

The Divine Call: Doctrine and Practice

by
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Lutheran congregations handle the call process much differently than American Evangelical congregations, for whom the call process works like a cross between a job interview and a popularity contest. Lutherans (and much of the church catholic) view the pastoral office as instituted by Christ, and the call to that office as coming from the Holy Spirit, but mediated through the church. This call is a three-step process: 1) Preparation, 2) Call, and 3) Ordination. The Preparation phase includes the church as it prepares a young man for the ministry. The Call phase includes the congregation receiving a candidate's information, examining themselves and the candidate, and seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Then they either extend a call or reject the candidate. When a congregation rejects a candidate, they are saying they understand the Holy Spirit is not calling that particular candidate to their congregation. Likewise, when a candidate rejects the call of the congregation, he is saying he understands the Holy Spirit is not calling him to serve that congregation. Finally the presbytery or Ministerium confirms the validity of the call by ordaining the man to the pastoral office.

This has several important consequences. First, since the call is from the Holy Spirit, and since the church merely mediates the call, the call is permanent. The pastor may be dismissed only for ungodly acts, unsound doctrine, or incompetence. When a congregation dismisses a pastor under these conditions, it is not acting for itself, but acting in the stead and by the command of God. Second, the call process is not a job interview. Neither is the call process a preaching test, where the best preacher is chosen. Candidates are examined one at a time, then accepted or rejected. We do not cast lots, as happened with Matthias; we do not select between multiple qualified candidates. Third, the first call is the important call. Because no candidate is a pastor without a valid call, no candidate should reject his first call except in the most egregious of circumstances. Fourth, we Lutherans, along with the majority of the church of Christ on earth, understand the call process to take place within the context of good church order. The call process must take place with purpose and intent. It is not haphazard, it is not ad hoc, and it is not solely the province of the local church. This is most certainly true, and is consistent with our congregational church polity.

The apostles were immediately and directly called by our Lord, but subsequent calls are indirect. "How shall they preach, except they be sent?" (Rom 10:15). This passage provides us with the standard for the pastoral call. Pastors are sent by the Holy Spirit through the mediation of the church. We are not talking only about the local congregation, but about the larger church body as the agent of the church universal. It is the church universal through which the Holy Spirit works to call a pastor. This means the call process, as part of good church order, has been developed through the ministrations of the Holy Spirit.

The church always mediates the divine call. We see this in the scriptures when Matthias was chosen to replace Judas (Acts 1:15-26,) and we see this again when the first seven deacons were chosen (Acts 6:1-6). Paul and Barnabas “ordained ... elders in every church, and ... commended them to the Lord” (Acts 14:23), where the word “ordained” means also appointed, chosen, and elected. Paul charges Titus to “ordain elders in every city” (Titus 1:5), where the word for “ordain” means to appoint or place in office. In both cases this implies the involvement of the local congregation, an implication given credence by the call of Matthias and the first seven deacons.

The Divine Call is always a mediated call. It is mediated through the local congregation, through the church body, and through the ministerium. The call to the preaching office comes at the first call, when the Holy Spirit, through the church body, presents a trained person to the local congregation. The Holy Spirit then works through the church, which decides whether to extend a call to that person. The Holy Spirit also works through the pastor who then chooses whether to accept the call. In the case of a first call, the call should be accepted except in the most egregious of circumstances, because without that first call a man is not a pastor, no matter how well educated. (Phillip Melancthon wrote the Augsburg Confession, but was never a called and ordained pastor.¹

The call to the preaching office is a lifelong call, “For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance” (Rom 11:29). Once a local congregation has extended the call to a man and he has accepted, the man is ordained. At ordination the ministerium recognizes the man as qualified, the call as legitimate, and the man is ordained as pastor. Please note that the Holy Spirit is always the one who acts through the church to call/ordain the pastor. Since the Holy Spirit has called and ordained the pastor, only the Holy Spirit may dismiss a pastor. The scriptures provide us with three reasons such a dismissal may occur: Ungodly life, unsound doctrine, or incompetence (Hos 4:6; Rom 16:17; Tit 1:5 ff.; I Tim 3:2; II Tim 2:24).

The evangelical practice of interviewing several pastors and then choosing between them is contrary to the Lutheran doctrine of the call. The Lutheran congregation looks at candidates individually instead of aggregately. The Lutheran congregation seeks the guidance of the Holy Spirit and chooses whether to extend the call. If the congregation decides not to extend a call, they then move on to examine another pastoral candidate. This process is not secular, but spiritual. This process is not intended to find the “best” candidate, but find the candidate the Holy Spirit has chosen for that congregation.

The call process is not a popularity contest, and it is not a preaching contest. It is instead a process of determining the will of the Holy Spirit. May God grant to each congregation the wisdom to discern His will for His church.

¹ This statement is itself problematic, for Melancthon was once painted baptizing. Whether this actually happened is another matter. Even Dr. Robert Preus was of two minds about this. In a forum for seminarians he made the statement that Melancthon was called, but never ordained. A few years later he wrote that Melancthon was a layman without a call.