

Practical Applications of the Teacher's Call

By: Prof. Joel C. Gerlach

Prologue

The secretary of the program committee indicated that this essay is to be a sequel to another essay presented to this conference. The prior essay, entitled "The Call," was primarily doctrinal setting forth the Scriptural basis for the call. The committee has specified that this essay should be practical, rather than theoretical, stressing the everyday implications of having a divine call. With that directive in mind we shall proceed without further reference to what God's Word teaches us about the divinity of the call.

On numerous occasions since 1967 the essayist has written on aspects of the theme of this essay in the editorial columns of *The Lutheran Educator*. Regular readers of that journal will recognize many of the ideas expressed here as a repetition of ideas originally expressed on the pages of the *Educator*.

When an agenda committee selects a theme for a conference paper, there are invariably a number of reasons for the choice the committee makes. Obviously the committee members feel there is a need for a study and consideration of the theme they choose. I did not ask any of your program committee members why they felt there was a need for a study of this particular topic, but I think it is rather obvious. We all know what a divine call is, but we don't always see as clearly as we should the implications of the divinity of the call and the practical applications of those implications to our life and work as gospel ministers. Consequently God's will for me as well as for others He wants to serve through me is often frustrated; we sometimes disgrace His holy name; and we also cheat ourselves out of a measure of the satisfaction our Lord intends for us to derive from our ministry.

My hope and prayer as we proceed is that all of us will see our calling in a clearer perspective, and that we will be encouraged and inspired to a more faithful and zealous service as we consider the practical applications of the teacher's call. As we endeavor to develop this theme, I will not be following the usual custom of dividing the theme into parts. I intend rather to speak to you first about the attitude which a teacher with a divine call will want to display toward his life and his work, and then consider with you the relationships a teacher will seek to establish and promote between himself and his coworkers, and between himself and those whom he is called to serve.

The Gospel Ministry

To insure the propagation of the gospel message, God instituted the ministry (*διακονία*) of the Word, commissioning the church to preach the gospel of Christ. "Ye shall be witnesses unto me," was the Lord's statement of fact to His 120 followers on the day of His ascension.

This ministry according to Scripture takes two forms which are related to each other as species to genus. They are the personal and the public ministry. The Lord is addressing every Christian when He says, "Ye shall be witnesses unto me." Likewise in 1 Peter when the apostle writes, "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people, that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." That verse is a *sedes es* passage for the universal priesthood of the believer. It makes clear to us that every Christian has a part as a minister in our Lord's ongoing ministry. Paul makes that same point clear when he says in Eph. 4:11 that God gave apostles, prophets, evangelists pastors and teachers for the perfecting of the saints for their work of the ministry. Clearly your Lord has called you to carry on a personal ministry for Him.

The other genus of the species is the public ministry. The public ministry is a representative ministry exercised only by those who have been specially called to preach and to teach in Christ's name. We just heard Paul say that the Lord gave gifts to His church for that very purpose. Paul also told Timothy that "if a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work." This public ministry is conferred by a call. "How shall they preach except they be sent?" Paul asks. Rm 10:15

This call authorizes those who minister to speak not only **to** the church, but also **on its behalf**, as its representative. In ordinary affairs it would be presumptuous of us to speak on behalf of someone without authorization from that person to do so. It would be just as unethical for a person to presume to speak for a Christian congregation without proper authorization to do so. Your call provides you with that authorization.

But before we give further consideration in a specific way to the proper practical application of your call to the public ministry of the church, a further word is in order about your prior call to a personal ministry. The former is simply narrower in scope than the latter.

“Even hereunto were ye called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example that ye should follow his steps.” With those words the apostle Peter puts the matter of our calling into its proper perspective. We are followers. Paul calls it mimicking God as dear children Eph 5:1. We re-present Him to the world of which we are a part. Thus we are ambassadors no less, of the One who came not to be ministered unto, but to minister and to give his life a ransom for many. You and I are windows to the world through which men - and children especially may look to get a glimpse of the living Spirit of Jesus Christ. And because we are teachers, because Jesus has spoken to us personally not only through His Word, but also through His church, honoring us with a call to help Him get His empire built, we have reason to be larger than ordinary windows. Jesus expects that of us. Nowhere does He tell us to limit our candlepower. Nowhere does He tell us to limit the amount of service we render to Him. His claim is a total one. Those who know they have been bought with a price also know that they have no hours they can call their own. They don’t even have a life they can call their own. They know Jesus meant it when He said, “Whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel’s the same shall save it” Mk 8:35. And they know He wasn’t speaking parabolically when he said that unless we willingly forsake all that we have, we cannot be His disciples. Nor was Jesus speaking with tongue in cheek when He talked about putting hands to the plow with a warning not to look back.

Whether you be principal, kindergarten teacher part-time, or janitor, if you are Christ’s own, your commitment to Him is complete. You hold nothing back. And you don’t ever think of this as your obligation to Him. God Forbid! It’s your pleasure to be His love-slave. That is what *διακονία* all about. Your surrender is like that of a virgin bride to her bridegroom. Doesn’t the Bridegroom himself use that to picture our relationship to Him? When once the effective call comes, the *μετανοία* as Paul calls it, so that the natural man is routed and the new man takes up residence in the heart, we no longer think to ask “How much is He asking of me?” or “What’s my fair share of the load?” or “Have I done my part?” The answer is ever “NO!” We have only done what was our duty to do. We live a paradoxical life always satisfied and content in the knowledge that Jesus is using us to front for Him, yet ever dissatisfied because so much that could be done always remains undone. Yet what is more rewarding or pleasurable in life than to slump exhausted at the end of the day for that moment of quiet time with Him and to know in that solemn moment that His kingdom got built a little, not because of us, but in spite of us.

Extension of the Personal to the Public

All this has its particular application to our specialized calling as public servants of the Word. And it might be asked what more needs to be said in this connection? What every Christian is privately, you and I are publicly except that through the call our Lord indicates to us a specific area of responsibility in ministering to His people. He also adds to the requirements for our ministry such specifics as these: that we be apt to teach, that we not be novices, that we be above reproach reputation-wise, blameless, sober, not covetous, and the like.

Thus as lamb-feeders Jesus has laid a hand on you with a call that says, “Follow me!” Whenever you are following Him you are making the proper practical application of your call. If you wish to know what it means to follow Him, remember that He didn’t go to the cross for us only half committed to the proposition of atoning for our sin. My sin took full commitment on His part, and I would be a cheapskate to think I could get by with anything less. To sum it up then, every Christian is called to be a full-time servant of Christ. Your teacher’s call simply designates a specific type and area of full-time service in which Jesus wants you to involve yourself. Your commitment to Him, however, is total either way, with or without a divine call. In a society of leisure

lovers such as is ours, those of us who have been specially called are sometimes prone to forget this with the result that we cast covetous glances in the direction of eight-hour days and forty hour weeks. But if we harbor such notions in our hearts for long, we may become a part of a sick society's problem rather than the illuminators of its solution.

Your complete commitment to your Lord as Master of your lives has further attitudinal implications. When Paul counselled Timothy about being an effective instrument in the Lord's hands as vacancy pastor at Ephesus, he told him, "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed." This obligated him, Paul said, to "neglect not the gift that is in thee." Timothy is further instructed, "Meditate on these things; give thyself wholly to them, that thy profiting may appear unto all." Clearly God's servants, whether pastors or teachers, are to be professionally adequate to their calling. In Timothy's case of course this meant that he should be theologically and pastorally competent. In your case it means theologically and pedagogically competent. And I use the word theologically first for a purpose. You could be the most pedagogically competent teacher in the country, but if you do not know how to make your teaching distinctly Christian teaching, then you are not adequate to your calling. If you know how to handle all the latest math techniques with ease, but do not know how to handle law and gospel properly in the classroom, you will be cheating your children.

The cult of the mediocre has no place in our schools, neither pedagogical mediocrity nor theological mediocrity. If you teach your children that to be satisfied with a B when they could have gotten an A with effort is a sin, the equivalent of burying one's talent, then consistency requires that you face the fact that to be satisfied with being a good teacher when you could be an excellent one is equally a matter of burying talent. The pursuit of excellence as a Christian teacher has got to be one of the goals of your life of sanctification.

Among other things, the pursuit of excellence means retraining yourself to stay abreast of what's new in an exploding world of knowledge. Educators tell us that because of the rapid growth of knowledge, today's graduates in the field of arts and sciences will have to be retrained three to five times during their careers to remain competent in their various fields of endeavor. The congregation you serve has the right to expect of you that you continue to qualify to do what your call obligates you to do. It is not worthy of us ever to excuse any incompetence on our part by saying that we offer the one thing needful. The one thing needful was not given to us to compensate for any inadequacies which by diligence, self-discipline and the Spirit's help can be eliminated. It is part, then, of a teacher's role in the congregation to be the best teacher he can be whether his talents number five or two or one.

Your call to teach carries with it yet a further implication concerning your attitude. Paul expresses it this way: "Be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity." He urged the same thing upon Titus, "In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works." Our God wants people to be able to see His gospel power in action in us. That is why your mood and disposition are so important in and out of the classroom. C.S. Lewis has suggested that the sin we Christians are more guilty of than any other is the sin of ignoring the apostolic injunction to rejoice in the Lord always. You cannot be glum and a good gospel teacher at the same time. The gospel rightly understood puts a smile not a frown on a teacher's face. No one can really teach the gospel without living the gospel. To repeat an old cliché, it's caught, not taught.

There is a passage in the 2nd letter to the Corinthians the meaning of which easily escapes us in the King James version because of our lack of familiarity with the significance of the word "savor." In the NIV the verse reads, "Thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ, and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him" 2 Cor 2:14. What a beautiful thought that is! Certain aromas can really be tantalizing. It may be the fragrance of orange blossoms, or the salty tang of an ocean breeze, or the pine scent in a forest after a newly fallen rain or perhaps the smell of coffee brewing when you roll out of bed in the morning and are still trying to rub the sleep out of your eyes. Paul's thought here is that God makes you fragrant with the aroma of the love of Jesus Christ. As a teacher you have the rare privilege of making the air around you fragrant with the aroma of the knowledge of Him. How much of that fragrance could I detect in your classroom? And how much of it is coming from you in your school and in your church?

Children get to know the love of Christ not just from hearing about it in the classroom, but especially from seeing it operative in the lives of those who stand in for Him.

We have said that your call obligates you to be professionally competent, even to excel in such competence. But such a worthy ambition must not be allowed to blind you to another practical consideration Jesus wants you to be aware of as you serve His people. Pedagogical competence is never an end in itself, always only a means to an end. And the service of His chosen people is that end. If you lose sight of that, your professional competence may become a wall between you and the people who have called you. Your professional training is not something that sets you apart from or above your people, but in and among them. Perhaps an illustration from my profession rather than from yours will illuminate the point I want to make. People frequently complain that sermons they hear are over their heads and irrelevant, ivory tower stuff. Such sermons can easily give people the impression the preacher is trying to impress them with his preaching prowess and his learning rather than trying to impress Jesus on them. You can do that too if you think your call puts you on some kind of pedestal in the congregation. It doesn't. It puts you in the servant's quarters in a glass house. It puts you down there with the lambs whose servant Jesus made you to be. To put it as simply as I can, be yourself, unless of course being yourself would expose something that ought to remain concealed. Beware of the temptation to talk down to people. Don't make your people climb over barriers to get to you. (Example)

Yet another practical consideration requires that you remember that your call from the congregation is not so much a call to serve the congregation as it is a call to build Christ's kingdom by helping Him to extend His ruling influence in the lives of people. The teacher who views his call as a call to serve a congregation is likely to see his call as something which puts limitations on his need to serve. The teacher who sees his call as a call to partnership with Christ in His kingdom building activity will view his call as one that affords limitless opportunity to be involved with his Master.

Practically that means this. While your call specifically says that you are to teach grades three and four, or six and seven, and perhaps to play the organ or direct the choir, that is not where your responsibility ends anymore than an usher's ends with showing people to their pew. Those people in your church are all God's people, people with needs, people who need help shaping up. And if they have certain needs and you have certain matching gifts, you don't need a call on paper to match your gift to those needs

Specifically I am thinking of other agencies in our congregations which sorely need your gifts, interest and special training, particularly the Sunday school, vacation Bible school, youth groups, pre-confirmation classes or whatever. There is probably more than one pastor who laments the fact that his day school teachers treat the Sunday school as an unwelcome if not unnecessary intruder. I once heard of a congregation in which the pastor sought to introduce a Sunday school. His chief opposition in the congregation meetings came from the principal of the day school. I wonder what percentage of the teachers in our day schools teach with any regularity in the Sunday school of their congregation. Who, pray tell me is better equipped than you are to help our Sunday schools be the kind of agencies they ought to be in mission-minded congregations? A secular magazine once termed the Sunday school hour the most wasted hour of the week. How worthwhile you could help to make it with teaching second to none. Of course, it's not in your call, or is it? In an essay titled, "Pastor-Teacher Harmony," Pastor Robert Voss once warned that "it is an extremely dangerous tendency to find shelter in a call." (*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Jan. 1968, p 11) I heartily agree with his observation.

Of course there is a limit to what a congregation may rightly expect of you. And teaching five hours a day is a colossal task. No one questions that it is. But can an under-shepherd of the Savior really watch lambs go hungry on Sunday morning when they could feed them so much more than teachers not trained to feed? Especially if they happen to be children from families in which parents do not introduce their children to their Savior?

Summer vacation Bible schools offer the same kind of opportunity. Your participation in VBS programs could add a measure of stability and effectiveness which might otherwise not be there. If we want these agencies to be the best we can make them, our best efforts should be employed in conducting them. There are of course sometimes valid reasons for teachers not getting involved-summer sessions of your own, or ten month

calls to teachers not expected to spend their summer vacation period in the community, and the like. Congregation members surely have an awareness of such factors, but where they do not apply, there ought to be a recognition of the fact that non-involvement may be interpreted as an indication of low Christian candlepower.

In saying this I am not insensitive to nor unappreciative of a responsible teacher's work load and exhausting schedule. Your work, like ours, is never done. But neither am I unmindful of the truth of Parkinson's law. My Lord has shown me personally time and again that when we approach our tasks in the right spirit, snowed under, but happy nonetheless to be about His business, He has a way of affording a kind of superhuman strength for our work. "They that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint." Is 40:31. And Daniel promises, "The people that do know their God shall be strong and do exploits." But if we are just plodding along wearily, our Lord tells us bluntly, "Ye have not because ye ask not." Anyone whom He honors with a call has every right to say with Paul, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Let's never forget it. "We are not sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God; who also hath made us able ministers." 2 Cor 3:5-6.

Thus far we have endeavored to focus attention on the attitude which ought to display itself in the life and service of those who are called by God into the public ministry. Since your call authorizes you to speak on behalf of those who call you, something needs to be said also about your relationship to those who have called you to serve them. And since you serve in a congregation together with other called servants, the pastor especially, your relationship to them is a matter of special importance also.

What the pastor-teacher relationship should be is clear from the Scriptures. Nowhere in those portions of Scripture which give us insight into the arrangement of things in the early church are we given the impression of rank or ranks among called servants. A noteworthy passage is Acts 20:21-28, which records the account of Paul's meeting at Miletus with the elders of Ephesus. Paul charges them, "Take heed unto yourselves and to all the flock over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God." The Greek word for overseer is ἐπίσκοπος or bishop. We commonly regard the word bishop as a title designating a position of high rank. It is apparent that Paul did not use it in that way. His intention was to point up the responsibility of these overseers as servants. They were to feed, ποιμαίνω, that is, to shepherd the church of God. The thought of domination or control is completely foreign to that word.

It is clear that Paul is talking about a responsibility they all share together as called servants of the Word. Whether one of the elders was a pastor, another a preacher, and another a teacher is not clear. Obviously to Paul it doesn't make any difference. Nor does it make any difference to us today. In our churches pastors and teachers, male and female are all called servants of the Word who share a responsibility together. In Paul's terms both pastors and teachers are elders, bishops, presbyters. And because things were done in an orderly fashion in the Ephesus church, the specific tasks of the several elders were spelled out by congregation just as we still do it today in our churches.

The practical application of the teacher's call requires that we understand that these elders were all equal in standing. No elder dominated other elders. There was no hierarchical system for anyone to sit on top of. The fathers of our church saw it this way too. Quenstedt the dogmatician says that, "Of these presbyters appointed by Christ through the apostles, not one had authority, control, or jurisdiction over his fellow elders, but they all had one and the same rank, the same solicitude for all members of the flock and for each individual member; . . . But because there were many, it was necessary that one should be first, another second, and another third, in rank and honor, not in authority, power or jurisdiction." (*Antiquitates*, 87f. quoted in "The Ministry of the Lutheran Teacher," A.C. Mueller, Concordia, p 150)

This does not mean that your office as a teacher is identical in terms of specific responsibility to that of the pastor. His call spells out the scope of his office and your call spells out the scope of yours. Because the scope of the pastor's call is broader than that of the teacher's our fathers designated the pastor as *primus inter pares* (first among equals) in the congregation. He is a servant of the word who performs pastoral tasks. You

are a servant of the Word who performs other tasks on the basis of a shared responsibility. But as Quenstedt reminds us, you both have the “same solicitude for all the members of the flock!” That does not mean you will insinuate yourself into an area of the work assigned to the pastor or vice versa. It means simply that because you have been called like the pastor to be a leader, your interest and concern extend beyond the walls of the school to the whole congregation. You are just as interested in an 83 year old grandmother’s growth in grace as you are in your third grader’s.

Shared responsibility has its concomitants. Full cooperation between pastor and teacher in one. Close harmony is another. According to Paul this means you will be “kindly affectioned (devoted) one to another with brotherly love, in honor preferring one another” Rm 12:10. Phillips paraphrases it beautiful fully. “Let us have a real warm affection for one another as between brothers, and a willingness to let the other man have the credit.” I cannot think of any sin more ugly than that of patent disharmony between those called by God to serve His people cooperatively and harmoniously. Again, I heartily recommend to you the essay by Pastor Robert Voss to which we referred earlier. He puts the whole matter succinctly when he says, “There ought to be harmony out of respect for the call.” (op. cit. p 9)

Equally as important as the pastor-teacher relationship is the teacher-parishioner relationship. That relationship is a very delicate one, and a teacher must be sensitive to that fact. The teacher and the parishioner are members together in the family of God in their parish. Everything God says in His Word about the relationship of one Christian to another Christian applies here with equal force. But there is more. As a teacher you are in a sense a big brother in the family. You are an example setter. You wear Timothy’s shoes, who was told to “be an example to the believers in word, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.”

A word about social relations is also in order. What is true of the pastor in his social relations with parishioners is true also of any other called servant. You cannot afford to give your “younger” brothers and sisters the impression that you play favorites within the family of God. Once again, remember that you are servant to all, not just a chum to some.

A current and perplexing difficulty necessitates that we make a further application of the call in connection with the teacher-parishioner relationship. You are doubtless all aware of the fact that the Department of Labor of the United States government has issued a ruling that several of our schools are in violation of the equal pay act and has ordered that these schools cease paying female teachers less than men who do comparable work. We trust that all of our teachers recognize a truth which apparently the Department of Labor does not, namely that the relationship between congregation and teacher, whether male or female, is not an employer-employee relationship. No teacher in any of our schools is hired to do a job, and any teacher who thinks he is ought to leave the classroom forthwith for Christ’s sake and for the sake of His children. You are called to serve, not paid to perform.

As a matter of fact, no teacher in any of our schools, and for that matter, no pastor in any of our congregations, is being paid for his services strictly speaking. What would a just salary be for one who serves sixteen hours a day seven days a week? The congregation has a Scriptural obligation to provide for the needs of the servants they call. Significantly in years past, call forms frequently did not list a salary. They merely stipulated that God’s people would provide on the basis of need for God’s servants.

This is said not to justify inadequate salaries for female teachers. Nor is it said to excuse congregations which do not properly recognize the needs of their teachers. It is said to assert that the practice of our churches has been governed consistently by Scriptural principles.

A further application of the call needs to be made which does not directly involve your relationship to pastor or parishioner. When God calls you to a certain school, He has his reasons for placing you where He does, and He doesn’t make mistakes in His assignments. That means you should be content to stay put. When He needs and wants you somewhere else, He will know how to find you without benefit of the current issue of the *Annual*. It’s a case of “Don’t call me, I’ll call you.” I have known teachers who have allowed personal considerations about where they wanted to be or what they wanted to do hamper their effectiveness as servants of the Word. They were not imbued with the Samuel spirit. Nor had they learned to say with Paul, “Lord, what

wilt thou have me to do?" If you know the book of Acts, then you know God isn't in the habit of putting His servants in places where they can be comfortably at ease in Zion. It is presumptuous of me to think that God should take my personal preferences into consideration in deciding where to place me to serve Him.

It has been said many times, but it bears repeating: when you receive a call, all legitimate considerations revolve around one single, though not simple, question. Where will the abilities God has given me serve Him best? To answer that question I need to listen carefully to the objective counsel of those who are in the best position to know the facts pertinent to the situation-my pastor, my coworkers and colleagues, the board members. To decide a call on any other basis is to make a mockery of its divinity.

Perhaps a reminder is in order here also about proper procedure when you receive a call. The steps are these:

1. Notify the calling congregation or board immediately (within 24 hours) that you have received the call. If more information about it is required from the calling congregation, a request for such information should be made within a week. It is frustrating to a congregation where there is a vacancy to have to endure unnecessary delays. Your courtesy and promptness indicate a proper appreciation for the ministerial office you hold.
2. Notify your own congregation through your pastor and the board under which you serve. Ask at the same time for brotherly counsel concerning the call.
3. Notify the District President of your receipt of call. Do this at the same time you notify the calling congregation.
4. Determine whether a meeting of the congregation is necessary for counsel. If it is, ask the president of the congregation to arrange such a meeting.
5. When you have made a decision, notify all those you have previously notified of your decision. Do not forget the District President.
6. If you accept your call, request a release from the congregation you are serving.

Before we conclude we need to add a word concerning the status of women teachers. It is clear from all that we have said that as a called servant of the Word she is a minister in exactly the same sense that a male teacher or a pastor is. The fact that the Scriptures limit the scope of her service, and that her call further limits it in no way alters the fact that she holds a ministerial office. (cf. 1 Tim 2:9-15)

The reason we distinguish between male and female teachers is because of the unique functions for which God designed them in the creation. Men intend to continue in their office until God relieves them. Being the head of a house does not preclude a faithful performance of the tasks for which God has called them. That is not true for women. They do not necessarily enter the ranks of the teaching profession with the intention of making it their life career. God had motherhood in mind when He created woman. She was made to be a helpmeet for man. The call does not impose celibacy on her. She is free to leave the classroom at any time for the higher calling God has in mind for her.

Now in conclusion we wish to underscore once more the word divine in connection with the call. You are God's man, God's woman, serving God's people in God's appointed place. No one on God's earth has a higher, nobler calling than you do. When you go about your daily work, you are filling Jesus shoes. Your mouth becomes His mouth. Your hands become His hands. Your heart beats with His heartbeat. You love with His love. Here is the key to making all the proper applications of the teacher's call. Don't ever forget it. Your call is divine.

