

The Call to the Public Ministry with Special reference to Termination and Reentry

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When the Holy Spirit calls someone to saving faith, that person receives all the blessings of Christ's redemptive work, the forgiveness of sins, peace with God, the sure hope of heaven, comfort in tribulation, confidence to pray - all the blessings which Christ, our Lord, has obtained for us. With it comes the privilege of sharing Christ with others. And it is a privilege. For although our Lord has legions of angels at his command, he has chosen to use us with all our frailty and weakness to share with a perishing world "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Ephesians 3:8). Every Christian, as a member of the royal priesthood of believers, has been called to "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (I Peter 2:9). In fact, this follows as a fruit of our faith, since "we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

I. The Call to the Public Ministry

Although the privilege of proclaiming Christ to the world has been given to all believers, in his government of the church the Lord has also established the public ministry. This does not give a higher rank to anyone. It does not set up a priestly caste apart from the laity, since all Christians are priests before God by virtue of their call to faith. The difference lies in the word *public*. The public ministry is a service performed in the church on behalf of fellow Christians and in their name. The public minister publicly carries out responsibilities that have been entrusted to him by his fellow believers. These responsibilities are not really different from those which God has committed to every Christian. They are rather a service in the Gospel, and I cannot emphasize too strongly that the call into the public ministry affords an opportunity not for "lording it over those entrusted to you" (I Peter 5:3), but for greater and wider service. It is essentially a work of "preaching and teaching" (I Timothy 5:17). But the public minister does this on behalf of the church, as a representative of the church, not unlike a public official whom we elect to perform certain functions in our stead.

The public ministry assumes many and various forms. In the freedom that is ours under grace the Lord has given his New Testament church an amazing degree of liberty in establishing the specific forms of the ministry it deems essential to carry out its mission at any point in time. I suppose we think most readily of the parish pastorate as the most comprehensive form of the ministry, though we now have associate pastors, assistant pastors, senior assistants, visitation pastors, youth ministers, etc. In addition we have teachers, elementary and secondary, professors, executive secretaries, missionaries (home and world, to a specific place and at large), tutors, and instructors. Hopefully even Synod presidents are regarded as serving in the public ministry. Scripture does not make the external forms of the public ministry a matter of divine command. Hence these can be changed and have been changed over the years to be responsive to the church's changing needs. Although every Christian has been charged to proclaim Christ to the world (God has made no other plans to get out the good news), to function in the public ministry on behalf of brothers and sisters in the faith requires a call. Since every Christian is a priest before God in equal measure, it would be presumptuous for any one person to function publicly on behalf of his fellow Christians unless they have called him to do so. "Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (I Corinthians 14:40). Imagine the confusion and disorder that would result if ten people would insist on preaching or consecrating the elements or officiating at the baptisms on a given Sunday. The Apostle Paul asks, "How can they preach unless they are sent?" (Romans 10:15). And our Confessions state, "Our churches teach that nobody should preach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless he is regularly called" (AC XIV).

Such a call comes through the church, the body of believers. Prior to our Savior's ascension the public servants of the church (prophets and apostles) were given an immediate call. They were called directly by God

himself. Since that time the Lord calls his public ministers through the church, the assembly of believers. In Acts 6, for example, we observe the congregation at Jerusalem electing seven deacons to minister to the poor and the widows. When Paul's presence was required elsewhere he tells of leaving Titus behind in Crete with instructions to "straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town" (Titus 1:5). The Lord continues to call his public servants through the church, the assembly of believers. Such a call, however, is no less divine than the call of a Moses, an Isaiah, a Paul, and others who were called by the Lord directly. The Ephesian elders had the assurance that the Holy Ghost had made them overseers (Acts 20:28). Theirs was a mediate call. The congregation had chosen them, but through the congregation the Lord God himself was calling them.

The church at large can function only through some tangible body, a congregation, a synod, a commission, a board, an association, where the presence of the church is recognized by the presence of the marks of the church, the Means of Grace. Even in the case of a congregation, calling will normally be done through a representative group, the voters' assembly, the school board, the church council; yet it is the congregation that calls. The Synod in convention issues certain calls to elected officers and board members, but most of its calling is delegated to boards and commissions; yet it is the Synod that calls. Similarly, an association or federation will normally call through its officers and boards of control; but it is the association or federation that calls.

We speak of a call as *valid* when it is extended by those who have the right to call, i.e., the believers, those who possess the Means of Grace. And we speak of a call as *legitimate* when both the calling body and the person called have done things decently and in order.

When one considers everything that the Bible says about the call into the public ministry, one comes to the conclusion that a call will normally be permanent, permanent as opposed to a contractual arrangement in which two parties agree on specific terms to the satisfaction of both with provision for renewal or termination at every expiration date. It is not difficult to see that there would be a severe temptation in such an arrangement for the called servant to conduct his ministry with a view to pleasing those whom he serves rather than in conformity with God's Word. A permanent call does not mean that the called servant must remain in that spot for the rest of his ministry.

It simply places the length of a person's service in a given place in God's hands. We always need to remember that God gives ministers to his church. They are not the exclusive property of a single congregation or group. And it is God who will indicate in his own way when it is time for that call to be terminated.

This does not mean that the church may not issue a temporary call when in its judgment the needs are of a temporary nature. We regularly issue temporary calls to a vacancy pastor, because the need for his services will no longer exist when a new resident pastor is installed. Recently the Synod through its Conference of Presidents issued temporary calls for a man to serve as director of the REACHING OUT offering and another to serve as the project director for our new/revised hymnal. We issue a temporary call also when the availability of the person called may be limited. The call of a student to serve a year of vicarship as part of his training for the ministry is naturally temporary because of his obligation to return to the seminary to complete his ministerial training. A tutor is given a temporary call because he will normally desire to serve in the parish ministry for which he has been trained. An instructor may be given a temporary call both because of a temporary need and because of his desire to serve in the parish ministry for which he has been trained.

II. Termination of A Call

Undoubtedly the most frequent reason for terminating a call is because the called servant is accepting a call to another field. That decision will have been made because the called servant has been led to the conviction that his gifts in building the kingdom at that point in time can best be used by following the new call which the Lord has directed to him. While there are many factors that need to be weighed in arriving at a call decision, the overriding consideration on the part of the called person must always be, "Where can I best serve

my Lord at this point in time with the gifts that he has given me?” And the body of believers he has been serving will then grant him a release from his present call so that he may follow the Lord’s direction.

A call may also be terminated when the need for it no longer exists. The enrollment in a school, for example, may decline to a point where the services of a teacher are no longer needed. A civilian chaplain who has been called to serve a certain military installation will no longer be needed if that particular installation is phased out. A pastor who was called to a congregation to minister to German-speaking people will no longer be needed if the need for such a ministry no longer exists. And while the church will make every effort to use the persons, whose calls are being terminated because the need no longer exists, for other service in the kingdom, there is no justification for continuing a call indefinitely when the need for it no longer exists.

A call is, of course, also terminated through death, retirement, or resignation. It should be noted that when a person retires from or resigns his call he is no longer in the ministry. To say, “I resign my call from St. John’s Congregation, but not from the ministry of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod,” is a misnomer, something that does not exist in fact. The call makes the pastor. There is no public ministry apart from the call. There is the possibility that those who have retired or resigned (for reasons that do not disqualify them from serving in the public ministry) may be given limited calls for a specific assignment or service in the church. It is self evident that this always be done in a “fitting and orderly way” (I Corinthians 14:40).

But there are also situations in which a call must be terminated, lest opportunity be given “the enemies of the Lord (to) show utter contempt” (2 Samuel 12:14). The *Model Constitution and Bylaws* for congregations of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod states: “Sufficient and urgent causes for removing a pastor or a teacher are persistent adherence to false doctrine, scandalous life, willful neglect of duty or established inability to perform the duties of his office (I Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9). In such cases the advice and good counsel of the appropriate district officer shall be sought” (*Model Constitution and Bylaws*, Article IX, Section 2).

I believe it would be well to have the Scripture reference cited above before us:

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, 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 (I Timothy 3:1-7). An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God’s work, he must be blameless - not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to much wine, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. (Titus 1:6-9)

The first reason mentioned for which a call must be terminated is persistent adherence to false doctrine. The Lord exhorts us to be on guard against false prophets. “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves” (Matthew 7:15). In his letter to the Galatians Paul pronounces a curse on those who preach another gospel that is not the Gospel.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the Gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be

eternally condemned. As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned. (Galatians 1:6-9)

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thessalonians 2:15). And John tells his readers, “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (I John 4:1). The Scriptures further urge us “to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them” (Romans 16:17).

By God’s grace our Synod is a confessional church body. Our member congregations are committed to a confessional position.

Article II Articles of Faith

Section 1

This congregation accepts and confesses all the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as the verbally inspired and inerrant Word of God and submits to this Word as the only infallible authority of all matters of faith and life (2 Timothy 3:15-17)

Section 2

This congregation accepts and confesses all the symbolical books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church contained in the *Book of Concord* of 1580 as true statements of scriptural doctrine. They are:

- A. The three ecumenical Creeds
 - 1)The Apostles’
 - 2)The Nicene
 - 3) The Athanasian
- B. The six Lutheran Confessions
 - 1) Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism
 - 2) Dr. Martin Luther’s Large Catechism
 - 3) The Unaltered Augsburg Confession
 - 4) The Apology of the Augsburg Confession
 - 5) The Smalcald Articles
 - 6) The Formula of Concord

Section 3

This congregation accepts and confesses these symbolical books without reservation, not insofar as, but because they are the presentation and explanation of the pure doctrine of the Word of God and a summary of the faith held by the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Section 4

Hence, no doctrine shall be taught or tolerated in this congregation which is in any way at variance with these symbolical books and the Holy Scriptures.

Section 5

Likewise, all controversies which may arise in this congregation shall be decided and adjusted according to this norm of doctrine and practice.

(Model Constitution and Bylaws)

So if a pastor or a teacher takes a position contrary to Scripture and persists in it despite admonition he has disqualified himself for future service in that congregation or for any other call in the Synod. If a man, for example, would be disqualified from teaching at our Seminary because of false doctrine, we would consider him equally unqualified to shepherd one of our congregations.

The second reason cited for terminating the call of a pastor or teacher is “scandalous life.” We’ve already quoted the scriptural directive that the overseer be “above reproach” (I Timothy 3:2) and that he “also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap” (I Timothy 3:7). Paul further speaks of the obligation that God’s workers have “to put no stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited” (2 Corinthians 6:3). This hardly means that the pastor or teacher must be sinless, or no one would qualify. But we’re speaking of the kind of conduct that causes even self-respecting people of this world to sit up and take notice. We dare not forget, though, that the world is a very lenient judge and is becoming more so right along. And we’re only deceiving ourselves if we do not recognize that the church is not immune to the world’s influence. Community standards cannot define scandalous conduct. Today’s society is extremely permissive. Holy Scripture must be our guide.

We need to remember that the pastor who is guilty of scandalous conduct doesn’t only shock people. He doesn’t just give people something to talk about within and without the congregation. It’s not simply a matter of someone not liking what he is doing. But inherent in the word “scandal” is the connotation of causing spiritual harm, of leading or rather misleading someone to be harmed in his or her spiritual life or to fall from the faith altogether. For that reason, above all, the public minister who is guilty of scandalous conduct does not meet the qualifications God has set down for his public servants. Such a one has disqualified himself for the ministry.

Another cause for terminating a call is willful neglect of duty. Paul writes, “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” (I Corinthians 4:1,2). Faithfulness is the overriding qualification for the public ministry. But the church must always be careful not to judge a man’s faithfulness on the basis of mere statistics. We’re not in charge of the harvest; God is! Our responsibility is to sow the seed. And that the pastor is to do faithfully. He is to “preach the Word, be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Timothy 4:2).

We’re not speaking here of the frustration that all of us feel at times because the day isn’t long enough to accomplish all we had set out to do. Nor are we speaking of the one-time missed appointment because we relied on our memory instead of writing it down on our calendar. [When that occurred we were the most embarrassed of all and immediately].¹ And we made sure it didn’t happen again, that it didn’t become a way of life with us. These kinds of things are not willful neglect. We’re speaking rather of a situation where a rather consistent pattern of neglecting ministerial responsibilities has emerged. The pastor or teacher persists in that pattern despite admonition. He even defends it and habitually repeats it. Such a one gives sufficient cause for removal from the ministry. His unfaithfulness is a hindrance to the Gospel. He is not building up God’s people, but harming and depriving them.

The fourth cause for termination of a call mentioned in the Synod’s *Model Constitution and Bylaws* is “established inability to perform the duties of his office.” We have already quoted the Scripture references cited here (I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9) which lay down rather explicit qualifications for the ministry.

Established inability to perform the duties of the office may occur for a variety of reasons. It may be the result of illness or old age. Memory, hearing, sight, strength are failing. A man who has served long and faithfully is just not capable of doing so anymore. The work is suffering. This is a case, surely, in which the church must deal with all love, patience, compassion, sensitivity, and evangelical concern; but consideration for a man must not outweigh consideration for the welfare of the church. Since incompetence does not normally involve the pastor in conduct worthy of blame, the congregation will not immediately think of termination, but will rather seek to lead the pastor to submit his resignation for the sake of his own reputation and, above all, the

¹ Editor’s note: The rest of this sentence is illegible on the original.

good of the kingdom. Because this is such a sensitive area one cannot underscore too strongly the wisdom of the counsel given in the *Constitution and Bylaws*, “In such a case the advice of the appropriate district officers shall be sought.” Too much is at stake for the congregation to act unilaterally.

Illness and old age, however, are not the only causes of incompetence. There may be a case where someone, in spite of careful screening on the part of the Worker Training schools, gets into the ministry without really possessing the qualifications which God requires of his ministers. This does not surface until the minister is out on his own somewhere. He is not happy. The congregation is not happy. The work of the kingdom is suffering. Perhaps he is not “able to teach.” Perhaps he is legalistically “lording it over those entrusted” (I Peter 5:3) to his care. He seeks to motivate with the Law rather than the Gospel which alone can change hearts. Perhaps he lacks the self-control and sound judgment which the Scriptures enjoin. Or perhaps he does not have the ability to deal with people, and people are what the ministry is all about.

We’re not speaking of a personality clash between the pastor and one or more of the members. They consistently rub each other the wrong way. Nor is it simply a matter of not liking the man and how he does things. We’re speaking of one of whom it can be demonstrated that he lacks the essential qualifications for the ministry prescribed by Scripture. Where this has been clearly established over a period of time, not on the basis of an isolated incident or two, not on the basis of the complaint of someone who has yet to get along with any pastor and who might have had trouble accepting the ministry of the Apostle Paul or the Lord Jesus himself, but on the basis of a consistent pattern that has emerged in spite of patient dealing and constructive attempts at correction, then we have a situation which constitutes “sufficient and urgent cause for removal.” Self-evidently, a congregation will, first of all, pursue the avenue of resignation rather than termination, and again, it will seek the advice and counsel of the appropriate district officers.

But when one who obviously lacks one or more of the scriptural qualifications for the ministry insists upon continuing because, after all, “He has a call,” then someone else must act. Christians dare not ignore the Lord’s directives. There are, obviously, orderly channels in which we move and it goes without saying that if we’re going to err in our dealings, let’s do it on the side of patience and charity. But throughout we dare not forget that we have not only the welfare of a man and, perhaps, a family to consider; we need to be equally concerned about the welfare of the church, of souls redeemed by the blood of Christ. And forgive me for repeating it one more time. Let no one act independently and unilaterally. The pastor who feels the need to resign or who has been asked to resign will confer with his brothers in the ministry, his circuit pastor, his district praesidium. Similarly, the congregation that feels it has cause to press for a resignation or even terminate a call will likewise work closely with the circuit pastor and the district praesidium.

This step insures greater objectivity in the dealing. Often a determination needs to be made whether the request for resignation resulted from opposition to the pastor’s methods and procedures, as is alleged, or from opposition to the truth of God’s Word that he has faithfully taught and applied. The Scriptures also voice the caution, “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. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths” (2 Timothy 4:3-4). In that setting resignation dare not be encouraged or termination permitted.

III. Reentry Into The Ministry

May one who has resigned from the ministry or whose call has been terminated for cause reenter the ministry at some future time?

To that I would give the answer that I have often heard from veteran pastors in cases of casuistry, “That depends on the case.” No, I’m not evading the question. It’s just the way it is. For in cases of casuistry we’re dealing with a situation where we must apply general principles of ethics and then decide to what extent circumstances alter cases. Cases which seem to be the same will not always have the same outcome because, in fact, they are not the same. Sometimes those who are responsible for dealing in a specific case will have access to facts that are not known to everyone. Conversely, sometimes individuals will have access to information that

is not available, except through hearsay, to those responsible for dealing in the case. The fact that individual cases do not always appear to be handled in a uniform manner should not be interpreted to mean that every attempt is not being made to implement a common practice. Before we accuse district officers of glaring inconsistencies in their dealings we do well to remember that every pastor is at times accused of inconsistency in the way that he dealt with specific cases in his congregation, cases which on the surface appeared to be the same, but were, in fact, different. And circumstances do alter cases.

There seems to be a growing feeling in some quarters that when a pastor who has disqualified himself for cause repents, is forgiven, perhaps even stays out of the ministry for a time, then there ought to be no question about his subsequent reinstatement and eligibility for a call when he again requests it. Otherwise, how can we say that we have forgiven him? Forgiveness, however, is not the point at issue. When a pastor repents the church will assure him of the Lord's forgiveness and regard him as a brother in Christ, even as it would any other Christian in the same situation. But because of the offense the sin has caused both within the congregation and in the community, it should not be taken for granted that he can automatically be declared eligible for the ministry again. The scriptural qualification that "he must also have a good reputation with outsiders" (I Timothy 3:7) still stands.

The example of Peter, whom the Savior reinstated to his apostleship, and of Paul, who became an apostle after persecuting the church of God, are most frequently advanced in support of the contention that a penitent public servant should be reinstated. In both of these cases, however, the Lord dealt directly and immediately. Subsequently, these same apostles, by divine inspiration, record the Lord's qualifications for the ministry. We can only be guided by those principles, rather than by the manner in which the Lord himself handled a specific case. And that Word continues to teach that a minister of God must have a good reputation, also among outsiders, must be upright, holy, disciplined, an example to the flock. The Word is our only guide. For that reason, the judgment of those to whom God has entrusted those decisions will often be that such a one should not again serve in the public ministry because he no longer possesses the scriptural qualifications for the ministry.

May a person who has resigned or whose call has been terminated for cause ever be declared eligible to serve again? Yes, provided he again meets the scriptural qualifications for the ministry. When is that likely to occur, if ever? The Bible does not give us the simple answer we might like. The church will have to use its sanctified judgment in applying the scriptural principles. And we do well to respect rather than second-guess the judgment of those to whom the Lord has entrusted that responsibility. When well-meaning friends and relatives are too persistent in their efforts to accomplish someone's reinstatement, they often raise more questions than they answer. There is a very real danger of violating confidences. Things better left lying dormant have a way of surfacing again so that neither the church, nor the individual, nor his family are edified.

In the case of a resignation that is not for cause, the district presidents will normally counsel such a person to remain out of the ministry for a time before again recommending him for a call. Such a waiting period affords an opportunity for that pastor or teacher to sort out his own thinking so that he can reach a firm conviction whether he really belongs in the public ministry or not. It enables the person to consider seriously whether he is now in a position to cope with the stresses that posed a problem for him in his previous call. It also allows for other pertinent factors to surface, if there are such, which may not immediately be known.

But there may also be a case in which district officers have been directly involved. The case is marginal, at best. It's hard to get a handle on all the facts in the case. There has been a substantial and apparently irreparable loss of confidence in the pastor or teacher. Whether it is totally justified or not is hard to pinpoint. But that the work of the kingdom in that place is suffering is not in doubt. Hence, those responsible for the supervision of doctrine and practice may advise resignation out of concern for the congregation and the called servant. They are agreed, however, that there were extenuating circumstances, that the man can still work with blessing in another setting. For that reason they do not hesitate to recommend him for a call to another place where his particular gifts can still be used. In such a case it would not be impossible or even unlikely for the person who resigned to receive another call quite soon. Nor would that show a lack of respect for the divinity of

the call. In an earlier day, when workers were less plentiful, this would have been less likely to occur. The man in question probably would have received a call to another field before patience wore thin.

It should also be noted that even when the church declares a man eligible, the Lord may still overrule that decision by not directing a call to him. Serving the Lord in the public ministry is always a privilege, not something he owes us because we have successfully completed a prescribed course of study.

In every area of life the proper course of action in a given case usually falls somewhere between two extremes. This area is no different. One could point to examples which seem to show a lack of understanding of, appreciation for, almost disrespect for the divine call. The church must ever be alert to a hiring-firing mentality which reduces the divine call to a secular contract. But the church must be equally alert to a mindset that says, "I have a call," with almost total disregard for the souls for whom Christ died.

May the Lord give his church wisdom, especially those to whom God has assigned the responsibility for dealing in these sensitive areas, to minister with compassion and concern, to the man and to the church.