

THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF “THE DIVINE CALL” A Minority Opinion

There are of course many fine statements in this CTCR’s report, the text of which has been developing in committee for nearly ten years. Our main reservations about this draft are twofold: (1) Specifically, the document abandons our Synod’s 150 years-long opposition in principle to “temporary calls”; and (2) in general, we are concerned about a pragmatic type of theologizing which always seeks to reshape doctrine to fit existing practice, rather than correcting practice by the unchanging standard of biblical doctrine.

(1) “Temporary Calls”

Although the document admits that “there have been good and solid reasons for regarding the calls of parish pastors as open-ended or of unspecified duration” (38), and even takes this as normal practice for ordinary parish calls, the document treats this as no more than a desirable *adiaphoron*: “It may well be the case that the length of service, like location and salary, is also an issue that is entrusted to the church to administer ‘by human right’ (*de jure humano*) (37). Walther says the opposite: **“the church cannot create a call according to its own discretion but can issue only that call which God has instituted and which He alone recognizes (through which alone a servant of God comes into existence, not, however, through a human contract for a few hours and days)”** (*Walther Speaks to the Church: Selected Letters*, Carl S. Meyer, ed. [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973], 58; emphasis added).

If adopted, the new theology would be the first official break—foreshadowed, to be sure, by decades of loose practice—with our Synod’s previous stand on the matter throughout its history. Indeed, the whole Synodical Conference from the beginning held that “the toleration of temporary calls for pastors” was a “practice contrary to the confession, and therefore a bar to church fellowship” (CTCR Report *Theology of Fellowship*, 20). Unlike other CTCR reports, merely recommended by the Synod for study, etc., this one was formally “adopted” as its position by the Synod in 1967).

If it is true that the minister of the Gospel is “God’s man” (1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 3:17), who may therefore be removed from office only for cause (ungodly doctrine, ungodly life, incompetence), properly established (1 Tim. 5:19), then a temporary “call” is simply an enabling device for arbitrary dismissal on unbiblical grounds, and is no call at all. It is in fact “an abominable disorder” (see Walther, below). That is the historic Lutheran position defended by our Synod.

The document’s “situationism,” which holds that “pastors in specialized fields of service” may be treated differently (38-41), threatens the distinctively Lutheran understanding that there is only one divinely established Gospel ministry, and that all Gospel ministers—whatever their particular specializations—are therefore essentially alike as incumbents of one and the same God-given office. Thus Walther, refuting Grabau’s claim that he had the right to dismiss his assistant, Pastor Hochstetter, because

he was technically only an “archdeacon,” accused Grabau of “sacrilege” and “church-robbery,” saying:

However therefore Pastor Grabau may twist and wiggle, he will never manage to prove from God’s Word that there is more than one divinely instituted office, and that there exists a type of preacher who by divine right would be something other or more or less than other [preachers], which of course is a doctrine which domineering pastors would only too fondly like to smuggle in from the Roman or the Episcopal church into the Lutheran (*Der Lutheraner*, vol. 23, no. 9 [1867], 67).

If “the free and unhindered proclamation of the whole counsel of God has been a fundamental reason why the call of a local pastor has been considered permanent” (38), it is difficult to see why that same logic should not apply in other situations. If anything, academic or bureaucratic pressures for conformity within the synodical structure are likely to be much more intense than public opinion within a local congregation. Why then does the document favor temporary appointments or “a rolling contract” (40) for Gospel ministers in such situations? If permanent calls for local parish pastors are desirable in resisting “the pressure . . . for the pastor to become a ‘people-pleaser’” (38), then how can pastors in the employ of the Synod under “a solemn Call” be expected to “serve at the pleasure of the appointing authorities” (1989 *Proceedings*, 129)?

We recognize of course that there are unusual and “fluid” situations. This, however, is not the place to offer detailed suggestions for various cases. What is important is the principle that the one Gospel ministry is conveyed by a regular (non-temporary!) divine call, and that this is also the way for orderly transfers of Gospel ministers from one field of service to another. Within a permanent call to a mission field, for example, orderly changes of location may well be made by mutual consent. And as for elected offices, if they require ministers of the Gospel, then these may either be called permanently or else be given temporary auxiliary calls in addition to their regular, permanent calls. Where there is a will to follow proper churchly practice, there will always be a way. The proposed document’s treatment of the new concept of “intentional interim ministry” (see 40-41) does not face up sufficiently to the underlying issues of principle. Nor do the issues of “Resignation and Retirement” (45-46) appear to have been sufficiently thought through.

The majority document is mistaken in assuming (20) that unlike Walther, Pieper “was willing, however, to distinguish between a call for temporary assistance and a temporary call.” In point of fact, that distinction had been made already by Walther: “Those preachers, however, who without giving up the office to which they have an orderly, regular call, serve another congregation for a time as it were ‘on loan,’ with the agreement of their congregation, by no means thereby make themselves guilty of conducting the office on the basis of a temporary call” (*Pastoraltheologie*, 4th ed., 1897, 44n). Walther cites biblical and Reformation examples, including that of Bugenhagen, “who near the beginning of the Gospel was lent from Wittenberg to Brunswick for a year.”

(2) Doctrine and Practice: The Horse-and-Cart Problem

Serious theology needs constantly to call the church's practice back to the pure standards of her doctrine. It is a mark of decline when theologizing is used instead to justify loose, pragmatic practice. In this way unsound practice ultimately leads to unsound doctrine, instead of sound doctrine being allowed to cure the ills of unsound practice. It is easy for the church, especially in an age of pragmatism, to drift into loose practice. In call matters all sorts of practical anomalies have arisen, and have been accepted apparently without any serious theological analysis. For instance, the Wichita Convention (1989), contrary to Augsburg Confession XIV, accepted Word and Sacrament ministry by uncalled, unordained ("licensed") persons, largely on the grounds that the thing was happening anyway and should be regulated for the sake of good order (*1989 Proceedings*, 111-114). The process that led up to this action, incidentally, had bypassed the CTCR—causing the latter to express official "regret" (April 22, 1989).

We call upon the CTCR to be more intentionally independent of organizational givens, in order to assert and maintain the sole sway of the divine gift of truth in His holy Word, as purely confessed in the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

ATTACHMENT: THE HISTORIC LUTHERAN REJECTION OF "TEMPORARY CALLS"

1992 Resolution 3-09A mandating the study of the Call expressly stated that this was to be done "utilizing the writings of C.F.W. Walther (i.e., his book *Church and Ministry* and essay 'The Congregation's Rights [sic] to Choose Its Pastor'" (*1992 Proceedings*, 116). The intent clearly was to take seriously the balanced, historic, orthodox Lutheran consensus on church and ministry, for the clear exposition and defense of which Walther is rightly famous. The CTCR's document fails to do justice to standard Lutheranism's rejection of "temporary calls," as the following citations clearly show. (Our translations; boldface added).

C.F.W. Walther, *Church and Ministry*, trans. J. T. Mueller (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1987), 311.

Kromayer: "The minister may not be engaged by those who call him through a contract for certain years or with the reservation to dismiss the freely called person. **God nowhere has granted or permitted those who call the right to make such a contract. Hence, neither the one calling nor the one who is called may regard such a call or dismissal as divine**" (*Theologia positivo-polemica*, part II, p. 530).

C.F.W. Walther, *Amerikanisch-Lutherische Pastoraltheologie [American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology]*, 4th ed., 1897, 41-45, *passim*.

Especially here in America there exists in many congregations the custom that preachers are called only *temporarily* (for a time), that is, either with the proviso that they may be dismissed at will, or that they are called only for a certain term, perhaps for one or several years, or "until notice," so that they must resign within a fixed time from the day of the notice; even if all this [includes] the possibility of being elected again for a new fixed term. **However, neither is a congregation**

entitled to issue such a call, nor is a preacher authorized to accept it. Such a call is before God neither valid nor legitimate. It is an abuse [Unsitte]. It conflicts in the first place with the *divinity*, clearly certified in God's Word, of a true call into a preaching office in the church (Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11; I Cor. 12:28; Ps. 68:12; Is. 41:27). For if God is actually the One Who calls preachers, then the congregations are only the instruments for the selection of the persons for the work to which the Lord has called them (Acts 13:2). Once this has happened, the preacher stands in God's service and office, and no creature can then deprive His servant of his office or dismiss him, unless it can be proved that God Himself deprived him of his office and dismissed him (Jer. 15:19, cf. Hos. 4:6), in which case the congregation does not really depose or dismiss the preacher, but only executes the manifest deposal or dismissal by God. If the congregation does that nonetheless, then it, the instrument, makes itself the mistress of the office (Mt. 23:8, cf. II Tim. 4:2, 3), and interferes with God's rule and administration, whether [such congregation] makes arbitrary decisions about this already before or during the call, or whether it presumes to do so afterwards. But the preacher who gives a congregation the right to call him in this way, and to dismiss him at will, thereby makes himself a hireling, a servant of men. **Such a call is not at all that which God has ordained in respect of the holy office of preaching, but is an entirely different matter, which hasn't got anything to do with it. For it is no mediate call through the church, but a human contact; it is no life's calling, but a passing function outside the divine order; an ecclesiastical, thus a human order, or rather an abominable disorder made contrary to the order of God. It is therefore, as stated before, without any validity, null and void, and one so called is not to be regarded as a servant of Christ and of the church.** Such a call conflicts also, secondly, with the relationship in which congregation and preacher are to stand towards each other according to God's Word. It conflicts firstly with the *honour* and the *obedience*, which the hearers are to show the administrators of the divine office of preaching according to God's Word (Lk. 10:16; I Tim. 5:17; I Thess. 5:12, 13; I Cor. 16:15; Heb. 13:17); for if the hearers really had that alleged plentitude of power, then it would be fully within their power to withdraw themselves from the divinely required observance of that honour and of that obedience. No less is every sort of a merely temporary call also contrary to the *faithfulness* and *constancy* until death which God requires of preachers (I Pet. 5:1-4; I Tim. 4:16; I Cor. 4:1 ff.) and contrary as well to the *accounting*, which the preacher as guardian over souls will one day have to render (Heb. 13:17). Finally a temporary call is contrary both to the *practice* which the Lord commanded the *apostles*, and which they observed, according to which they, namely God's Spirit through them, not the hearers, had to determine how long they would and should remain with a congregation (Lk. 9:4, 5), and also contrary to the *practice of the church* in those times when corruption in doctrine, life, order, and discipline had not set in. That, incidentally, with the existence of that sort of call the church can nevermore be rightly cared for or governed, or the right discipline be practiced, or the church be rightly grounded in the faith and in pious ways, and be propagated, requires no proof; **such a call opens gates and doors to**

all disorder, confusion, and all mischief through gainsayers and through men-pleasing and men-fearing belly-servers. . .

Finally, Ludwig Hartmann writes: “Here belongs also that controversial question, whether someone may consent to render his service or official work to the church *for certain years*. We say no: 1. Because such a calling impertinently prescribes to *God*, Who calls, a certain time, after the lapse of which he will depart from that church, no matter how it might behave; as it is not the place of a legate to prescribe to his lord how long he is to represent him. 2. Because *fleshly counsels* are at hand, which ought to be far away; for such an one thinks that if things don’t turn out according to his heart’s desire, if no treasures are to be gathered or many adversities to be endured, then he will easily disentangle himself from these labyrinths. 3. For the sake of many *disadvantages*: for if the faithfulness of a pastor were very pleasing to the church, she would suddenly be robbed of it; also because through such frequent changes the property of the church is much diminished, as is well known. If one now asks further, whether it is permitted to *call* a servant of the Word *under the definite condition of how long*, so that when the patron no longer wishes to hear or tolerate the pastor, he must leave and wander to some other place? then I answer: We are servants of God and this office is God’s, to which we are called by God, albeit through men; this holy work must therefore be handled in a sacred way, but not according to human arbitrariness. **A shepherd and cowherd people may hire for a time, and when their service no longer pleases, they may at a definite time, but not always, dismiss them, if they wish: but so to treat a shepherd of souls is not within the power of any man. Nor may the servant of the Word himself accept the holy office in such a way, unless he wants to become a hireling.** Certainly those who would be thus called would not fulfill the office diligently and faithfully, but would become flatterers and say which pleases people, or they must constantly expect their service to be terminated” (*Pastorale evang.*, 104). . .

J. P. Beyer, “*Vom Beruf zum Amt der Kirchendiener*,” LC-MS Eastern District *Proceedings*, (1889) 36-37.

This temporary calling is a shameful perversion of the order which Christ Himself has created in the church. Nowhere is it revealed as the will of God that preachers and teachers should be so engaged that it depends on the good will and the decision of the others whether they may remain in their office or not. In the most ancient church one therefore finds not a trace of such temporary employment. This vice arose only at the time of the Reformation, when some congregations misused the doctrine of the spiritual priesthood. [Luther strongly objected]. . .

As a result of this decided opposition to the excesses of congregations, we hear no more of such attempts in the Lutheran church for a long time. Only at the time of the Interim, 1547-’52, several south-German imperial cities began again to call their preachers for a certain number of years, and retained the contract system, even though the emergency was ended by the Passau Treaty in 1552. An Opinion of the Wittenberg Faculty in respect of a school-cantor, from the year 1638, reads: “The calls to church and schools services, in which one is to give the other a quarter year’s notice without any other weighty cause, are entirely disapproved in

our Lutheran churches” (*Consil. theol. Witeb* III, 55). . . As a result of such forceful testimonies against it, the temporary call disappeared again from Germany, but arose again about 200 years later in America. But also here the Saxons, who had immigrated 50 years ago, raised their voice against it, and showed the limits of congregational rights in call-matters, and maintained what we still teach today: A congregation has no right to call or dismiss a preacher or teacher by contract.

P. F. Koehneke, “The Call into the Holy Ministry,” in *The Abiding Word* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1946) 1:380.

From the beginning our Synod had to take a definite stand on this question. Among the conditions of membership in Synod the following is listed [in the Constitution]: “**Regular (not temporary) call of the pastor.**” Chapter V, paragraph 11, we find this statement: “Licenses to preach which are customary in this country are not granted by Synod because they are contrary to Scripture and the practice of the Church”. . . This has been the consistent practice of our Synod since that time and has been stated again and again in official papers presented at conventions and in our periodicals.

Robert D. Preus, “The Doctrine of the Call in the Confessions and Lutheran Orthodoxy,” in *Church and Ministry Today*, ed. John A. Maxfield (Crestwood, Mo.: Luther Academy, 2001), 33.

The call is always permanent. The notion of a temporary call is inconceivable in the nature of the case, and therefore the matter is not even considered by Luther or the Confessions or any Lutheran theologian. The function of the ministerial office, Calov asserts, is to work for the church as a servant (*diaconus*), not as a lord, to do the work of an evangelist to the grave, to guard and be an example to the flock, an angel of God’s revelation of His Word. One never quits such a calling. As the immediate call in apostolic times was for life (until God Himself called the person to a new place), so it is with the mediate call. **It is permanent and irrevocable, unless God Himself intervenes.**

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