

The doctrine of the divine call

With special consideration of the elimination of called positions in our synod due to finances or changing ministerial needs

In the name of Jesus

Our synod and its congregations recognize with great appreciation the blessings of the public ministry. We show that appreciation by the careful way in which we prepare candidates for the ministry, the careful assignment of new graduates to their first place of service, and the many ways in which we provide physical, spiritual, and professional support for called workers. It is an appreciation that is encouraged by God in his Word (Hebrews 13:17), and it flows from the faith and love that is created in us through the preaching and teaching of his gospel.

God himself has established this holy ministry. Because we recognize the holy ministry to be established and given by God, we acknowledge called workers as gifts from our ascended Savior (Ephesians 4:11-13), and we treasure them as such. We joyfully confess that the public ministry glorifies and serves Christ and that the church is served through it.

In recent years, the synod and many of its congregations have made difficult decisions to terminate divine calls due to changing ministerial needs, significant shortfalls in financial resources, or a combination of the two. When positions were eliminated early in the decade and more recently in 2009, concerns and questions were raised about whether a calling body acts in keeping with the doctrine of the divine call when it terminates divine calls primarily for financial reasons. These concerns were not only raised in terms of the propriety of the action in light of Scripture, but also raised as the result of genuine love and concern for the faithful workers and their families who were affected by these decisions. Quite properly, the 2009 synod convention asked the Conference of Presidents to study this issue and to bring a report to the 2011 synod convention.

Our understanding of the doctrine of the holy ministry, as well as how we apply that doctrine, must always be drawn from Scripture alone. Where Scripture clearly speaks regarding the ministry, we must stand firm on God's truth. Where Scripture allows decisions based on Christian freedom, we must always act in love and strive to make decisions based on sanctified wisdom and judgment. In those areas where Scripture has not spoken, we will take care not to assume that a practice is God-pleasing, wise, or beneficial if Scripture does not explicitly forbid it. At the same time, we will not conclude that a practice is sinful just because Scripture does not explicitly allow it.

The office of gospel ministry

God has established one divinely-instituted office for the church, the gospel ministry. In John 20 the evangelist writes, "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'" (John 20:21-23). It is *ministry* because it is service, both to God and to God's people. It is *gospel* ministry because the essence of its service is to proclaim the entire word of God, especially the gospel message of free and full forgiveness in Christ.

The source of the divine call

Scripture tells us that those who desire to serve in the public ministry of the gospel are pursuing a noble goal. "Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task" (1 Timothy 3:1). Still, the desire of the individual is not the source of a divine call. The source of a divine call is not *internal*, produced by the willingness, desire, or feelings of a believer.

Rather, the source of a divine call is *external*. It comes from outside the believer. It comes from God; thus we call it a *divine* call. The writer to the Hebrews, referring both to the Old Testament priesthood and the office of Christ, speaks of the external divine call that is necessary for service in the Lord's New Testament church: "No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was. So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest" (Hebrews 5:4,5).

Since God is the source of a divine call, it is really *his* call. It belongs to *him*. Even though we may sometimes use the expression “my call,” it is always to be understood in the sense of “the call in which God has privileged me to serve.”

A called servant occupies the office of the public ministry by the high privilege accorded to him by God. It is by grace alone that any of us are God’s children. It is grace heaped upon grace that the Lord grants anyone the privilege of serving in the public ministry of the gospel. Paul says, “I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Ephesians 3:7,8).

Immediate and mediate calls

The calls of the prophets and the apostles were *immediate*; they were called directly by God without a mediating group or individual. Old Testament prophets entered the ministry when the Word of the LORD came to them. The New Testament apostles were called and appointed by Christ himself.

At other times, however, God called people into the ministry through *mediate* calls, in which the divine call came from God through the church. In the Book of Acts we see the church as the medium through which divine calls were extended. Matthias was called mediately through the apostolic assembly in Acts 1. In Acts 6 God called men to serve as deacons through the church assembled in Jerusalem.

Even though God uses his church on earth to issue divine calls to individuals, they are still divine calls because it is God who does the calling. In Acts 20:28, St. Paul describes the elders that had been appointed to their position mediately (either by Paul or by the church) as ones who had been made overseers by the Holy Spirit. The origin of the call is divine, but the means through which the call is extended is the church.

Called to serve

By a divine call the Lord makes an individual a public minister of the gospel. Public ministry is representative ministry—the individual called by a congregation represents the congregation, using the keys on behalf of the congregation and in its name. The Lord designed that this ministry or service be carried out for the benefit of others. God-pleasing ministry is not self-serving; it always seeks to serve God and his people (1 Peter 5:2). Since the person occupying the office of the holy ministry by divine call is a servant of God and is used by God to shepherd God’s people, the Scriptures have much to say about the honor due the office of the holy ministry. “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Hebrews 13:17). “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching” (1 Timothy 5:17).

The honor due the called servant is not due to the worthiness of the servant. “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7). “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant” (2 Corinthians 3:5, 6). Rather, the Lord desires that his servants be held in the highest regard because of the office with which they have been entrusted and the blessings he intends to grant through their work. Those who are called into public ministry serve as the Lord’s representatives and his instruments for blessing. Through them, the Good Shepherd cares for the souls he purchased with his own blood. He works through these called servants, as they proclaim his Word and administer his sacraments, to create and strengthen faith, to sustain his people in trials, to equip the saints for works of service, and to empower them for lives that bring glory to his name. “Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work” (1 Thessalonians 5:13).

Qualifications for public ministry

Scripture speaks to us of the source, essence, and purpose of the public ministry. It also describes several specific and some general qualifications for the ministry. Called servants must be blameless, hold firmly to the Word, and be faithful to sound doctrine (Titus 1:9); they must live in keeping with the requirements outlined by Paul to Timothy: “Above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of

money. He must manage his own family well. . . . He must also have a good reputation with outsiders” (1 Timothy 3:1-7).

Scope and duration of the divine call

A divine call always involves scope and duration. In the case of a mediate call, God entrusts the calling body to determine the scope (what needs to be done) and duration (how long that work is to continue) of a particular divine call. This is done not by direct revelation from God, but through the prayerful consideration and sanctified human judgment of the church.

While God does clearly establish for us the doctrine of the divine call in Scripture, he does not explicitly state in Scripture the duration of a divine call. The Lord has given his New Testament church amazing freedom in determining the scope and duration of a divine call. Historically, calling bodies in our synod have, in sanctified Christian judgment, considered divine calls to be permanent until God brings them to an end, mediately or immediately. However, in some situations the duration of a call is limited from the start due to the needs of the calling body or some special circumstances (e.g. the production of a new hymnal, service as a tutor). The limited duration is known and communicated when the calling body issues the divine call. Calling bodies must exercise great care when limiting the duration of a divine call. Temporary or renewable divine calls carry with them particular temptations. There is the temptation for some calling bodies to look for a worker who will tell them what they want to hear or who will have the particular gifts or personality they like. The office of the ministry is not to be treated as a hired position, subject to the whims of those who provide a job and a paycheck. Conversely, the called servant could be tempted to tell people what they want to hear for fear that a temporary call might not be renewed. “For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear” (2 Timothy 4:3).

The scope (specific duties and responsibilities) of a divine call is determined by the calling body. The called worker is expected to carry out those duties faithfully as long as the calling body continues to recognize the needs that had been established. In our fellowship, we have recognized a calling body’s ongoing right, and even responsibility, to change the scope of the divine call when it is judged to be necessary or beneficial. This happens in various ways, both by formal and informal change of a divine call. It usually happens with the willing consent of the called worker, who agrees with the calling body’s evangelical assessment of the needs of the ministry and, therefore, the need for the change in the divine call’s scope. In such cases, the called worker transitions willingly into that revised scope. Sometimes a change in scope or responsibility takes place without the consent of the called worker, but still based upon the calling body’s evangelical assessment of ministry needs. When the change in scope or responsibilities is a dramatic departure from the previous scope, we have recognized the propriety of extending a new divine call to the worker, allowing that worker to consider whether his/her gifts or abilities fit the new divine call. We also have typically recognized the right of the called worker respectfully to disagree, even to the point of prayerfully declining the divine call if the worker so chooses. By declining that new divine call, the worker thereby leaves the public ministry in that place.

The ending of a divine call

Obviously, God himself brings a divine call to an end immediately through death.

Furthermore, just as God calls mediately through his church, he also entrusts to his church the responsibility to end divine calls when appropriate:

- When the Lord calls the worker to another field of service through his church; the acceptance of the new divine call ends the divine call in which the worker had been serving.
- A calling body must, at God’s direction, terminate the divine call relationship due to the called worker’s persistent adherence to false doctrine, scandalous life, willful neglect of duty, or an established inability to carry out the duties of the office.
- A calling body may terminate a divine call due to a significant reduction in ministerial needs, such as lower enrollment in a school or a decrease in a congregation’s membership.
- A calling body terminates a divine call by a decision to discontinue the ministry itself.
- The duration of a temporary or limited divine call comes to an end.

There are also circumstances in which God entrusts to the called worker the responsibility to bring an end to the call:

- A called worker resigns the divine call due to retirement, recognition of inability to carry out the tasks required, ill health, family obligations (e.g. a female teacher resigns in order to devote herself to caring for her children), personal circumstances, or a change of vocation.

Financial reasons

It is a clear scriptural principle that a calling body is obligated to provide and care for a person who serves in the gospel ministry. “Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain” and “The worker deserves his wages” (1 Timothy 5:18). No calling body has the right to expect someone to serve in a divine call without such support. A worker may choose to serve in a divine call without compensation as Paul did in Corinth, but a congregation cannot expect or demand it.

There are times when a calling body recognizes that, though their ministerial needs remain the same, it will not be able to support a worker in keeping with its scriptural obligations. The question before us is this: Is that a circumstance in which a calling body may legitimately terminate the divine call? Such decisions have been made by the synod and by congregations in the recent past, and many calling bodies may find themselves in that situation in the future.

We want at all times to honor the divinity of the call and to demonstrate honor and love for those who serve the Lord and his people in public ministry. While we cannot anticipate every situation that may arise, the following general principles ought to guide us as we make these difficult decisions:

- Sincere and honest heart-searching must be done to avoid any hint of false motives. A financial reason should never be used as an artificial or manufactured excuse to end a divine call because of dissatisfaction with a particular called worker. An older called worker should not be set aside in favor of a younger, “less expensive” called worker to fill the same calling. Materialism and improper priorities need to be admonished and corrected.
- The urge to end a divine call for the sake of a new or “exciting” ministry program (served by a different called worker) should be resisted.
- The calling body is to make every effort to encourage God’s people toward more faithful stewardship; such efforts could serve to alleviate or remove the financial shortfall.
- The calling body should consider all options to provide for the continuing support of the called position, including reducing salaries for all of its called workers. Decisions regarding compensation reductions should be made in careful consultation with the workers to determine if those cuts might put a particular worker at great risk.
- If the financial situation cannot be changed and other options are not considered possible or appropriate, the calling body is expected to demonstrate love and concern for the ministry of the Word in general and the called worker and his family in particular.
- Any contemplated change should not be done quickly or precipitously; sufficient planning time needs to be given to the affected called worker. Careful planning and sufficient advance notice will provide the congregation with the opportunity to communicate with the district president, with the intent that the called worker will be able to be considered for a divine call to another field of service.
- If, after careful examination of all options and discussions with the called worker, the calling body concludes that it is unable to fulfill its obligation to support the worker (assuming the need for the ministry has not changed), it should present to the called worker what could be provided by way of support. If the called worker is in a position financially to continue to serve at the level of compensation provided, the worker would be free to do so. If the worker prayerfully determines that the compensation is insufficient to support his household, the congregation ought to grant the worker a peaceful release from the divine call, rather than forcing the worker to resign or unilaterally terminating the divine call.

Reflections

Self-examination is a good and proper thing to do. Having reflected upon the events of the past several years and the difficult and painful decisions to terminate divine calls for financial reasons, the Conference of Presidents acknowledges that there have been situations that could have been handled in a better way. Lapses in communication and inconsiderate treatment of called servants, while not intentional or malicious, resulted in misunderstandings and genuine hurt. In hindsight, actions taken may not always have given clear witness to the high regard the church has for the public ministry and for those whom the Lord has called to serve in that ministry. Where calling bodies have failed, we will humbly approach God for his forgiveness in Christ. Where God's Word guides and instructs, we will resolve to look to that Word more diligently. Where corrections in our decision-making should be made, we will resolve with God's help to make those changes.

These reflections drive us back to the grace of God in Christ, which he declares to us in his Word and administers to us in his sacraments. In repentance and faith we cherish even more the public ministry of the gospel and the called servants who dispense the grace of God and the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus.

To God alone be the glory!

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