

What is a call?: or, When is a call a call, and who makes it such?

By Alfred H. Maaske

In all our textbooks on dogmatics and other literature of a confessional nature, our Wisconsin Synod as well as our entire Synodical Conference has always stated that we, in conformity with our Lutheran Confessions, regard ordination as being a solemn public confirmation of the call. Therefore, even though the rite of ordination, in itself, is an adiaphoron, yet it is just as important that this rite be retained, as it is important that marriage ceremonies continue to be performed. In regard to marriage, it is the consensus that makes the marriage; in regard to the ministry, it is the call that makes the minister; but the respective ceremonies publicly acknowledge this.

The question now arises, however, “What is a call?” or “When is a call a call, and who makes it such?”

The Legitimate Call

In the days when our Lutheran confessions were formulated and for at least three and one half centuries thereafter, a legitimate call was always understood on this wise:

- 1) The man considered for service in the church, was trained, if necessary, by competent authorities of the whole church.
- 2) He was then examined by competent authorities of the whole church, and declared fit for service in the church. At the same time, the man himself declared his intention to remain loyal to the Lutheran Confessions.
- 3) Hereupon he was ordained in some assembly representing the whole church and by competent and authorized representatives of the whole church.
- 4) He was then given his specific charge or appointment, and installed into it by competent authorities of the whole church. If this happened to be a local congregation (Pfarramt), he was usually placed there by the consistories. Local congregations did not issue “calls” in the manner in which we now do in America.

Thus the call, in reality, was consummated by the whole church, and his eventual placement or appointment was only a minor act of that call. In fact placements and appointments as well as transfers from one specific field of labor to another, were regarded as being rather a result of the actual call, than an essential part thereof. Certainly they were never regarded as being exclusively the only essential feature of the call. The call was considered as being already virtually complete before the specific appointments. That specific appointments would follow was taken as a matter of fact. For that reason also, ordination often took place prior to a man’s specific appointment, and never was repeated, no matter how many times he was transferred thereafter.

A few statements from early Lutheran Theologians will show that the call was understood thus:

Johann Gerhard, 1582-1637; “*Erztheologe*,” “der unbestritten groeste Vertreter der aelteren Lutherischen Dogmatik.” “Private individuals may exercise the duties of a pastor in a

congregation which has no legitimate pastor.” “...if no legitimate servant of the church is available.” (See Walther’s *Kirche and Amt* Ed. 1852, P. 380)

Chemnitz, 1522-1586: “The manner in which one is legitimately called as a servant of the church, is also the manner in which one is deposed, or transferred from one congregation to another... And, as in the case of calling, so also in the case of deposition, is the whole church concerned therewith, in due order (in einer gewissen Ordnung).” PP 412-413, K. u.A.

F. Balduin (- 1626, Wittenberg) : “It is our opinion that ordination concerns the whole church, for she (the whole church) calls and ordains servants (of the church), which right she exercises through the ‘ministerium.’ Ordination is not an act of the ministerium, but of the whole church, and can be performed even by a corrupt ministerium.” pp 101-102, K. u. A. Heshusius, 1527-1588: “In cases of dire necessity, where it is impossible to obtain legitimately called servants of the Word, there is no doubt that every individual Christian has the power (Macht habe), and is empowered by the Word of God in accordance with the principle of Christian love, to exercise the ministry, including the proclaiming of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. When we speak here of a case of dire necessity, we mean this: when it is impossible to obtain legitimate (rechtschaffene) and true servants of the church ... what an Christian may do in such a case, as when a number of Christians are in a place where there is no appointed shepherd (bestellter Seelsorger) anywhere availableI do not say that two or three Christians have the right to sever their connections with the true church, and to despise the appointed and legitimate pastors, and to create factions (Rotten anrichten), but in cases of dire necessity, , when there are either no pastors available, or when those who are available disseminate false doctrine and must be avoided.” pp 371-373, K.u.A. Luther: “And the same insignificant bishop or pastor, St. Augustine consecrated and ordained many pastors and bishops which were sought for and called by other cities, in his own little congregation (there being as yet no consecrating or ruling bishops ...all being at that time simple pastors), just as we may ordain and send pastors out of our congregation in Wittenberg to other cities which desire them and have none of their own.” p 331, K.u.A. It is evident, therefore, that when the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church state that ordination is a confirmation of the call, they refer to the call of the church at large, and not to the specific placements and appointments.

American Lutheran concept of the call (Synodical Conference)

Nevertheless, our synods continued to function very much in the same manner as the Lutheran Churches-at-large in Germany had done ever since the days of Luther. They sought to interest gifted young men to study for the ministry. After being trained, these men were examined and, being found fit for the ministry, were then placed into specific fields of labor. Candidates were even assigned to local congregations at the discretion of assignment committees. After thus placing ministers into their first specific charge, the synods, through their representatives, still claimed and usually exercised the right of supervising and virtually governing transfers from one specific field of labor to another. Usually only such men were transferred from one congregation to another whose name appeared on synodical lists. In a few exceptional cases, local congregations “called” men of their own choosing, although they usually incurred some measure of censure and disrespect for having disregarded synodical advice and for having acted contrary to the laws of love and order. Yet, even in such cases, synods did not

institute disciplinary action against the congregations, since the men whom they chose usually were men belonging to the synod, whose gifts and fitness were known. However, if congregations arbitrarily called someone who was unorthodox or otherwise unfit, our synods did not tolerate such a situation. The synods further claimed and exercised the right to depose pastors who became unfit.

Also in regard to ordination, the practice was much the same as it had been. Men were ordained upon their graduation from the seminary or following a successful colloquy. In a great number of cases they were ordained in their home congregation, although the pressure of those who regarded that as being wrong, often caused many to be ordained in their first local congregation. Moreover, the ordination could not be performed except upon authorization of the proper synodical officials. In some cases, candidates were ordained en masse at seminary graduation ceremonies.

All this seems to indicate that there was an underlying instinct born of the scriptures and of the Holy Spirit that the European Lutheran concept of the Church and of the ministry and of the call and of ordination was essentially correct. And it was. The only trouble in Europe was that the church in Europe had become hopelessly entangled in the meshes of the State, and for that reason could not function as it should. Having forfeited its rights to the state, the church became hamstrung by the state. The practice of our Synodical Conference, therefore, was mainly correct, although its theoretical stand in regard to the above-mentioned doctrines was not, and this inconsistency became the source of many of our troubles.

In spite of the fact that our practice was correct in most instances, there were many who held that the local congregation alone has the right to issue a call, that only after receiving such a call may a man be ordained, and that the ordination may take place only in the congregation which first gives him such a call. They were then also forced to explain ordination on this wise, that ordination is in reality nothing more than the first installation, without making any attempt to explain why the first installation should be any different from the others.

This confusion regarding the call also resulted in other absurd inconsistencies. For example, men who entered the service of the Church as professors or missionaries could not be ordained. Men who had so-called "temporary calls" also could not be ordained, even though they had just as much of a permanent call from the church-at-large as other men who were ordained. Unordained men were often said to be ineligible to synodical offices, and in order to make them eligible, they were given calls as assistant pastors to local congregations so that they might be ordained. Another example; men who ought to have been transferred to another congregation were often conscience-bound to wait until some local congregation called them, and oftentimes conscientious men who minded their own business in their own congregation, had to wait a lifetime since they were not known in other congregations. They were told to wait until the Lord called them, but since the Lord no longer calls immediately but rather mediately through men, and since the men who were responsible often failed to assume responsibility, such pastors who needed a change, were left to languish where they were. Others made it their business to become known and engineered calls for themselves. In general, I believe it will be conceded that the matter of calls and ordination have caused much ill-will and confusion among us, which could

have been avoided, had our stand in such matters been more in keeping with the spirit of Scripture.

For it is a legalistic view, entirely contrary to Scriptures to teach and believe that a local congregation alone is a true church with the sole right to call. It is further contrary to Scriptures to teach and believe that a call from a local congregation alone makes the minister and gives him the right to be ordained a minister.

A visible church is a church not because of the manner in which it is organized, but because it is a group of people having a common confession of faith. That makes a synod a church in the same manner as it makes a local congregation a church. The law of brotherhood and love confers upon any body united by a common confession the authority to function as a church in every respect, regardless of legalistic pronouncements to the contrary.

And what constitutes a call according to Scriptures? I know of no iron-clad Scriptural restrictions giving any definite organized body the sole right to call. On the contrary, when any group of Christians united by a common confession, recognizes a man as being gifted of God and fit for the ministry of the Word, and by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, lets that man know in one way or another that his services are desired, and he lets it be known that he is willing to render such services, thus creating a sort of unwritten contract, that is a call. That is what a synod does when it finds, trains and recommends men for the ministry; and in order to make the unwritten contract binding, the ordination ceremony publicly confirms the whole church's call. The consensus is publicly confirmed by the ceremony.

This I believe the correct Lutheran understanding of ordination and the Scripturally sound use thereof.

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