

The Divine Call

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“Our pastor is leaving us, so we’ll have to hire a new pastor.” “Don’t ask me to do that. It’s not in my call.” Remarks like this might be multiplied. They serve to show that it becomes necessary and wholesome from time to time to review and rethink the whole matter of the divine call, both as to theory and as to practice. That’s what I’ve been asked to do with you this evening. So our subject will be:

The Divine Call

We’ll speak about:

- I. Its divine nature
- II. Its requirements for those who receive it
- III. Its obligations for those who extend it

I.A. A call is necessary. Among us it would be unthinkable for a man to come to a congregation and say, “I’ve decided to be pastor here.” Or for a teacher to come into our community and tell us, “I’m going to teach in your school during the new school year.” We realize that no one may presume to do the work of a Christian congregation unless the congregation has asked him to do the work. When we speak of the public ministry, we mean that a man is not preaching or teaching as a private venture, but that he has rather been asked by the church to do the work that the Lord has given to the church. He may not do it unless he has been asked, unless he has been called. The apostle asks, “How shall they preach, except they be sent?” (Ro 10:15) and expects the answer, “They can’t.” Only endless confusion would result if men were to undertake to preach or teach on their own. The apostle, however, says, “God is not the author of confusion” (1 Co 14:33). He tells us what our God wants: “Let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Co 14:40).

I.B.I. So men serve as pastors of our congregations and teachers teach in our schools only if they have been called to do so. There is a human side to this process of calling, as you well know. A congregation in its voters’ assembly considers a list of candidates for a vacant pastorate or teaching position in its midst. The candidates are described and discussed. A vote is taken. When one candidate receives a majority the vote is made unanimous and a call is issued. Sometimes a congregation may authorize its church council or its board of education to act for it in calling when time is of the essence, but it is still the congregation that is calling.

I.B.2. Where does the list of candidates come from? One of the purposes for which our congregations have banded together to form a synod is to exercise supervision of doctrine and practice in their midst. By common consent in their District constitutions they have made the district president directly responsible for this supervision. One way in which this supervision is carried out is that only such people are recommended as candidates for a vacant position who agree with our doctrine. So we have made it the responsibility of the district president to recommend a list of candidates. There’s another reason for this procedure too. Since the district president as a rule has a wider acquaintance with our pastors and teachers than the average congregation, the district president has a better idea of who might fit best in a given situation and might be likely to accept a call if it were extended. That does not mean that congregations may not nominate other candidates. But then we have agreed that they ought to have the district president approve these candidates too. If a congregation decides to call a graduate of our seminary or of our teacher’s college, it does not vote for a particular person. It delegates the district president, who is a member of the assignment committee, in consultation with the other district presidents and the heads of the training schools to make the choice.

I.B.3. This procedure of calling qualified candidates by means of an election dates back to the time of the apostles. In Acts 1 it was followed when Matthias was elected to fill the vacancy in the ranks of the 12 apostles caused by the suicide of Judas. It was followed when the church at Jerusalem elected deacons to administer its

welfare program for the benefit of the congregation's widows. In Acts 14:23 we are told how Paul and Barnabas had the young churches of Asia Minor elect elders, men who were entrusted with the public ministry. In 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 the apostle lists the qualifications which bishops, which means overseers, and deacons ought to possess.

I.B.4. This procedure is the visible, human side of the calling procedure. Invisible to the human eye is the Lord's part in this procedure. That he does play a part in it is a matter of faith, believed because his Word tells us that he is involved. In the familiar passage Eph 4:11 we are told that it is the ascended Lord Jesus who gives the church its pastors and teachers, among others. In 1 Co 12:28 we are told: "God hath set some in the church ... teachers." The Lord's activity involves endowing men with the necessary physical, mental and spiritual gifts for the ministry. It also involves implanting in their hearts the desire to serve him in the public ministry. But it also includes this that the Lord places a man into his particular field of service. This is very evident in the case of one like St. Paul to whom the Lord appeared directly to call him as an apostle. But it is also true of those who are entrusted with the ministry in a specific place. The apostle told the elected elders of the church at Ephesus: "Take heed ... unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood (Ac 20:28). The Holy Ghost made them overseers over their particular flock. The specific functions of those who have been entrusted with the public ministry may change, the mode of procedure which the church follows in assigning their functions to them may change. But our God doesn't change, it is still he who puts public ministers into their particular field of labor. Their call is a divine call.

I.C.1. Some people have held that since a call is a divine call, a man must accept a call whenever he receives one. We do expect those who are presented to the church as candidates for the teaching or preaching ministry to accept the call which is assigned to them. They have expressed their readiness to serve. They have no other call, hence they are to conclude that through the call which has been assigned to them the Lord is showing them where he wants them to begin serving him in the public ministry. But when a pastor or a teacher already has a call and now receives another, he has two calls. Since he cannot stay where he is and also go to the place to which he has been called, he has to decide which of the two calls he will follow.

I.C.2. He must decide. This does not mean that he must or will reach his decision entirely by himself. The Word of God leads us to think of the relationship between a congregation and its called workers as a family relationship (1 Ti 3:5). In a family we talk over together matters which concern the family. Furthermore, reaching a decision concerning a call involves weighing many pros and cons. It is a privilege to have co-workers with whom one may discuss a call and perhaps be helped to see factors that one may have overlooked. Pastors may especially appreciate the advice of their visiting elder or their district president, teachers, the advice of their school visitor, or of the executive secretary of the Board of Parish Education.

I.C.3.a. Ultimately however, the decision has to be made by the one who has received the call. What should he consider? The salary? Housing provisions? The wishes of his family? The relative closeness to his home? Educational or recreational opportunities? All of these considerations are minor unless there are circumstances that warrant attaching major importance to them. One who has sinus trouble, for example, may welcome a call into an area with a drier climate because there his efficiency would not be impaired as much as it is where he presently is serving.

I.C.3.b. But the really important factor is indicated in the words: "The Manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal" (1 Co 12:7). This means that the Spirit has given us the gifts that we have that we might use them for the good of the church. So the question to be decided by the one who has received a call is: "Where can I do the most good for the church, by staying where I am or by accepting the call that I have received?" Sometimes it is easy to find the answer, sometimes hard. The Lord has promised to hear and answer

our prayers. He will also in his own time and in his own way help us to see what we ought to do with a call, accept it or return it. I used to tell those who sought my advice in this matter: “If you can’t return the call with a good conscience, accept it. If you can’t accept it with a good conscience, return it. If you can’t reach a decision, let the congregation decide.”

II. What does a call require?

II.A. In its essence a call is an assignment to serve the church in the name of the church by performing the functions which the Lord has assigned to the church. Sometimes we call these functions the use of the keys. The terms “keys” goes back to what our Lord Jesus told Peter after he had made a good confession of the Christian faith: “I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Mt 16:19). We unlock heaven for a sinner when we tell him that Jesus died for him and he believes this good news and we tell him that he has everlasting life. We lock heaven to a sinner when we tell him the good news and he refuses to believe and we tell him that he has no forgiveness. So the use of the keys is the proclamation of the gospel. Using them is a service, a ministry. As we well know, this ministry involves a variety of functions, all the way from preaching from the pulpit to ministering to the dying; all the way from teaching Bible history to dealing with a disobedient pupil.

II.B.1. The call specifies which of these many functions an individual is to perform in the name of the congregation. The call of the pastor is comprehensive. To him is entrusted the care of the entire flock. This includes preaching, certain areas of teaching (confirmation classes, Bible classes, adult classes, Sunday school teacher training), the ministry of comfort, disciplinary calls, mission calls, administrative responsibility.

II.B.2.a. The calls extended to teachers assign to them a more restricted area of responsibility, sometimes simply stated as to serve as teacher in the congregation’s Christian day school, sometimes specifying the particular grade or grades that are to be taught. If a man is to serve as principal, this responsibility is usually mentioned in his call. The fact that a teacher’s call assigns to him a restricted area of responsibility does not mean that it is an inferior type of call. His call, just like that of a pastor is a call into the public ministry, a call to serve the congregation for the good of the congregation.

II.B.2.b. If we bear in mind that all who serve in the public ministry have a divine call, we shall not be tempted to distinguish between calls which are more divine and those which are less divine. Thus there is no essential difference between the call of a male teacher and that of a woman teacher, both are divine. The only difference can be in the restrictions that the calling body includes in the call. We have called attention to that difference between a pastor’s call and that of a teacher. So too for the sake of order, which is God pleasing, a congregation may assign to each teacher the responsibility for certain grades and the general responsibility of cooperating in promoting the welfare of the school. In addition it may assign to the principal beside the responsibility for the pupils in his grade or grades the responsibility of supervising the work in all of the grades in his school. Again, it is not the case of a superior type of call and an inferior type, but rather of a wider and a more restricted area of responsibility, but always a ministry, service to the Lord and his church.

II.C.1. The question may be raised whether all of the responsibilities of a called worker need to be spelled out with the result that if a called worker is asked to do something which is not specifically assigned to him in his call he may refuse to do it because it is not in his call.

II.C.1.a. In general, the attitude of one who has a divine call will be decisive. He is not a hireling. When a labor union negotiates a contract, the contract spells out in detail what may and what may not be expected of a worker. He may lay only a specified number of bricks in an hour, he may take a coffee break of a specified length, etc., etc. Not so with one who has a divine call. He is called to serve, for ministry is service. He looks upon his work as a privilege even as did the apostle Paul: “Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph 3:8). With

such a sense of privilege he will endeavor to make the fullest possible use of it and not try to get by with the barest minimum. Paul wrote to Timothy: "Make full proof of thy ministry" (2 Ti 4:5), that is, fill it up to the brim.

II.C.1.b. But then there is the matter of priorities. Functions that have been specifically assigned will receive priority over matters which may be desirable, but which would undercut the time needed for full and adequate performance of assigned duties. A classic example is furnished by the attitude of the apostles in the mother church at Jerusalem. At first they could attend to welfare work among the widows of the congregation without cutting short the time needed to their prime work. But as the congregation grew and the number of widows increased, they called a halt and advised the church to elect people to take care of this charity, saying: "It is not reason that we should leave the Word of God and serve tables. ...We will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word" (Ac 6:2,4). Among brethren the cogency of such argumentation is recognized, and other solutions to the problem of supplying additional needs will be sought and found.

II.C.2.a. One problem that seems to arise quite frequently is whether teachers ought to be expected to teach Sunday school. There are some that are quite eager to perform this service, welcoming the opportunity to become acquainted with other children of a congregation and to encourage them to attend Christian day school. Others may say that they would like to serve, but that they are so drained physically, mentally and emotionally after five days in the classroom that they need the weekend to recoup their energies in order to teach at peak efficiency. Or a married woman teacher may not have time for additional teaching over the weekend because work has piled up at home during the week. But for a teacher who is asked to teach Sunday school to refuse to do so by saying, "It's not in my call," could raise questions about the wholeheartedness of his devotion to the ministry.

II.C.2.b. It would be impossible to attempt to list all of the situations that could conceivably arise. In the case of the teacher, attitude and priorities will point the way. On the part of congregations, brotherly understanding will lead to proper evaluation of each situation. This comment may well serve as a bridge to a somewhat more detailed consideration of the obligations that are assumed by those who issue a divine call.

III.A. If we let the Word of God train us to look upon those who have a divine call as being in their particular area of service because the Lord has placed them there, our high regard for our Lord will lead us to regard his called servants with respect. And that is just what the Lord wants us to do. Paul writes to Timothy. "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the Word and doctrine" (1 Ti 5:17). And to the Thessalonians he writes: "We beseech you, brethren, to know them which labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake" (1 Th 5:12-13). It is not a question of whether they have a likeable personality or not that decides whether or not we are going to look up to them. The fact that the Lord has entrusted them with their kind of work through their divine call is what should move us to esteem them highly and love them.

III.B. One way in which we can show our loving concern for them is to pray for them. We have at least two instances where Paul expressly asks for the prayers of his people. In 2 Th 3:1-2 we have these words: "Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the Word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified, even as it is with you: and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men." To the Ephesians he wrote: "Praying always ... for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel" (6:19). You will have noticed that he doesn't ask them to pray that he might enjoy good health or have a safe journey, but that through him the gospel might be proclaimed effectively. If even a great man like Paul felt the need for the prayers of his people, we who are pygmies in comparison to him need the prayers of our people much more.

III.C.1. There's an old saying: "The family that prays together stays together." I'm going to parody it to say: "The congregation and its workers who pray together will work together." If we pray that our pastor may be helped in his work, we shall also be willing to help him where we can. Our congregations have provided

assistance for their pastors by electing a church council. The elders in particular are charged to help him in his concern for purity of doctrine, good order, and the admonition of lax members. Special committees like the stewardship committee and the evangelism committee may be called into being to assist him in specific areas. If there is a prayerful desire that the pastor be helped in his work, there will be no unwillingness on the part of members to serve on the council or on special committees if the request is made to do so. In larger congregations secretarial help may be provided to relieve the pastor of routine detail so that he might devote more time to his essential work.

III.C.2.a. Teachers too may in many instances be relieved of time-consuming details if some kind of secretarial help is provided for them. The board of education is there not only to supervise the work of the teachers but also to assist in it as the opportunity arises.

III.C.2.b. The help which teachers particularly need and appreciate is that which is provided by the parents of their pupils. Parents are the ones who will have to see to it that pupils are punctual and regular in attendance. They will have to make sure that their children do their homework and help them as much as is advisable. They can undergird the discipline in the school by letting their children know that they stand behind the teachers when corrective measures are called for.

III.D.1. Before, I quoted a passage from 1 Timothy in which Paul spoke of giving double honor to teaching elders, double first because of their position and secondly because of their faithfulness. Then he adds the words: "For the scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And the laborer is worthy of his reward" (5:18). Thus he indicates that honor is shown to those who have a divine call also by being concerned about their material wellbeing. This is in line with what he says in two other passages. 1 Co 9:14: "Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel." Ga. 6:6: "Let him that is taught in the Word communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things." Today we carry out these injunctions by providing those who have a divine call with a regular and, we trust, adequate salary. This arrangement may lack some of the warm personal touch that is there when individual members share what they have with their called workers, but it does have the advantage of being systematic and regular.

III.D.2.a. Ideally the income which congregations provide their called workers ought to be adequate so that there is not need for moonlighting. But ideals are not always attained. It is conceivable that a congregation whose members are all in a low income bracket is convinced of the value of a Christian day school and strives to maintain one, but in spite of strenuous efforts is not able to provide its workers with an adequate income. The called workers in turn are so much of the same spirit with the congregation that they are willing to accept a sub-standard salary, but must augment it with outside earnings in order to provide their families with the necessities of life. Or there may be cases where a called worker has unusually high expenses, medical, educational, or others, which for a time make it necessary for him to augment his income with outside part-time work.

III.D.2.b. Cases of this nature, we hope, are rare. Instances of moonlighting on the part of called workers may not be that rare, however. They can hardly be condoned if the motive is not to take care of cases of actual need, but rather a desire to maintain a higher standard of living than the salary provided by the congregation permits. Nowhere are we commanded to strive to keep up with the Jones's. On the contrary, the Lord says: "Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content" (1 Ti 6:6-8). Happiness comes not from having, but from being satisfied with what we have.

III.D.2.c. As in so many other situations, it's the motive behind it that determines the moral quality of the act. Offhand to condemn every instance of moonlighting as an evidence of unfaithfulness or a lack of dedication is not justified. Paul was moonlighting almost constantly. He reminded the Ephesian elders: "Ye yourselves know that these hands have ministered unto my necessities, and to them that were with me" (Ac 20:34). And surely no one would dare to accuse Paul of a lack of dedication or faithfulness.

III.D.3.a. I suppose that comparatively few pastors do any moonlighting. They just do not have the time. Most congregations are willing to grant that the pastor's is a full time job and feel that they must provide him with a salary large enough to meet his needs.

III.D.3.b.1. But there are some that do not consider the teacher's a full time job, especially if there are a number of teachers and at least tacitly encourage them to do some moonlighting. They advance the argument: "Look at the vacations that a teacher has."

Let's look at these vacations, especially the summer vacation. Those who have never taught do not realize how much a day of teaching will drain a teacher physically, mentally and emotionally. Nor can a teacher stretch out and take it easy once the pupils have been dismissed for the day. There are papers from today to correct and tomorrow's schedule to plan and to prepare for. Our car batteries remain fully charged if we operate our cars alot. But our physical, mental and emotional batteries are recharged by recreation and rest. Teachers need their long vacation fully to recharge their batteries.

III.D.3.b.2. But their vacations are not a complete break from classroom work. While there is day by day preparation, there also needs to be long range planning for an entire school year. Such planning is done during the summer. In this planning we might also include the school canvass in which teachers participate for it shows them for how many pupils they must plan.

III.D.3.b.3. Some people may suppose that once a teacher has taught a course, he has it made. Next year he has only to repeat what he did this year. The fact is, however, that no one knows everything that is to be known about any subject. During the school year a teacher might wish that he had the time to do some research in a given area, but he doesn't have the time. During his vacation he does have the time. Some teachers devote much time during their vacation to organized private study, others take summer courses. So a good teacher's job is a full time job.

Pastors and teachers have a divine call. When this truth is kept in mind, those who have had the privilege of acting for the Lord in issuing a call will show a loving concern and a high regard for those whom they have called. And those who have been called will rejoice in the privilege that the Lord has bestowed upon them and serve Him and His people with love, zeal and faithfulness. May the Lord help us ever to bear in mind the privilege and the obligation that are packed into this simple term: the divine call.