

The Doctrine Of The Call And Ministry

I. In The Scriptures

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[Essay prepared for the Metropolitan South Pastoral Conference
Southeastern Wisconsin District (WELS) and presented on February 1, 1994]

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INTRODUCTION

Pity Obbe Philips. After enduring shame and regret in silence for twenty-five years, he wrote a “Confession” to disclose something which, in his own words, remained “utter grief to my heart and which I will lament before my God as long as I live.”ⁱ The cause of his lament was the subject we now give attention to, namely, the call into the public ministry and the ministry that follows such a call. Obbe Philips had become convinced that he had functioned as a spiritual leader among God’s people without a call to do so.

In the 1530’s Philips became a disciple of Melchior Hofmann, the Anabaptist “Apostle of the Baltic.” Convinced that Hofmann possessed valid apostolic credentials and authority, Philips allowed himself to be ordained by him and thus to have apostolic authority conferred upon himself. With that assumed authority he carried out prophetic and ruling functions among other professing believers. He even ordained other Anabaptist leaders, including his own brother Dietrich and Menno Simons, later organizer of the Mennonite movement. When it became obvious that Melchior Hofmann was an apostate rather than an apostle of our Lord, Obbe Philips was devastated. He had believed the legitimacy of his office and authority was derived through Hofmann. So whatever validity he had seen in his own ministerial functions or in those ordained by him suddenly evaporated. In his “Confession” of 1560 he admitted, “I am still miserable of heart today that I advanced anyone to such an office while I was so shamefully and miserably deceived.”ⁱⁱ

Pity Obbe Philips. He followed a false prophet and embraced false teaching. Bible truths, including those concerning the call and ministry, became a terror rather than a joy to him. It simply shouldn’t be that way. Biblical doctrine is provided by God to serve souls and oppose Satan. As Luther once wrote, “If we emphasize the matter of the call, we can worry the devil.”ⁱⁱⁱ

With that in mind, let us proceed. We shall follow the general progression of thought as outlined in the assignment. We shall look at the doctrine of the call and the ministry as revealed in the Scriptures, reflected in the Lutheran Confessions and expressed in our synod today.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE CALL AND MINISTRY IN SCRIPTURE

Paul’s opening words to the Christians in Rome and Corinth are appropriate places to begin our study. “To all in Rome who are loved by God and *called* to be saints . . . To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and *called* to be holy” (Ro 1:7, 1 Co 1:2). In these verses the *calling* of the Romans and Corinthians has reference to their conversion to Christ. While the term may denote the extending of an invitation or an offer, the Bible usually uses the word *call* to tell us that God actually transfers sinners into his kingdom by bringing them to faith. This is totally the work of our gracious God “who has saved us and *called* us to a holy life — not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace” (2 Ti 1:9). This is, of course, none other than the call into Christ’s church, the communion of saints.

The call to saving faith is also the call into God's priesthood of believers. To all who share this vocation God says, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pe 2:9). All Christians are fully in God's family and fellowship, have no need of a mediator other than Christ, and are full-time priests of God. Christ has truly "made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father" (Rev 1:6). We bear witness to Christ's saving work, intercede for our neighbor, offer our bodies as living sacrifices, and continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise. At the heart of it all is our assignment and commission to use God's Word and Sacraments for the benefit of others and ourselves. Also known as the "ministry of the keys," this is the task of all believers as they proclaim all of God's Word among all nations. In a word, this is *the ministry* of the church.

It is, then, most fitting to speak of *the call and the ministry* in Scripture as the call to faith and into Christ's church and the ministry of the word entrusted to and shared by all believers. But when this paper was assigned or when its title was printed on the agenda, I doubt if any of us thought that was supposed to be the focus. There is another kind of call and a closely related yet somewhat different ministry also set forth in Scripture. These usually come to mind first when the words *call* and *ministry* are used.

To examine these alternate meanings of the words, let's return to Paul's opening words to the Roman and Corinthian churches. "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, *called* to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God . . . Paul *called* to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God" (Ro 1:1, 1 Co 1:1). Paul actually possessed two calls, one he had in common with all believers and another he shared with his fellow apostles. Another way of putting this is to say Paul had a call to *the ministry* of the church (as a member of Christ's church and the priesthood of all believers) and another call to *the public ministry* in the church (as an apostle within Christ's church). *Public ministry* is *representative* ministry, carried out on behalf of and for the sake of fellow believers, fellow priests. The call to serve as a public minister is, in essence, an invitation or assignment to serve the church on behalf of the church by carrying out tasks (ministry) the Lord gave to the church. The purpose of public ministry is the same as that of the priesthood of all believers: to administer the means of grace that sinners be called to sainthood and then be strengthened in the faith and equipped to serve yet more souls.

So which of Paul's calls authorized him to be a *minister* and to do *ministry*? Both of them. His call to faith was a call to do ministry in the wider sense, to serve his neighbor as an individual believer. His call to apostleship was a call to do public ministry in the presence of and for the sake of fellow saints and priests of God. A substantial degree of confusion has resulted from people using the term "ministry" without clarifying which kind of service is meant. An excellent summary of the problem is given by Professor John Brug in the most recent issue of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*.^{iv} Here we simply desire to demonstrate that the terms *call* and *ministry* are used both ways in Scripture and to mention that the *public ministry* and the call into it will be our primary focus from this point on.

Since the gospel ministry in the wide sense (entrusted to all Christians) and the public ministry (entrusted to selected, called Christians) is essentially the same, why do we have both? One answer is to say that the public ministry is purely or predominately a matter of expediency and good order in the church, an arrangement made to avoid confusion or duplication of effort in ministry. Admittedly, if all believers insisted on exercising their right to administer God's word and sacraments in church assemblies, confusion and cacophony would be the predictable result. Similarly, the church calls representatives to make sure necessary things get done. The selection

of the Seven recorded in Acts 6 was obviously a practical response to a pressing need. Love and orderliness require leadership positions and a delegation of functions in such cases. Public ministry helps to insure that everything in the church is “done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Co 14:40).

In his treatise “*To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*” Luther presented the need or rationale for a public ministry with a couple of analogies. “It is like ten brothers, all king’s sons and equal heirs, choosing one of themselves to rule the inheritance in the interests of all. In one sense, they are all kings and of equal power, and yet one of them is charged with the responsibility of ruling.”^v Luther’s second analogy was “a group of earnest Christian laymen” who are taken prisoner and set down in a desert. This group of Christians, none of whom was a pastor or priest, could select one of its number to baptize, say mass, pronounce absolution and preach the gospel. By doing this none of them are forfeiting their rights in the universal priesthood of all believers, but they are acknowledging that all of them cannot exercise the function of the public ministry at the same time. And the one selected (*called*) to serve on behalf of the others? “Such a man would be truly a priest as though he had been ordained by all the bishops and popes in the world.”^{vi}

Luther, of course, elsewhere gave more than this as the reason the church has public ministers. Simply put, more needs to be said. Just to say that the public ministry flows from the church, from the priesthood of believers in response to its needs and desires does not reflect Scripture in its fullness. Ephesians 4:11-12 clearly says it is the ascended *Christ* “who gave some to be apostles . . . prophets . . . evangelists . . . pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service (ministry) so that the body of Christ may be built up.” Similar words in 1 Corinthians 12:28 give the same basic truth: “In the church *God* has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers . . .” Offering a brief position description for Apollos and himself, Paul used the words, “servants, through whom you came to believe—as *the Lord* assigned to each his task” (1 Co 3:5). The familiar words to the Ephesian elders make the same point by announcing *the Holy Spirit* had made them overseers of the flock (Ac 20:28). Public ministry has been established by God. It may indeed reflect the will of believers and be a practical response to ministerial needs among them, but it is God’s idea first and foremost. It is not an optional idea left to the whim of the priesthood; it is a part of God’s good and gracious will for his people on earth. Public ministry is revealed in the word of God, divinely established for the sake of the word of God, and recognized as such by those entrusted with the word of God.

So is a public minister *called by God* or *called by fellow believers* to function representatively? We acknowledge the legitimacy of expressing it either way. Public ministers, as their title signifies, are servants—servants of Christ and Christ’s people. To the same people Paul wrote, “Men ought to regard us as servants of Christ” and “We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (1 Co 4:1, 2 Co 4:5). In an effort to be more precise in matters pertaining to the call, however, perhaps we do better to phrase it as the essayist at our 1891 synod convention did in the outline of his paper:

Gott selbst beruft die Prediger durch die Gemeinde

1. *Gott selbst beruft die Prediger*

2. *Gott beruft nicht mehr unmittelbar, sondern mittelbar, d.i., durch die Gemeinde*

This is precisely what we believe on the basis of God’s Word regarding the calling of all public ministers, including but not limited to preachers. God has always called and designated his servants. Prior to Christ’s ascension he usually did this *immediately* or directly, as typified by

the call of Moses (Ex 3), Isaiah (Isa 6) and the Twelve (Mk 1:16-19, 2:14, etc.). Less frequently the Lord called *mediately* through human agents, as in the calling of Elisha through Elijah (1 Ki 19:19-21). After the Lord's ascension, however, the calling of people into the public ministry was done *mediately* through the believers (with the notable exception of St. Paul). We freely admit that the shift from direct to mediate calling is nowhere declared in so many words in Scripture. It simply happened at the time of the apostolic church and the biblical record records the fact. Nothing in the subsequent history of the church had led us to think otherwise.

The calling of Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot (Ac 1) and the call of the Seven to wait on tables (Ac 6) are excellent examples of mediate calling as well as patterns of procedure that have been largely duplicated by subsequent generations of believers. Regarding these two events, it has been well said, "A careful reader will note no command, no prescription, which we are required to follow, though the same careful reader will note similarities in the procedures we use today."^{vii} Other New Testament examples of mediate calling would include the appointment (or election^{viii}) of elders among the Galatian believers (Ac 14:23), the selection of the brother by the churches to accompany the apostles carrying the offering (2 Co 8:19), and the appointment of elders among the Cretan believers (Tit 1:5). It is noteworthy that we are not told in detail **how** believers went about calling or selecting representative ministers and are certainly not commanded to call public ministers in any particular manner. What is given to us as methodology in the apostolic church is primarily *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*. Procedural flexibility and freedom is a dominant characteristic of God's calling of public ministers through the church.

The matter of freedom is purposely stated here in view of the many battles that have been waged in church history over the question, "Who precisely is to act as God's agent in the calling of public ministers?" As we know, the Roman papacy claims it makes priests through bishops it appoints, while Anglicans point us to bishops who have the stamp of apostolic succession. Some Lutherans have maintained public ministers can be appointed only by a self-propagating and self-perpetuating ministerium of public ministers while other Lutherans have insisted that a combination of church members (laity), public ministers and even civil authorities should be involved in selecting leaders among the believers. And what does the Scripture really say? Only this: God calls through *believers*, that is, through the *church*. As kings and priests who possess the ministry of the keys, believers have the right and authority to call one or more of their number to serve them representatively (publicly) in the Lord's name. The size or outward organizational form (local congregation, association of congregations, district, synod, etc.) is immaterial. All gatherings of believers are fully church and fully God's priesthood (despite the possible inclusion of hypocrites in their visible ranks). They may make the selection by themselves or delegate the task to others who then act on their behalf. Their call may be extended in more or less formal fashion. It is enough for them (and others) to know that the Lord is with two or more who gather in his name, and that they are authorized and equipped to attend to gospel ministry issues. God's active participation in their calling procedure is an article of faith, believed because of promises and declarations given in Scripture.

Another area in which the church has been granted freedom and flexibility is in determining what external forms or offices its public ministry should take. The New Testament certainly mentions a variety of offices and functions of public ministry (e.g. apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastor-teachers,^{ix} overseers, deacons, and elders). Several kinds of spiritual gifts are likewise referred to as manifestations of the equipping Spirit, gifts which could certainly be used in yet other forms of public ministry should that be the choice of any body of believers. But have certain forms of public ministry been divinely established or commanded? Professor John Schal-

ler has given the answer: “God did not *command* that there be apostles, but he *made* apostles, and thereby that special ministry was established. We can also consider it as settled that nowhere in the New Testament can a definite *command* be cited that Christians should establish a *particular form* of the public ministry in their midst.”^x Through the centuries the visible church has developed the practice of calling public ministers of the gospel to serve in offices deemed necessary under whatever circumstances or conditions prevailed at a given time. Whenever a group of believers recognizes its need or desire for a representative servant of the gospel in its midst, it may issue a call to meet the need or fulfill the desire.

Yet another area in which the calling group of Christians has a high degree of flexibility is that of determining the *duration* of a given call. May a call be *temporary* or must it be *permanent*? What is meant by temporary and permanent? Much has been written on this subject by Lutherans on American soil. By *permanent* we refer to a call to an assigned task that is not arbitrarily limited in time. The duration of the public minister’s service is expressly left in the Lord’s hands. A temporary call does not simply mean one limited in time, but one whose time limit is set arbitrarily. In the previous century, for example, it was a relatively common practice to call pastors to serve for a specified time—so the congregation could easily be rid of him if not fully pleased with his person or work. The practice in part stemmed from nightmare experiences of parishes that were forced to endure ill-equipped, inept or domineering pastors.^{xi} In time plenty of papers, sermons and articles attacked the conduct as abusive, unworthy and essentially illegitimate. At the heart of the issue, of course, is the attitude or motivation that lies behind limiting the duration of a call. Believers remain perfectly free to issue temporary calls. They should have recourse when there are justifiable complaints about a called worker. But they are not to be arbitrary. Since the Lord is actively involved in the whole matter, a call is not to be equated with an employment contract nor a called worker with a hireling. As always, Christian freedom is coupled with responsibility.

There are other examples that demonstrate the church’s freedom in extending calls is not absolute. The Scriptures clearly address the issue of *qualifications* that potential public ministers are to possess. Those who serve publicly are to be exemplary. When the early church called Matthias and the Seven, they required that candidates for the offices be subjected to certain qualifications (Ac 1:21-22, 6:3). Paul’s words in his pastoral epistles contain straightforward words about what is expected of potential overseers, deacons and elders (1 Ti 3:1-13, Tit 2:5-9). It has been observed that characteristics required of such public ministers parallel those expected in the life of every believer. To insist on soundness of doctrine, aptness to teach, blamelessness of lifestyle and a good reputation among those outside the church is the duty of those who call public ministers. They may, and historically often have, delegated the training and supervision of public ministers to other groups (synodical training institutions, pastoral bishops and ecclesiastical rulers). Ultimately the calling group remains responsible to see that adequate training and accurate appraisals of candidates are being provided.

If a public minister lacks the necessary qualifications the matter of *terminating* a call must be faced. The termination of a call when the need for services has genuinely ceased, when a call to a different field of labor is accepted, or upon the death or retirement of the called worker is always anticipated. Much less anticipated yet of equal necessity is the calling group’s responsibility to remove any public minister from office for chronic unfaithfulness and neglect of duty, persistent false doctrine, inability to teach, loss of blamelessness, and the like. The ministry of the gospel, ministry to souls, is always the primary issue. That is why Scripture sets standards and why the church is to maintain them.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE CALL AND MINISTRY IN THE CONFESSIONS

In the Lutheran Confessions, the doctrine of ministry is discussed at the following places: The Augsburg Confession, Articles V, XIV and XXVIII; The Apology, Articles XIII, XIV and XXVIII; The Smalcald Articles, Article IV in Part II and Articles IX and X in Part III; and generally throughout the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope. Those portions dealing most pointedly with the call itself would be Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession and Article X of Part III of the Smalcald Articles. This listing does not, of course, include incidental references that may be found elsewhere in the Book of Concord. Overall, we will not find thorough, extensive treatments of the subject here. “There is surprising little about the office of the ministry in the Confessions, and where they do treat of it, the discussion of the subject is almost always incidental to the main theme.”^{xii}

The emphasis on the *purpose of ministry* is unmistakable in the confessions. After stating that we are “freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith,” the connection to ministry is made: “That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted.”^{xiii} The institution of gospel ministry in the wide sense (which we believe to be the subject of AC V) and then also in the sense of public ministry has this continuing purpose: to serve souls. “For through the Word and Sacraments the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God.”^{xiv} “The ministry of the Word has God’s command and glorious promises.”^{xv}

This focus on ministry as *service* is frequently stated in concrete terms for pastors and priests, as well as bishops and rulers, to note. It was the confessors’ conviction that public ministers best “maintain and defend their office not by insisting on their prerogatives as officeholders, but simply by practicing and exercising their office with genuine care for and willing service to their people.”^{xvi} How does one care for and serve best? With and through the Word of God.

And what power or authority do public ministers have and exercise? The power of the Word. The source of power for public ministers is the same as for the priesthood of all believers, namely the power of the Keys. “The authority of the ministry depends on the Word of God”^{xvii} This is the “power or commandment of God to preach the Gospel, to remit and retain sins, and to administer Sacraments,”^{xviii} that is, to serve souls, not to tyrannize them with priestcraft. Power struggles of clergy against clergy or clergy against the priesthood of all believers are repudiated. “Paul makes ministers equal, and teaches that the Church is above the ministers.”^{xix}

Finally, let us acknowledge the emphasis of the Confessions regarding the *necessity of a call* for public ministers to serve. AC XIV gives the familiar message, “Of Ecclesiastical order they [our churches] teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called.”^{xx} While every Christian is a priest before God and possesses the right—even the command—to teach God’s Word, to do so publicly on behalf of fellow priests requires their invitation and authorization.

It has been observed that the confessional statement is not accompanied by a biblical reference, and we freely admit that Scripture does not provide explicit statements mandating a formal call to precede such ministry. Romans 10:15 is sometimes cited: “How can they preach unless they are sent?” The reference to the Levitical high priest to which Christ’s eternal priesthood is compared is also mentioned: “No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was” (Heb 5:4). Close examinations of these passages, however, fail to establish the principle. Ethics and common courtesy obviously play a part in this, for how could any believer presume to teach or exercise authority in the presence of or on behalf of other believers unless there be a recognized right or authorization to do so? The plain practicality of the princi-

ple is also apparent as expressed by Luther while commenting on Psalm 82:4: “For a great work a divine call is necessary and not merely one’s own devotion or one’s own prompting. Even those who are certain that God called them will find it hard to do and accomplish what is worthwhile, though God is with them and is granting his blessing; what, then, can those senseless fools do who undertake something without a call but seek their own honor and praise?”^{xxi}

It should also be mentioned that a valid call might well be a very informal agreement ratified by nothing more than a tacit acceptance on the part of the believers who are being served. Luther himself wrote about how Apollos came to Ephesus “without call or ordination” and taught fervently to refute the unbelieving Jews. Afterward, notes the Reformer, he was “even made an apostle without the formality of ordination.”^{xxii} Luther makes similar comments regarding Stephen and Philip who were ordained to serve tables, proved themselves useful in the use of the Word and whose ministries were recognized as valid by the members of the church.

The emphasis on the necessity of a call for representative ministry, finally, underscores the Lutheran emphasis on the authority of the Word and of the Lord who provides that Word for his people. The Word is given to the entire church and should not be wrested from it. Neither the tyranny of Roman hierarchy nor Anabaptist enthusiasm rightfully bypasses the right of Christians to call their public ministers. Furthermore, the Lord may be trusted to call workers when and where they belong. When tempted simply to jump in and do ministry in a given situation, “I should commit the matter to God who in his own time will find the opportunity to call ministers lawfully to give the Word. For He is the Lord of the harvest who will send laborers into his harvest; our task is to pray.”^{xxiii}

THE DOCTRINE OF THE CALL AND MINISTRY IN THE WELS MINISTRY TODAY

The more one reads articles and essays written in the WELS or LCMS during the past 140 years, the more one may appreciate how much we have matured in matters pertaining to the call and the ministry. Whatever weaknesses we now perceive, especially in practical applications of the doctrinal principles, often appear minor compared to what our forefathers did or endured.

Earlier we referred to “temporary” calls; those limited in time arbitrarily. In the 1800’s such a way of doing things was relatively common, as congregations strove to protect themselves from inept or abrasive pastors and teachers assigned to them by synodical or clergy consistories. But long after an ample supply of qualified and suitable candidates for public ministry was available for calling and congregations were active in the calling procedures, congregations still tended to call pastors for specified time periods, almost like hiring them for a contract period. In a 1938 article Professor August Zich lamented this practice, urged that such calls be neither extended nor accepted, and emphasized that “God calls the pastor into the flock, and God will see to it in His time and in His way that this relation of pastor and his flock is again dissolved.”^{xxiv} With the reminder that calls of limited duration are sometimes perfectly suitable (e.g. when known needs are limited in duration), we acknowledge with gratitude that within our circles the permanency of the call is consistently left in the Lord’s hands.

Another practice that remains quite modern and acceptable in many church bodies beyond our own was also cited by Professor Zich. “Another abuse that has crept into our churches, due to ignorance of the fact that it is God who calls his ministers, is the sad custom of sermon tasting by either the whole congregation or some committee, self-constituted or sent out by the congregation.”^{xxv} Solicitation to fill a vacancy, moreover, can be a two-way street. Past lists of abuses usually included that of public ministers “applying” for vacant positions, offering themselves for “less salary than the present incumbents,” and basically tending to “cheapen (not in dollars and cents) the doctrine of the divinity of the call.”^{xxvi}

A case can be made that this kind of behavior does not necessarily abolish the divinity of the call in every case, especially if this is the manner that a given body of believers has chosen to go about maintaining a public ministry in its midst. We also admit that the Lord is perfectly able to use those involved in what we deem *irregular* or inappropriate calling procedures for his good purposes. In fact, we trust he will. Calls that may be labeled *irregular* or *illegitimate* are always subject to how God will permit, prevent, limit or use them. Our point here is simply that our church body seems to have “grown up” in certain ways pertaining to the call of public ministers. The value of continual instruction and ongoing self-examination remains real. But as we appraise the “doctrine of the call and ministry in the WELS today,” let us not fail to express thanks for the relative stability in doctrine and practice that we currently enjoy.

Another way of examining the doctrine of the call and ministry in our circles is to acknowledge the growing amount of discussion and debate that is going on in and around our synod on such subjects. Those of you who subscribe to and have had the opportunity to read the most recent issue of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* are fully aware of these things. “The doctrine of church and ministry is without doubt one of the hottest topics in Lutheranism today.”^{xxvii} Because this is so, a series of exegetical, doctrinal and practical articles dealing with ministry will be presented in upcoming issues of the periodical. Professor Brug identified nine major issues currently being debated within and /or outside the WELS. Since an adequate discussion of any one of these points would require a good-sized essay or article, an overview paper like this one cannot and will not pretend to cover the material. But a couple of observations and encouragements regarding this may be in place.

First of all, debate or discussion of ministry issues should not surprise us. It is as Lutheran as Gottlieb Christoph Adolf von Harless. While reading material in preparation for this essay I came across information about this nineteenth century professor and court preacher, described in the *Lutheran Cyclopedia* as a “conservative Lutheran theologian” who “exerted great influence for sound Lutheranism.” In the mid nineteenth century Harless observed that “fighting over issues of church and ministry knows no end among Lutherans.” But did that stop him from entering the fray? Not for a moment. He wrote and published major works on the subject in 1853 and 1862. Now why do Lutherans do these things? Surely a major reason is that we take very seriously what we are (church) and what we are to do (ministry) as God’s people. Since we also hold to the biblical truth that God works among us and others through the means of grace, and since ministry is serving people with those means, we will always be prepared to study, learn, present, discuss, defend, clarify and dwell on such issues whenever it will serve souls. The WELS Ministry Symposium held in December 1992 and the 839 page WELS Ministry Compendium prepared in conjunction with it are further testimonies to our continuing interest in the subject. Another similar symposium is expected to be held near the end of this current year. The importance of the subject matter almost guarantees ongoing interest.

Second, while our ability to end debate and convince all opponents is probably just as limited as that of the authors of the Confessions, we still do well to maintain sharp focus on key issues that they championed in their day. I am thinking especially of two: the Center of ministry, namely, Christ; and the heart of ministry, namely service. Christ and his saving work for mankind is the central message of ministry, the core content of all that is preached and taught by and for the benefit of God’s people. The gospel of Christ is what brings people into the church, equips them to serve as church and empowers them to reach out to draw others into church. And any proper understanding of church and ministry can only occur when people focus on Christ who established both and calls people into them. Then there is the heart, the essence, of ministry:

service. Of course. Yet all too often ministry debates in history have been little more than maneuvering to gain ecclesiastical power and control. To the degree that we grasp the truth that God's Word is the *only* power in the church and that it is provided to serve and save, to that degree we comprehend ministry. The best question we can ask is how we may best preach and teach the word of God and thus best serve God and mankind.

Later today this conference is scheduled to focus on the subject of "ongoing rejuvenation of the parish pastor." This implies that there are difficulties associated with your calling. The implication is correct. The need for public ministers in general and parish pastors in particular to find encouragement has received a lot of press lately. The tension and frustration level among called workers is high. While reasons cited for this will vary and are occasionally debated, all of them will invariably and accurately fall into two broad categories: those we bring upon ourselves and those that are thrust upon us. The doctrine of the call and ministry has much to say about both kinds.

The biblical pattern will alert us to the need for *self-examination* before we address grievances that come to us from others. Let us do that. How may we be falling prey to our own sinful desires? Martin Luther once made the observation that called workers are especially subject to the vices of *vanity and greed*. He also commented that this should come as no surprise at all because of the very nature of the office to which we are called. The office of preaching has been instituted to seek only God's glory (not our own) and the welfare of our neighbor (not personal benefit). The predictable result of all this is the fierce temptation to vanity and self-glory as well as to "belly service" and covetousness.^{xxviii} By returning to the nature of our call and of the ministry entrusted to us, we can not only anticipate the devil's schemes, but apply the antidote of truth. We, frail human beings and fully sinful by nature, are privileged to do the Lord's work. There is no shortage of angels, archangels, cherubim or seraphim whose qualifications and personal characteristics seem to surpass ours in every way. Nor is there a lack of people who likewise appear to be more generously endowed with natural attributes and spiritual gifts. But the call to serve God and God's people with God's word and sacraments has been extended to us. We are now talking pure grace, high honor, grand privilege—and suitable rebuttal to satanic whisperings about vanity, greed and all other related vices (and their name is Legion). To each of us is given the task of daily self-appraisal under God, daily contrition and repentance, and daily rising in thankful love to carry out our calling. Pondering what our call is—and *that* our call is—helps to that end.

Then there are burdens and causes of tension that come to us from others. Many times people add to existing frustrations unintentionally and, in fact, when they are unaware of what they are doing. Several examples could easily be listed, but here we limit ourselves to burdens stemming from two kinds of people: those who *misunderstand* what the primary purpose of ministry is and those who *underestimate* the importance of what ministry does.

One of the most prevalent misunderstandings about ministry seems to be in the way some people define "successful" ministry or ministry as it "should" be. Perhaps the most frequently used definition of a successful ministry is one that "meets the religious needs of the people." That is an excellent definition in one way, for a body of believers normally calls public servants to do just that. The problem, however, seems to center in the varying definitions of "needs." If *real* spiritual needs are referred to, those will be met by the faithful, competent use and application of the means of grace. This performance in ministry is successful to God because it is what he calls his ministers to do. Unfortunately, "meeting people's needs" may have more to do with what are now called "perceived needs," which are desires but not necessarily needs. To be suc-

cessful by this criterion a minister has to speak and serve to please people first and the Lord secondarily or incidentally, if at all. The potential tension between the two is tremendous. But it is not new. Martin Luther is one who gave eloquent expression to the issue:

It is a great hindrance to a preacher if he looks around and worries about what people like or do not like to hear, or what might make him unpopular or bring harm or danger upon him. As he stands high on a mountain in a public place and looks around freely, so he should also speak freely and fear no one, though he sees many kinds of people and faces. He should not hold a leaf in front of his mouth. He should look at neither the pleasure nor the anger of lords and squires, neither money nor riches, neither popularity nor power, neither disgrace nor poverty nor harm. *He should think of nothing except that he is speaking what his office demands—his very reason for standing there.*

For Christ did not establish and institute the ministry of proclamation to provide us with money, property, popularity, honor or friendship, nor to let us seek our own advantage through it; but to have us publish the truth freely and openly, rebuke evil, and announce what pertains to the advantage, health, and salvation of souls.^{xxix}

Hopefully we all see the connection between our call and our conduct. Wilhelm Maurer has stated the point well: “To fear no one and to set forth the truth freely and openly is not a test of the pastor’s courage; it is a matter of office and command. Those who preach should not wear out and let themselves be chased into a corner, nor should they become impatient and creep away into the wilderness.”^{xxx}

The statement has been made that the frustration level on this account has intensified because now many *within the church* have false or inadequate expectations of the public ministers. Now even those who should know better are connecting standards of success to numbers like membership and attendance tallies or financial figures. Bigger is assumed to be better and telling people what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear would best satisfy such expectations. This may or may not be fully accurate but, if so, it would hardly be a new phenomenon. What is true and will remain so is the constancy of our call from the Lord and his definition of our ministry. “Men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as though entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (1 Co 4:1-2).

Finally, aside from those who may misunderstand the ministry, others tend to frustrate us. These willfully or thoughtlessly *underestimate the importance* of the ministry. Is our work taken lightly, our purposes reckoned of little value? Absolutely. Yet we know others before us were like men whom God “put at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena.” Ministers mighty in words and deed were long ago made “a spectacle to the whole universe,” “fools for Christ,” “the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.” All so they could serve and meet people’s needs as the Lord called them to do. The truth remains truth, and our dear God’s definitions and purposes for the call and ministry remain just that. So do his gracious promises for his people. Let us conclude with that reminder:

We who serve the most ungrateful world have the promise and hope of a heavenly kingdom, and so great indeed will be the compensation and remuneration for this wretchedness of ours that we will vigorously censure ourselves for ever letting a little tear or a single groan fall from us on account of this contempt and ingratitude. “Why have we not suffered heavier burdens?” we shall say. “I would never have believed that there would be such great glory in eternal life; otherwise I would not have been afraid even to endure much more.”^{xxxi}

ENDNOTES

- 1 Obbe Philips, "A Confession," *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, p. 224.
- 2 Ibid., p. 223.
- 3 LW 40:385
- 4 "Current Debate Concerning the Doctrine of the Ministry," WLQ, Winter, 1994, pp. 30-33.
- 5 LW 44:128
- 6 LW 44:129
- 7 Richard Lauersdorf, "The Doctrine of the Call, with Special Reference to the Question of Its Permanence Under Changed Circumstances," WLQ, Fall, 1989, p. 270.
- 8 The Greek verb used here, χειροτονειν, pictures selection by a show of hands and may indicate the elders were "appointed" by election among the people. Hence the NIV footnotes.
- 9 The hyphenated form is simply a reminder of the single article for both words in Ephesians 4:11, likely indicating one office that combined two kinds of functions.
- 10 "The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry," WLQ (January, 1981), p. 47.
- 11 In early America, clergy boards frequently claimed and exercised the right of supervising or governing the placement or transfer of called workers. When congregations acted on their own they were often censured, accused of disregarding synodical advice, or going against rules of love and orderliness.
- 12 "The Doctrine of the Ministry in the Confessions," *The Lutheran Quarterly*, 1963, p. 118.
- 13 AC, IV and V, *Triglot*, p. 45.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Apology, XIII, *Triglot*, p. 311.
- 16 Robert Kolb, "The Doctrine of Ministry in Martin Luther and the Lutheran Confessions," *Called and Ordained*, p. 52.
- 17 Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, 10, *Triglot*, p. 507.
- 18 AC, XXVIII, *Triglot*, p. 85.
- 19 Treatise on the power and Primacy of the Pope, 11, *Triglot*, p. 507.
- 20 *Triglot*, p. 49.
- 21 Quoted by Erwin Scharf, "The Call to the Public Use of the Keys," *Our Great Heritage*, Vol. III, p. 502.
- 22 LW 40:37-38
- 23 LW 26:18
- 24 "The Doctrine of the Divine Call With Reference To Present Day Abuses," WLQ [TQ], October, 1938, p. 240.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 *Concordia Theological Monthly*, January, 1941, p. 57. Similar examples are also provided by August Zich, op.cit., pp. 241-242. One suspects that this kind of behavior was more prevalent during the Depression era.
- 27 John Brug, "Current Debate Concerning the Doctrine of the Ministry," WLQ, Winter, 1994, p. 28.
- 28 Luther's words, from a sermon on 2 Co 11:19ff., are referred to and quoted in part by Irwin J. Habeck, "Luther's Attitude Toward the Public Ministry," *Luther Lives*, p. 39.

- 29 Ibid., p. 39-40. Emphasis added.
 30 Quoted by Robert Kolb, op.cit., pp. 61-62.
 31 Martin Luther, quoted by Irwin J. Habeck, op. cit., p. 41.

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- ⁱObbe Philips, "A Confession," *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, p. 224.
ⁱⁱibid., p. 223.
ⁱⁱⁱLW 40:385
^{iv}"Current Debate Concerning the Doctrine of the Ministry," WLQ, Winter, 1994, pp. 30-33.
^vLW 44:128
^{vi}LW 44:129
^{vii}Richard Lauersdorf, "The Doctrine of the Call, with Special Reference to the Question of Its Permanence Under Changed Circumstances," WLQ, Fall, 1989, p. 270.
^{viii}The Greek verb used here, χειροτονειν, pictures selection by a show of hands and may indicate the elders were "appointed" by election among the people. Hence the NIV footnotes.
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^x"The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry," WLQ (January, 1981), p. 47.
^{xi}In early America clergy boards frequently claimed and exercised the right of supervising or governing the placement or transfer of called workers. When congregations acted on their own they were often censured, accused of disregarding synodical advice, or going against rules of love and orderliness.
^{xiii}"The Doctrine of the Ministry in the Confessions," *The Lutheran Quarterly*, 1963, p. 118.

^{xiii}AC, IV and V, Triglot, p. 45.

^{xiv}Ibid.

^{xv}Apology, XIII, Triglot, p. 311.

^{xvi}Robert Kolb, "The Doctrine of Ministry in Martin Luther and the Lutheran Confessions," Called and Ordained, p. 52.

^{xvii}Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, 10, Triglot, p. 507.

^{xviii}AC, XXVIII, Triglot, p. 85.

^{xix}Treatise on the power and Primacy of the Pope, 11, Triglot, p. 507.

^{xx}Triglot, p. 49.

^{xxi}Quoted by Erwin Scharf, "The Call to the Public Use of the Keys," Our Great Heritage, Vol. III, p. 502.

^{xxii}LW 40:37-38

^{xxiii}LW 26:18

^{xxiv}"The Doctrine of the Divine Call With Reference To Present Day Abuses," WLQ [TQ], October, 1938, p. 240.

^{xxv}Ibid.

^{xxvi}Concordia Theological Monthly, January, 1941, p. 57. Similar examples are also provided by August Zich, op.cit., pp. 241-242. One suspects that this kind of behavior was more prevalent during the Depression era.

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^{xxix}Ibid., p. 39-40. Emphasis added.

^{xxx}Quoted by Robert Kolb, op.cit., pp. 61-62.

^{xxxi}Martin Luther, quoted by Irwin J. Habeck, op. Cit., p. 41.