to take more than two or three weeks to reach a decision. He will then notify the congregation he is serving, the congregation extending the call and his district president of his decision. If he has accepted the call, he will ask the congregation he is serving for a peaceful release.

### **Abuses of the Calling Procedure**

Since the call into the public ministry is a *divine* call, we believe that the call seeks the person, the person doesn't seek the call. People can prepare themselves for the public ministry and make themselves available to be called into the ministry. That is what the students at our schools do. But it is really an abuse of the calling procedure for a person to politick or scheme for a *particular* call. God knows where we are. If he wants to call us into a particular field of service he certainly has the ability to do so. In the same way, relatives should not work behind the scenes to secure a call, so that a loved one might be able to serve closer to home.

It would be an abuse for someone to accept a call with the idea that it will serve as a stepping-stone to something greater or more desirable. That thought is foreign to the spirit of service and humility that the ministry demands. In the same way bargaining with the calling body for extra benefits or perquisites is contrary to a spirit of willing service which recognizes the privilege of the ministry.

Some calls are temporary by their very nature (e.g. emergency teachers, tutors at our synodical schools etc.). It is not, however, our practice to issue calls on a temporary basis as a trial period or to renew calls year by year. The relationship between a congregation and called worker is not an employer/employee relationship. We do not issue calls with the idea that if the person called works out or we like him, we will keep him on. We issue calls for an indefinite period of time. We accept calls in the same spirit. We let God determine the time limits.

### **Resignation from a Call**

A call is not necessarily for life. A call may be terminated by acceptance of another call. If a person is no longer able to carry out the work he was called to do because of persistent illness or age, he will find it necessary to resign from his call. The public ministry is too precious to let our pride or selfishness stand in the way of the best interest of God's kingdom.

It may happen that a called worker has done something that results in the loss of the congregation's confidence in him. For the sake of the ministry it may be necessary to resign. The question to be answered is whether the loss of confidence or opposition in the congregation is because of the called worker's wrong actions or the result of opposition to the truths of Scripture that he has been faithfully proclaiming. Before such a resignation occurs it is best to seek the advice and help of the proper district officials. Resignation should not be an attempt to escape the problems that are common to the ministry.<sup>12</sup>

It goes without saying that a pastor or teacher who no longer shares the confessional position of the group that has called him can no longer serve that group with a clear conscience.

The sanctity of the call does not require submitting to a congregation's change to error, nor does it allow a pastor (or teacher) to claim a right to turn the congregation from truth to error through

his continued service. To attempt to do the latter through subversive methods without the knowledge of the congregation is most reprehensible.<sup>13</sup>

### **Termination of the Call**

A congregation may find it necessary to terminate a call if the reason for the call no longer exists. If a school's enrollment has dropped significantly with little hope of increasing, a congregation may find it necessary to reduce the number of teachers serving in its midst. In such a situation the congregation would contact the district president to alert him to the problem. The district president would see to it that the name of one or more of the called workers would appear on call lists for other congregations. Every effort would be made to provide for the called worker in the interim. But the truth remains that if the reason for a call no longer exists, the call no longer exists.<sup>14</sup>

### **Removal from office**

A congregation can also terminate a call for persistence in false doctrine, public offense, unfaithfulness, legalism or lack of ability. In such circumstances the congregation will proceed in Christian love according to Matthew 18 and will want seek outside advice and help from the proper district officials.

## **IV. Historical Developments and Practice in other Denominations**

The time allotted for this paper does not permit a close examination of the smorgasbord of calling procedures and practices of other churches. We can, however, take note of a few of the main practices which have developed over the centuries and can still be seen in modern America.

History does not record much information about the calling practice in first centuries of the Christian church. It seems that for some time the authority to choose or call candidates remained in the hands of the people.

The norm which was generally accepted in the fourth and fifth centuries and which was confirmed by the legislation of Justinian in 528, was to have three candidates nominated by *the clergy and people* of the vacant see, for election and consecration by the metropolitan and the bishops of the province. A reverse procedure—nomination of three candidates by the bishops, from which the people would choose one—was also considered acceptable.<sup>15</sup>

Over the centuries, however, some false teachings concerning the ministry and the call developed.

### **The Hierarchical View of the Ministry**

In the course of time more and more authority was placed in the hands of bishops and less and less in the hands of God's people. In the west there developed the idea that those in the public ministry received their authority not from God through God's people (the church), but from God through the pope and bishops. This false view of the ministry lessened and even eliminated the role of the people in the calling of their pastors and teachers. Bishops would assign and transfer priests and nuns according to their own best judgment.

The Roman Catholic Church also came to teach that ordination, not the call, makes one a minister. They claimed that ordination confers an "indelible character" on an individual. They maintained that ordination gives a person the power to perform the office. This continues to be Roman Catholic teaching in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as illustrated by an official Roman Catholic publication, *A Catechism for Inquirers*.

*What is the sacrament of holy orders?*

It is the sacrament by which bishops, priests, and other ministers of the Church receive the power and grace to perform their sacred offices.

*Why is it called holy orders?*

Because it comprises several steps or grades, which lead up to the priesthood and the episcopate, i.e., the office of bishop.

*Who can administer the sacrament of holy orders?*

Only one who is a bishop can validly confer holy orders.

*Who can receive holy orders?*

Any Catholic of the male sex, who has the necessary qualifications and is chosen by a bishop.<sup>16</sup>

Because of a shortage of nuns and priests the Roman Catholic Church in the last few decades has also begun the practice of hiring teachers for secular subjects in their schools.

At the time of the Reformation Luther brought to light again the scriptural teaching of the priesthood of all believers. He emphasized the truth that the authority to call lies in the hands of God's people, not in the authority of popes and bishops by virtue of some sort of apostolic succession.

God's people can, however, delegate to a bishop or a committee the responsibility for calling and providing public ministers. The problem in Roman Catholicism is not so much that bishops have been given authority to call or assign workers, but that bishops insist that it is their right and not the right of God's people.

### **The Inner or Immediate Call**

Luther also opposed another error of his day. The Anabaptists believed in the direct revelation of the Holy Spirit and in the inner or immediate or direct call of God as conveying the authority to exercise the public ministry. During Luther's stay at the Wartburg the "Zwickau prophets" came to Wittenberg and caused great confusion. They claimed direct revelation from God and the divine right to preach to God's people even when they had not been called by them.

In dealing with men who boast an immediate call, Luther would "ask them: Where are the signs, compelling us to believe? We are certainly not going to believe you on your bare word. And even if you show us signs, we will first inquire after your doctrine, whether it agrees with God's Word; for false prophets, too, can perform signs, as Moses said to Israel, Dt 13:1-4."<sup>17</sup>

John Calvin spoke of two calls, an inner or secret call, and a corporate call. The corporate call comes from the church and ratifies the individual call. According to Calvin, the two are complementary and necessary for genuine calling. Calvin, however, placed the greater emphasis on the corporate call.

Much of modern American Protestantism has placed the emphasis on the inner call. Evangelists like Billy Graham begin their ministry on the basis of their own personal conviction rather than being extended a call by a group of Christians. In an interview in *Christianity Today* Graham makes that very point.

*What made you move from being a college president to evangelistic work?*

I wasn't a very good president. I felt called of God [to become an evangelist]. And my wife felt it even more than I did.<sup>19</sup>

Because of the emphasis on the "inner" call the practice of "candidating" for a call and sending out search committees are common practices in America today. The process includes interviews and trial sermons. Congregations become employers and the called workers employees. The congregation hires and fires just like any secular business would do. As the pastor of a "Bible Church" writes,

In candidating for my first pastorate, I learned the previous pastor had been fired. The board had told him after a morning service that they didn't want him back in the church, period. I discovered the previous pastor's style had been authoritarian and abrasive. The infamous Sunday he'd been fired, he'd preached on how that church was a disgrace to the community.

Knowing that I had a different style of leadership, I didn't anticipate the same problems. Ten fruitful years in the ministry justified my conclusions.<sup>20</sup>

One cannot help wondering if public ministers in this calling scenario are not more than a little tempted to tell people what their itching ears want to hear, instead of proclaiming God's truth. The candidate is required to convince the committee that he is the man for the job.

On a June Sunday morning, I was introduced to the Victorian stained glass, antique woodwork, and cushioned pews of First Covenant church. But in spite of the beauty, I preached under tension. I needed a call—and fast.

The autumn before, my church, while not actually giving me notice, had sent unmistakable signals that eleven years was, let's say, *enough*. So I'd been looking for eight months. One search committee had interviewed me and turned me down, and another congregation had missed issuing me a call by three votes. Now I was preaching at First Covenant.

After the service we drove to a trustee's home for dinner with the search committee. The atmosphere was different than when candidating at previous churches. Conversation flowed easily over dinner, and then, after the dishes had disappeared into the kitchen, talk shifted to church. No obvious seam marked the passage from mere talk to serious business, but before I realized it, the interview was in progress. I wasn't performing; I was being myself.

I eventually received the call. I suspect the non-adversarial and pastoral tone established over dinner had something to do with the mutually positive impressions we had of one another."

### **Other Lutherans**

When Lutherans emigrated to America they found a religious climate far different from the one they left. In America there was no state church. There were no state laws establishing borders between congregations or fixing forms of the ministry. Every Lutheran immigrant group to this country had to wrestle with the doctrine of the church and ministry. Every Lutheran group had to wrestle with calling procedures and forms. Some denied that teachers were in the public ministry. Those Lutherans hired rather than called their teachers.

Unfortunately, time does not permit an historical survey of the doctrine of the church and ministry among America's Lutherans nor a close examination of the calling practice that can be found today.

Worthy of note, however, is the practice that has developed at Missouri's Concordia University in River Forest during the last twenty years. Instead of receiving a call on the traditional call night, seniors interview with representatives of congregations seeking a teacher. The students can also indicate a preference for the area of the country in which they would like to serve.

It's been only in the last 20-plus years that the placement process has changed to a system where direct contact is made between calling bodies and candidates. A prospective teacher is likely to interview in person or by phone with a parish's pastor, school principal or board of education. While the element of surprise may be gone, the divine call of the Holy Spirit is still the focal point of the placement process...

Zillman (director of educational and synodical placement) says the current model facilitates the best fit of a teacher with a congregation. While some parishes continue to call church workers based solely on written credentials, more calling bodies are engaging in personal interviews. Personality and attitude toward ministry become additional components to consider for both the calling institution and the candidate.

Mike Font, BA '93, was impressed with the formal interview he went through with the pastor, principal and board of education at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Norwood Park, Ill.

"In an hour-and-fifteen minute interview, they asked me everything I knew about the teaching ministry," he said. "I was impressed by how much they cared about the person to whom they were willing to extend a call," After interviewing with four congregations, Font accepted the call to teach seventh grade at St. Paul's.<sup>22</sup>

One can understand why this Missouri Synod school has gone to this procedure. The size of that church body makes it difficult for an assignment committee to know individual students and congregations well. Doctrinal controversies and internal problems in the Missouri Synod have also perhaps led to a loss of trust in leadership and the product of the synod's schools. It is understandable that Missouri Synod congregations would want to be more directly involved in selecting a graduate.

The procedure does, however, seem open to some abuses. Are the graduates in competition with each other to secure the "best" call? Do congregations have to vie with one another to present the "best" offer in order to entice a "top" candidate to accept their call? Does the graduate have to convince the committee that he is the "best" person for the office? Is this the best way to demonstrate that the call seeks the person, the person does not seek the call?

### **Conclusion**

The doctrine of the divine call is important and precious. It gives us comfort and courage. Serving in the public ministry is the greatest privilege that God grants in this life. May we always recognize and cherish the

privilege he has given us. May God move us always to give ourselves wholeheartedly to the glorious work that he has called us to do. May everything we do and say as public ministers give him glory and lead his people to praise his name.

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3. John P. Meyer, *Studies in the Augsburg Confession*, (Mequon: The Seminary Mimeo Co., 1965) p. 76.
4. *Senior Dogmatics Notes*, (Mequon: The Seminary Mimeo Co., 1985), P. 161.
5. C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, trans. by W.H.T. Dau, (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1928) p. 207-208.
6. Armin W. Schuetze *The People's Bible—I Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991) p. 55-56. Confer Prof. Schuetze's entire discussion on pages 47-59.
7. Robert J. Voss, "The Doctrine of the Call," an essay presented to the Arizona-California District Convention, June 1214, 1984, p. 16.
8. Voss, op.cit., p. 16.
9. Please confer Prof. Scharf 's comments on rank in the ministry. Erwin Scharf, "The Call to the Use of the Keys," *Our Great Heritage*, Lyle Lange, ed. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991) vol. III, p. 504-505.
10. Schuetze, op. cit., p. 82.
11. For an excellent discussion of the success mentality or syndrome in the ministry please confer; Richard D. Balge, "The Gospel Ministry A Triumphal Procession in Christ," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, vol 91, no. 1, Winter 1994.
12. Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd Under Christ*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1974) p. 4243,
13. Ibid. 43.
14. Richard E. Lauersdorf, "The Doctrine of the Call with Special Reference to the Question of Permanence under Changed Circumstances," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, vol. 86, #4, Fall 1989.
15. John Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Divisions*, (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989) p. 44.
16. Joseph I. Malloy and Edward H. Peters, *A Catechism for Inquirers*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1965) p. 53.
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18. James R. Edwards, "The Calling." *Christianity Today*, February 5, 1988, P. 61.
19. "Graham's View from Japan," *Christianity Today* February 7, 1994, p. 47.
20. Kenneth Quick, "Candid Candidating," *Leadership*, Fall 1990, p. 72.
21. Everett L. Wilson, "Pastoring Begins with the Search Committee," *Leadership*, Fall 1990, p. 74.
22. "Different Roads lead to Success," *The Forester*, Fall 1993, p. I.

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