

# A Pastor's Call – its Scope and its Limitations

*Irwin J. Habeck*

[St. John's, Lannon, Wisconsin, Metro-North Pastoral Conference, September, 1973]

In the recent past a number of questions of casuistry have arisen in our conference and have exposed what seemed to be a lack of consensus. Is it proper for a pastor who in a mission canvass comes upon a member of a heterodox communion to regard him as a mission prospect or must he terminate the contact if the information which he receives indicates that the person is in fact under the pastoral care of a heterodox pastor? May a social worker at the WLCFS work with a member of one of our congregations who is guilty of a moral offence or troubled by a problem in the area of morals without the knowledge and consent of the member's pastor? May a teacher at WLHS initiate a Bible class for members of our congregations? Now it is both hazardous and futile to attempt to legislate in cases of casuistry, both because there may not be a total knowledge of the facts which bear upon each given case and because there may be a divergence of judgment concerning which of a number of scriptural principles apply. The program committee felt, however, that the aforementioned discussion of specific cases may have revealed the need for exploration of the scope and limitations of a pastor's call. A review of scriptural principles ought, under God, to have the effect of helping us to appreciate anew the privilege and responsibility which are ours and of keeping us from moving from a solid center to dangerous extremes because of anger, jealousy, or suspicion on the one hand or misguided zeal on the other. This then is the background for the assignment and acceptance of the topic:

## A Pastor's Call – its Scope and its Limitations

### I. Its Scope

I don't have to tell you how you became pastors serving in your particular congregation or field of labor. You were called and you correctly are convinced that yours is a divine call, that the Lord put you to work where you are. He called you through your congregation or your board of control. There are scriptural references to the human agency through which the Lord put pastors into their particular field of labor. Of Paul and Barnabas and the young congregations of Asia Minor we are told: "When they had ordained them elders in every church" (Ac 14:23). The word ordain does not have the technical meaning which we attach to it today. In fact, the Greek cheirotoneo according to Thayer properly means: "to vote by stretching out the hand." He then gives the derived sense: to elect, appoint, create. The only other use of the word in the NT is in 2 Cor. 8:19: "who was chosen of the churches to travel with us." There an election is clearly indicated, in Ac.14 not, where the subjects of the participle are Paul and Barnabas. But it would not be forcing the meaning of the term unduly to understand it to say that they had an election of elders take place in every church just as the apostles at Jerusalem had the election of seven deacons take place. In Tt. 1:5: "ordain elders in every city," Titus is the agent. The Greek verb kathistemi means to set, appoint. Again, he might well have done it by directing the congregations in Crete to appoint elders. The agency of the congregation is clearly evident in 1 Tm. 3. The listing of the qualifications after the introductory remarks: "If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work" (3:1) indeed indicate that a man ought to examine himself to see whether he has the qualifications listed before he aspires to be a bishop. However, when the qualifications of deacons are listed (8-13), the significant remark occurs: "let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon" (10). This shows that also men who wanted to be bishops were to be tested before they were entrusted with their form of the ministry.

The divine agency in the process which entrusts a congregation to a pastor's care is most clearly pointed out in the familiar passage Ac. 20:28: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers (bishops), to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." The other chief proof text for the divinity of the call is Eph, 4:11: "(He) gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers." Here the fact is not definitely stated

that a particular pastor is called to a particular congregation, but it is implied. For shepherds are not given as shepherds in a vacuum, but are given as shepherds to a particular flock to shepherd that flock. Let this suffice to review the principle that a pastor receives his call through a congregation from the Lord.

As a link between the call and the scope of the call we might do well to introduce a quotation from the introduction to Schaller's *Pastorale*: "The pastoral office as such is not a biblical concept, but rather in every individual case one which has a historical background, i.e., the pastoral office at every time and in every place is that to which the church applies the term. One dare not identify the NT ministry with the pastoral office as it is established by an individual congregation....All forms of the public ministry of the Word in each individual case have the specific delineation which the congregation gives them when it calls into the ministry" (pp V, VI). It follows that we shall not find in the NT a sharp definition of the scope of a pastor's call.

We need not spend much time speaking about the functions which are assigned to a pastor. They are outlined in his diploma of vocation and summarized in the form for installation. His functions include preaching, teaching, administration of the sacraments, personal contact work in his ministry of comfort, admonition, and outreach.

Of more immediate concern for our present purpose is to note to whom he is called to minister. Here Scripture is both comprehensive and restrictive: "All the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers (bishops), to feed (Shepherd, pastor) the church of God" (Ac 20:28). "All the flock" means all who by their confession acknowledge the Lord Jesus as their Shepherd, for the pastor cannot look into their hearts to judge the genuineness of their confession. All the flock means all who are recognized as belonging to the specific flock which he serves as shepherd. For us with our careful counting of baptized souls this determination presents no problem. The missionary outreach is not included in this passage, but is always incumbent upon a pastor, not only by virtue of his call, but also by virtue of the Great Commission, which applies to him no less than to every other believer.

In the familiar section concerning the qualifications of bishops, 1 Tm. 3, there is this comment: "One that ruleth well his own house...for if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?" (4,5). In this argument from the lesser to the greater there is also this implication that just as a man knows who the members of his family are so he also knows who are the members of the church of God of which he is to take care. It is the family of believers for whom he has been made responsible. His is not a wide ranging, indefinite area of responsibility.

This limitation is quite evident in 1 Pe. 5:2: "Feed (shepherd) the flock of God which is among you (en hymin)."

Now the question arises whether the pastor is the only one who is to perform in the case of a specific church the broad functions which are included in the assignment to shepherd the flock. In Eph. 4:12 it is quite evident that his is not to be a solo performance, but rather that he is to function more as a coach who trains his people to serve one another in the area of their spiritual welfare. The KJV indeed says (speaking of the purpose for which various public servants of the Word are given to the church by the ascended Lord Jesus): "For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." This sounds as though they have three correlated functions, all assigned to the public servants of the Word, each introduced by the preposition *for*. NASB is some better: "For the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ." The Greek has *pros* in the first instance, and then two *eis*, which to me seem to be correlated. Since both *pros* and *eis* in this context could be translated "for," we can best preserve the distinction by expanding the *pros*: for the purpose of equipping the saints for the work of service, for the building up of the body of Christ. So the public servant of the Word is to equip the saints so that they may be able to serve one another and doing so build up the body of Christ. The deeply spiritual nature of the activity for which members are to be trained is indicated when the goal of service and edification is thus described: "Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God ... that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (13,14). So for a pastor to take a possessive attitude toward the exercise of spiritual functions in his congregation and to refuse to delegate any of

them to any member, for a pastor to take the attitude that he alone possesses the expertise which such service requires is not in keeping with the teaching of this section.

In the foregoing the pastor appears as the one who has the original responsibility, which he then delegates and shares with the members of his flock. Although we dare not press the terminology in the life of the church, there is the relation of a superior to subordinates. Sometimes, however, there are situations where two or more have the same scope of responsibility. The plural was used in the familiar passage Ac. 20:28: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers" (heautois, hymas, episkopous). We have a similar situation when a congregation has associate pastors or co-pastors.

In one respect at least all of our pastors have covenanted with one another to surrender something of their autonomy. I'm referring to the fact that in our synod and district constitutions we have provided for courts of appeal for those who insist that they have been excommunicated without just cause. It means that we do not say, "I have spoken with my congregation and that's the last word." Rather, we are saying in effect, "I am ready to have the case reviewed and if it can be shown that we have been wrong, to instruct my congregation to reverse its action."

It's interesting to notice how little the apostolic church reckoned with the possibility that there would be pastors who insisted upon standing upon their rights as being the only ones entrusted with the pastoral care of their congregations. Paul left Titus in Crete to "ordain elders in every city" (Tt 1:5). As bishops these men were to be able "by sound doctrine both to exhort, and to convince the gainsayers" (9). Titus was not one of these bishops. Still all the way from 2:1 to 3:11 Paul speaks in the single imperative to Titus, telling him particularly how he is to exhort various classes of Christians. Paul saw no problems in giving this assignment to both the bishops whom Titus was to have elected, and to Titus himself. Where priorities are right and hearts are right, there will be no problems.

I do not wish to imply that we in this area have shown unwarranted jealousy when the scope of our call was involved. In our Institutional Ministry we have not hesitated to encourage our missionaries to call on our members who were institutionalized. In our WLHS we have entrusted a portion of the Christian training of our teenage youth to the high school staff and have not insisted that we be consulted in every case of discipline. When in the scope of our WLCFS we included service to unwed parents, we realized that there would be counseling in cases which involved a violation of the moral law. When the Federation arranged pre-marriage lecture courses we advertised them in our bulletins. When the sainted WLC arranged lectures specifically for Sunday school teachers or on biblical topics in general, we gave them publicity. We did not look upon these and other enterprises as a violation of our ministry, but rather as an extension of it.

I don't think that any of us would ride too hard upon his call if a member came to us and said, "Pastor, we have a problem. Would you mind if we talked it over with our former pastor. He has helped us in a similar situation before and I think it would be easier for us to talk to him because he has known us for so long." If our people need help, we want them to be helped and not to hesitate to use whatever resources are available to help them. Without downgrading the sanctity of the call in the least we do need to remember that it is written: "Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others" (Php 2:4).

The imaginary case just presented may provide us with a transition to speaking of the limitations of a pastor's call. Let's suppose that the couple referred to did not show their present pastor the courtesy of asking his approval before they spoke to their former pastor. The kindly old soul feels flattered because his former members think highly of him still, arranges an appointment with them, and another, and another and finally counsels them to get a divorce. The first knowledge that their present pastor has of the whole process comes when they inform him that upon the advice of their former pastor they obtained a divorce. Would their pastor have a right to be resentful? Of course, the former pastor had acted where he had no business to act. He had ignored the limitations of his call.

## II. Its Limitations

Even if we in the Word of God had no specific reference to this kind of offense, a simple application of the golden rule ought to make anyone realize that as little as he would want another to interfere in his ministry to his members, so little ought he to interfere in another pastor's ministry to his members. But I think that we do have a specific command in this matter: "Let none of you suffer ...as a busybody in other men's matters" (1 Pe 4:15). The word used in the original, allotrioepiskopos, is a hapaxlegomenon. The roots are simple, allotrios and episkopos. Thayer: "One who takes the supervision of affairs pertaining to others and in no wise to himself, a meddler in other men's matters. The writer seems to refer to those who, with holy but intemperate zeal, meddle with the affairs of the Gentiles -- whether public or private, civil or sacred -- in order to make them conform to the Christian standard." There are those who feel that because we know so little about the use of the term we dare not apply it to the question under discussion. But let's not let our appreciation for scholarly research lead us to exalt it so highly that we can't reach any convictions without a dozen authorities to support us. Our question is: whose pastor am I? Here the Lord uses a compound of bishop and tells us not to get ourselves into trouble by presuming to be the pastor of another. That's clear enough. If the Lord by a call makes me a man's pastor, I am to be his pastor even though he is another from myself. The "another" has to be someone whose pastor I have not been called to be. He has his own pastor. Thus a pastor's call is limited. And now we may blithely use the term busybody, he is not to be a busybody in other men's matters.

Definition on paper and definition in practice are often two different things. It is easy to set forth theory, but practice can become more complex. More than one pastor has been trapped, as it were, into becoming a busybody. He meets a former member or a member of another congregation whom he has learned to know quite well. The member asks a theoretical question which the pastor answers to the best of his ability. Actually, however, the question had to do with a case which was being dealt with in the member's congregation, perhaps it was even his own case. If the pastor's answer is different from what has been said by the member's pastor, the member may cite him as an authority to the consternation of the member's pastor. He has been the victim of busybodyism, but of unintentional busybodyism. This will come to light if the victim speaks to the offender.

Since charity believes all things, we don't want to become suspicious as soon as anyone who is not our member asks us a question. But we do want to be vigilant and when we sense that someone is trying to induce us to usurp his pastor's place, we shall remind him of the limitations of our call.

There may be times when we may boldly become busybodies technically. There are those regrettable situations where a pastor is known to neglect his sick. If I happened upon a member of his congregation while visiting one of my members in a hospital and the other's member was in great agony and sorely in need of comfort and he told me that he had called his pastor a week ago and he still hadn't come, I would cast discretion to the winds and give the man the comfort for which he was yearning. The proper sequel would be to call the negligent pastor and tell him what happened -- and then head for the bomb shelter!

Another situation in which it is difficult to determine where pastoral responsibility ends and busybodyism begins arises when a member of a sister congregation moves into the proximity of my church. He attends my services and signs the guest register, giving his address and present affiliation. Is it my duty to visit him? Or must I take a hands-off policy? If I don't visit him, he may tell someone, "I thought of joining his church, but apparently he is not interested in me, for he never came to visit me." If I do visit him, I may be accused of busybodyism. I tried to cut the Gordian knot by visiting him and telling him, "I saw you in church Sunday and want you to know that you are welcome to attend our services. But I'm not going to coax you to join our church. If you want to transfer your membership, that's a matter between you and your pastor."

There will always be cases of casuistry in which we shall have to determine in the fear of the Lord whether we are to be held in by the limitations of our call or to be constrained by the law of love and the Great Commission. I remember a discussion between Dr. Orea Luna and Pastor Venus Winter. Pastor Winter was very careful not to work upon any Spanish-American who said that he was a member of the Roman Catholic Church unless the person gave him an opening by either asking questions or attending his services. Dr. Orea Luna contended that if he in Mexico felt thus inhibited, he could do no mission work because all Mexicans claimed membership in the Roman Catholic Church. As I recall, discussion revealed that they were closer together than it first seemed. Our general principle will have to be to avoid becoming busybodies by interfering

with another pastor's ministry, be he orthodox or heterodox. If, however, we are brought into contact with a member of a heterodox Christian communion and he begins to ask questions, we do have the Lord's directive to speak: "Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear" (1 Pe 3:15). If the public confession of the contact's "church" reveals that it is in fact not Christian, there is no pastor-member relationship under the Chief Shepherd. Then His command in the Great Commission to make disciples of those who are not disciples shows us what we are to do.

There are two significant passages in 1 Cor. 14. "God is not the author of confusion, but of peace. Let all things be done decently and in order" (33,40). These truths will guide us also in our attitude toward both the scope and the limitations of a pastor's call. To neglect what belongs in the scope of the call is wrong. To undertake what lies beyond the scope of the call and the limitations imposed by it is also wrong. It won't do for me to undertake to minister to those who have their own called pastor. It won't do for members to solicit the services of a pastor other than their own even if he is orthodox. In good order they have called their own pastor to serve them. We have previously mentioned that there is an orderly delegation of limited forms of service to others, the scope and limitations of whose call are defined. This becomes a matter of augmenting, not supplementing a pastor's service. He is still the prior responsibility.

Ideally there should be no problems in this area because the principles covering both the scope and the limitations of a pastor's call are clearly defined in Scripture. Unfortunately none of us is ideal, we all have a sinful flesh with which to contend. Problems arise when a pastor becomes so jealous about his call that he wants no assistance of any kind in the care of his members. Envy and suspicion may also creep in as he begins to suspect the motives or downgrade the methods of those who in an orderly manner have been called to assist him. On the other hand, those who have a limited call may become puffed up with a sense of their own superiority or conceited about their expertise and, because they think that they are better qualified, intrude upon the area of responsibility of the garden variety of pastor. So there is a continuing need for all of us to examine our attitudes and motives. Souls are so precious that we want them to be neither neglected nor confused. Responsibilities are so heavy and opportunities so many that we shall best serve souls to our Savior's glory if we ever bear in mind the pastor's call -- its scope and its limitations.