

Issues Concerning the Doctrine of the Call

by
Kristofer Carlson
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[NOTE: This letter was written as a progress report on a work project I'd been assigned into the Doctrine of the Call. I stumbled upon a huge problem area in Lutheran theology in North America. The problem involves church governance, and whether bishops and deacons are synonymous with pastors, or whether bishop, pastor, and deacon are separate offices, commissions, or functions, and whether the diaconate is simply an auxiliary function of the pastorate. Interestingly, this is not a problem overseas, where Lutherans have a spiritual hierarchy and have no theological difficulties with it.]

In my research into the practices implementing the divine call, (which I've been asked to perform by Pres. Hays,) I've run into a problem. Not being a theologian, I don't know if the problem is with the arguments used in support of the divine call, or with the theology behind it.

Kurt Marquart, in *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance*, Vol. IX of the Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics series, says the following:

There is one basic ministry . . . which is confessed to be divinely instituted in AC V. The German calls it the Predigtamt (literally: Preaching office), "to give Gospel and sacrament" while the Latin speaks of the ministerium evangelii et porrigendi sacramenta (ministry of the teaching of the Gospel and of administering the sacraments) (p. 120).

Marquart writes the following, the first passage to clearly delineate the problem:

Two examples are always cited to show the necessity of the church's consent in the appointment of her ministers. One is the nomination of Joseph and Matthias to Judas' vacant apostolate, in which the hundred and twenty appear to have collaborated (Acts 1, 15-26). The other is the election of the Seven (Acts 6:1-6) (p. 146).

Do you see it? There is only one ministry---the preaching office. So why then use the election of the Seven to prove the necessity of the church's consent to the appointment of her ministers? Marquart is at pains to say that the Seven were elected to the "auxiliary diaconate" with the consent of the church, thus separating them from the ministry of word and sacrament. Since he uses the term "ministry", this would seem to lend support to the idea of a three-fold ministry. (Gerhard, quoted below, may inadvertently provide additional support.)

Robert Preus, in his booklet entitled *The Doctrine of the Call in the Confessions and Lutheran Orthodoxy* writes the following:

A call to any public position of function other than the one and only ministry of the Word is no call at all, at least in the sense that AC XIV, Luther, Melancthon and all the dogmaticians use the term. Of course, there were other positions (status) and functions (functiones, munera) in the church at the time of the Reformation and among the Lutherans, notably later on, deacons, but also sextons, cantors, and in our day parochial school teachers; but as far as I know, they did not receive calls. (p. 25).

It is interesting to note that Acts chapter 6 does not say the Seven were chosen to be deacons. This perhaps may be inferred, but is unclear from the text, as Marquart points out (*The Church*, p.139). Marquart then goes on to say “the office being created here is neither a new divinely instituted office, nor a specialization within the one office of the Gospel and sacraments. It is rather an auxiliary service established by the church in Christian liberty precisely to enable the one apostolic office of the Gospel . . . to devote itself to its proper work” (pp. 139-140).

In a previously quoted section, Robert Preus writes that deacons did not receive calls. Yet the scriptures contain a most curious chronology in Acts chapter 6. The apostles, in verses 2-4, request the people select seven men to take care of the daily ministrations. In verse 5 the people chose the Seven. In verse 6 the apostles lay hands upon them (which, curiously enough, was a mark of ordination.) Then, in verse 7, we see Stephen participating in the public ministry of the Word within the church. No break in time is evident. No evidence of a subsequent call is presented. And we have Stephen’s defense before the Sanhedrin recorded in Scripture, by which we may assume from both text and context that the Holy Spirit approved of his work.

Marquart writes the following:

The diaconate of love is not, however, the whole story of the Seven. It turns out that Stephen and Philip in particular preached, and this is not simply in the capacity of private Christians in non-Christian surrounds, at least in Philip’s case, for we are expressly told that he was an “evangelist” (Acts 21:8). [This ignores the chronology in Acts 6.] The information is too fragmentary to permit any certain conclusion. Chemnitz held that the Seven were not originally ministers of the Word, but that “the apostles afterwards accepted into the ministry of teaching those from among the deacons who were approved, as Stephen and Phillip.” Gerhard, on the other hand, believed that the Seven were “not simply excluded” from the work of teaching, but were “principally put in charge of tables.” Such deacons, “conjoined with presbyters, preached the

Word together with them, administered the sacraments, visited the sick, etc.,” and so “were made teachers of a lower order in the church. . . Phil. 1:1. . . I Tim. 3:8.” (pp. 140-141).

Once again we have a problem. Chemnitz’ position cannot be supported from Acts 6, as no time passes between the election of the Seven, the laying on of hands by the apostles, and Stephen’s preaching ministry. But Gerhard creates another problem by saying the Seven constituted “teachers of a lower order in the church.” This raises the specter of the three-fold ministry, and perhaps even sequential ordination.

At this point I can’t tell if the arguments are poorly made, the choice of terms is imprecise, the exegesis faulty, or if the theology behind the doctrine of the call in Lutheran orthodoxy is flawed. I’m not sure I have the tools to resolve these difficulties.