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of the
CALL**

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THE NEW TESTAMENT DOCTRINE OF THE CALL

Scriptural teaching on "the office of the public ministry," which according to the nomenclature employed within The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is the same as "the pastoral office,"¹ has been regarded as a matter of theological importance and has been the subject of continuing interest in Lutheranism since the time of the Reformation. Along with the doctrine of the church, it was early a principal concern of the founding fathers of our own Synod in America, and it engages the attention of people and pastors in our church body today. Much has been written on the subject of the pastoral office by the theologians of our church.

Within confessional Lutheranism it has been traditional since the Reformation period to speak of the invitation members of a congregation extend to a man they wish to have become their pastor as a "call" (noun) or a "divine call" (to indicate God's involvement in the calling process) and to refer to the one summoned as the pastor who has been "called" (verb). The pastor is also described as a "called" (adjective) minister of Christ and of the congregation. Lutherans in our day employ this "call vocabulary" when discussing the Scriptural doctrine of the public ministry.

The New Testament--and time limitation for this presentation will permit the present brief exegetical study to investigate information provided chiefly by the New Testament--uses the words of the kaleo-family, the noun kleesis ("call"), the verb kaleo ("to call"), the verbal adjective kleetos ("called"), and other kaleo-base vocables, but with different explicit application than in our Lutheran usage. The present paper seeks to remind us of that and then to offer a few thoughts relating to this fact.

Hopefully some useful theological discussion will ensue.

When the New Testament uses words of the kaleo-family, the reference most frequently is to a step God follows in the process of His saving an individual, namely, when He "calls" a person out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9). The call or invitation to believe in the Lord Jesus is presented in the gospel, and the Holy Spirit works faith in a sinner's heart so that he trusts in Christ as his Savior. Thus Paul writes, for example, in 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14: "We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren . . . because God . . . called [ekalesen] you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."² In 2 Timothy 1:8-9 he says: "God . . . has saved us and called us with a holy calling [kalesantos kleesei hagia] . . . according to His own purpose and grace." Believers are designated as "the called" (hoi kekleemenoi), as in Hebrews 9:15: "He [Christ] is the Mediator of the new covenant . . . that those who are called [hoi kekleemenoi] may receive the promise of the eternal life."³

Interestingly, when "the called" are mentioned in the epistles of the New Testament, the effective, saving call is always referred to; that is, the call which the Holy Spirit enables the person called to accept in faith. In the gospels, the call may be either accepted or rejected by those called, as, for example, in account of the parable of the marriage of the king's son, Matthew 22:1-14; the last verse of the pericope summarizes: "For many are called [kleetoi], but few are chosen [eklekttoi]." It may be observed in passing that, when the apostle Paul, serving as God's spokesman, delivers the call in the imperative, as he does, for example, in addressing the Philippian jailor with the directive "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31), this is not an invitation to synergistic

cooperation on the jailor's part. It is no more that, than there is an invitation to synergistic cooperation on the part of dead Lazarus when Jesus cried out to him "Lazarus, come forth!" (John 11:43). The point in both cases is that divine, life-giving power was present in the very words of either imperatival statement--power to create faith in one spiritually dead in the first instance, and power to raise from death one who had been physically dead in the other--so that, the Word communicating this power to the jailor and Lazarus, the required response by either man could be rendered.

One unusual use of kleesis is found in 1 Corinthians 7:20, which reads: hekastos en tee kleesei hee ekleethee, en tautee menetoo, "Let each one remain in the same calling [kleesei] in which he was called [ekleethee]." Here the kleesis signifies the condition or station in life in which the saving call finds one, whether circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free; the believer is to accept this condition, says Paul, as apportioned to him by God, and continue on with his earthly living.

Only a few New Testament passages use a word of the kaleo-family as specifically indicative of a divine invitation, or call, to render a certain kind of special service in the Kingdom. A summons to discipleship is issued by Jesus to James and John, whom He sees mending their nets on the shore of the Sea of Galilee; according to the record of Mark 1:20, "Immediately He [Jesus] called [ekalesen] them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went after Him." Matthew carries a similar report in 4:21. Paul refers to himself as a "called apostle," kleetos apostolos, in Romans 1:1 and 1 Corinthians 1:1. In Hebrews 5:4 the writer speaks of no man's taking upon himself the office and the honor of the high priesthood in Israel "but he who is called by God [kaloumenos hupo

tou theou], just as Aaron was," and then applies this to Christ, saying:
"So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but it was He who said to Him: 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.'"⁴

It will be seen that all of the above kaleo-passages speak of an immediate divine call, a summons to service and/or office coming directly from God to selected persons, disciples (to become apostles) and Christ, without the assistance of human intermediaries. The same is true of Acts 16:10, where, after Paul had seen a night vision in Troas, it is reported: "immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called [proskleetai] us to preach the gospel to them," the Macedonians. This immediate divine call, we may note, was to a specifically indicated missionary field.

In the last of this kaleo-group of passages, however, human intermediaries are said to be involved in the divine call transmission process. We read in Acts 13:2-3: "As they [the members of the church at Antioch] ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, 'Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called [proskleemai] them.' Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away." This is noteworthy in the light of the future apostolic and church practice in the matter of providing pastors for Christian congregations where the Lord did not directly involve Himself in the appointing procedure as He did at Antioch. We observe also, and again, that apostle and assistant were called by God to carry out a specific missionary assignment.

The apostles labored in the church as the result of their receiving an immediate divine call to the apostleship,⁵ as well as in response to particular divine "calls" to specified missionary work. How did God supply

first century Christian congregations with pastors who were not recipients of an immediate call? In many cases the Lord used the apostles as His instrumentalities, according to New Testament report. We know, for example, that Paul and his associates assisted congregations he founded with the selection and invitation of certain qualified individuals to serve as pastors to these churches, and with the appointment of these persons to the pastoral office. Thus, the Book of Acts reports that at the end of Paul's first missionary journey, after he and Barnabus had preached the gospel and made disciples in various cities of the Roman province of Asia, the two men returned from Derbe through Lystra and Iconium to Antioch, "strengthening the souls of the disciples" and by congregational vote "they . . . appointed elders in every church" (Acts 14:21-23). In verse 23 of Acts 14 the participle cheirotoneesantes, meaning to vote by stretching out the hand, is used. This is an indication that each congregation was involved in the appointment of its pastor.⁶ Titus presumably employed the same process in another region after Paul reminded him: "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint [katasteesees] elders in every city, as I commanded you" (Titus 1:5). So it probably was with the appointment of pastors elsewhere in the mid-first-century church.

These pastors may be said to have been recipients of what has been termed a "mediate" divine call, although, it may be noted, the New Testament does not use "call language" (that is, it employs no kaleo-family word) in speaking of the engagement of a pastor to serve a local Christian congregation. That God and his guidance were indeed involved in the process of a church's securing a pastor--in a congregation's issuance of an invitation, or call, to a man to serve as their spiritual shepherd and his

subsequent acceptance of this call--is clear from Acts 20:28, where Paul speaking to the elders (Acts 20:17), that is the pastors, of the church at Ephesus, said: "take heed . . . to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers" (emphasis mine). The use of "mediate divine call" terminology is justified in the church. It is the implicit teaching of the New Testament. The mediate call is equally as divine as the immediate.

The reason the apostles and Christian congregations saw to it that Christian churches were provided with pastors, and this in the manner above described, can be understood when this additional instruction concerning church and ministry the apostles set forth in their New Testament writings is considered.

1. God has constituted all believers in Christ, the members of his church, spiritual priests, for the purpose of their functioning as priests and offering up to Him spiritual sacrifices. Peter writes in his First Epistle, Chapter 2, verse 5, "You [all Christians] . . . are being built up . . . a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ," and again in verse 9, "You are . . . a royal priesthood." These spiritual sacrifices are the fruits of faith, the good works of heart and hand and voice the Lord's people perform (ultimately) to glorify God (John 15:8). To be freed from the curse and dominion of sin for such priestly service in the Kingdom of God is one of the great blessings of the present salvation enjoyed by Christians (Romans 6:11-14; James 1:25). It is, indeed, also the final purpose of all of God's saving activity in Christ in their behalf (Luke 1:68,74-75; Titus 2:11-14; 2 Corinthians 5:15; compare Luther's explanation to the Second Article of the Creed).

2. Among the vitally important priestly functions God has asked His

people to perform are (1) that they assemble for worship (Hebrews 10:25), the hearing of His Word, and reception of the sacrament; (2) that they continually and reciprocally speak His Word of truth to one another in love, for their mutual upbuilding in faith and life and their growth to spiritual maturity (Ephesians 4:15-16); and (3) that they corporately take the saving and edifying Word out also to the unregenerate world at home and abroad and engage in the disciple-making of many among the unbelieving masses (Matthew 28:16-20).

3. To help Christians carry out their priestly assignments (as indicated in #1. and #2. above) God in Christ has (1) entrusted to them His inscripturated apostolic and prophetic Word and the sacraments and (2) instituted in their midst the office of the public ministry, the responsibility of occupants of which is to teach believers gathered into congregations to understand, love, trust, use, proclaim, and live out that Word in the God-appointed manner (Ephesians 4:11-16).

4. The way in which God and the ascended Christ--and, we may add, the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28; the divine opera ad extra indivisa sunt)--provided parish pastors for (at least some) newly founded congregations in the Apostolic Age, namely, through the divinely prompted joint-initiative of apostles and these congregations themselves, has been indicated. However, it should be noted that the New Testament records no words of institution of the pastoral office, as it does for the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, for example; and it details no procedures which are obligatory in the church with reference to the manner in which a congregation is to obtain a pastor and inaugurate his service in its midst. Evidently, if and where no apostle or assistant of an apostle was available, such specifics were left up chiefly to congregational determination, as a matter of Christian

liberty, with the congregation expected to keep in mind and act in accordance with the following principles and convictions derived from the Word of God delivered to the church by the Lord's apostles.

a. Just as it is God's will that there be local congregations, and it is His assumption that such congregations will exist in the New Testament era, so it is His expectation that these congregations will be served by local pastors of their own (Jeremiah 3:15; Acts 11:30; 14:23; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; 5:17,19; Titus 1:5-9; Hebrews 13:7,17,24; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

b. Since the universal priesthood of believers--and every congregation in particular--is by divine arrangement ultimate repository or possessor of the means of grace; since God has also placed the local congregation in charge of these means and has given it the authority and command to see to it that these means of grace are publicly administered in its midst in an appropriate manner, the members of the congregation must prayerfully engage in the selection and engagement of a pastor, who will administer the means of grace on their behalf, by their invitation and direction.

c. In participating in the engagement of a pastor, the congregation acts instrumentally for God, the ultimate Agent in bringing a pastor and a congregation together.

d. God through His apostles has informed the church as to the qualifications a man whom the members of a Christian congregation would invite to be their pastor ought possess. He has caused the apostle Paul to record this information in the Pastoral Epistles, the specifics being spelled out in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. The Lord expects congregations to seek out men with these qualifications to serve as their pastors.

e. When a man suitable and qualified for the pastoral office has been found, the presumption is that the congregation will invite him to serve as their pastor. After this individual has accepted the invitation to minister, no specific preliminaries are required of the congregation to mark the beginning of his pastoral work in their midst. No rite of ordination (or installation), for example, including the laying on of hands on the part of neighboring clergy and prayer in the congregation, is divinely mandated. The practice of such a rite, however, as employed early in the church in connection with the induction of gifted Christians into various service roles within the church (compare 1 Timothy 4:14; 5:22; 2 Timothy 1:6; Acts 6:6; 8:17), is worthy of retention. Once a man has assumed the pastoral office and begun his ministry in the parish, the members of the congregation are required by God gratefully to look upon their pastor as an overseer the Holy Spirit has placed over them (Acts 20:28), submissively to obey the pastor as he nurtures them in the inscripturated Word and seeks to promote their spiritual welfare (Hebrews 13:17), and earnestly to emulate his faith and godly conduct (Hebrews 13:7).

The foregoing discussion has included chief points of instruction, explicit and implicit, constituting the New Testament doctrine of the call. This instruction is really not lengthy. Words of the kaleo-family are used only a few times with reference to the summons of a person to special work in the Kingdom, and in each case it is the immediate divine call which is spoken of. Many questions concerning the call which have arisen in our church body are not explicitly answered in Scripture. These the Lord permits the church to deal with in its God-given wisdom and according to its free determination as guided by the Word and Holy Spirit--and thus our Synod has acted. A few examples may be given.

Early in our Synod's history Dr. Walther enunciated the right of the church to create offices which are auxiliary to and have the purpose of assisting with the tasks of the office of the public ministry. He wrote:

The highest office is the ministry of preaching, with which all other offices are simultaneously conferred. Therefore every other public office in the church is merely a part of the office of the ministry, or an auxiliary office, which is attached to to the ministry of preaching.⁷

One such auxiliary office is that of the instructor(ress) who teaches the faith in the Christian Day School. Should he or she be recipient of a call to serve as teacher in the school? Walther and the church answered yes. The practice of calling such teachers continues until the present time. Calls are also extended in the Synod today to persons occupying other offices in the church which are clearly auxiliary to the central functions of the pastoral ministry, such as deaconesses, directors of Christian education, and so on.

In the early church persons were placed into the pastoral office with whom, and with whose qualifications for the ministry, the members of the congregation were intimately acquainted. Today in many cases churches call men to serve as their pastors whom the membership has not met personally. How can they do so legitimately? The church has responded in effect as follows. In the case of new candidates, congregations may be assured of these men's eligibility and qualifications for the ministry because of the training they have received at one of the Synod's seminaries and the certification of their suitability for the ministry by the faculty members who have taught the candidates. When a candidate is ordained in a given congregation, this is also an announcement to the entire Synod that a given individual has begun to serve as a fully qualified pastor of the church. The latter's name is placed on the clergy roster of the Synod. In the case

(1)

of subsequent calls, a Lutheran congregation, in keeping with its membership in the Synod, extends a call only to a person whose name is found on the clergy roster and thus is generally acknowledged to be an individual fully qualified to serve as a pastor anywhere in the church. Thus in its definition of a "call" necessary for entry into the pastoral ministry or its auxiliary offices, the Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations in the 1981 CTCR Report entitled The Ministry: Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature has written:

A person is "called" when he or she is summoned by the church to the office of Word and sacrament or to an office auxiliary to it on a full-time permanent basis and by education, by certification, and by solemn and public act (e.g., ordination or commissioning) is brought into a unique relationship with the church from which he or she has unique authority and through which he or she is authorized to perform functions of that office of the church into which he or she has been ordained or commissioned, at a specific post for the length of time which is ordinarily continuing and indefinite, but which in certain cases and under certain special circumstances may be a specified period of time, which is evidenced by the individual's name being placed on and retained on one of the official rosters of the Synod.⁸

The New Testament offers no specific instruction on the question of the permanence of a pastor's divine, mediate call. In the same CTCR publication just referred to the question is asked point-blank, "Are calls always permanent?" and offers this response:

Paul and Barnabas were separated for a specific journey (although Paul had a lifelong call into the apostolic office). Some calls, such as a call into the military chaplaincy, carry within them a point of termination or reconsideration. Some ventures of the church--such as an experimental ministry in a new territory--cannot be assured of continuation. There is no Scriptural evidence to indicate that all calls are necessarily permanent or tenured. Calls to the colleges and seminaries of the Synod are generally not tenured at first.

The office of the public ministry cannot be terminated in a congregation. Moreover, to attempt carelessly or surreptitiously to terminate a call to this office (by either the congregation or the one who has the call) is to manifest a disregard for the divinity of the call. A call may be terminated for just

cause, i.e., unfaithfulness in office, false teaching or an ungodly life [or upon the option of an older pastor to retire, the present writer would add]. Processes of adjudication and appeal have been agreed upon by the church. After all of this is said, however, it should be noted that the nature of the ministry as a continuation of the apostolate and as a call from God implies that calls are generally not limited in time.⁹

In the same report the CTCR asserted that "Not only a local congregation but also larger structures of the church may legitimately extend valid calls upon proper delegation." In explanation of this statement the Commission continued:

The right of a congregation to call its pastors and teachers is not questioned. Some do question the right of agencies such as Districts or boards and commissions of the Synod or even the whole Synod itself to issue calls. . . .

The very existence of the Synod indicates that the church must do some of its work jointly. The Synod is not an alien organization. It is the whole confessional fellowship of congregations. In this case, by common agreement, certain offices are filled by the Synod or its commissions through authority delegated from the congregations. Agencies of any kind should first assure themselves that the right to call has been properly delegated to them by the church. In some cases that is done by regulations in the bylaws that are agreed upon in convention. Moreover, agency calls should contain clear descriptions to indicate that the call is of such a nature that the candidate may assure himself that the call is truly within the scope of the office of the public ministry or the appropriate auxiliary office.

Some offices in the church cannot be defined with absolute clarity merely by referring to their titles. The call itself should demonstrate why it is a "call" and not merely an office of employment as a lay worker in the church.¹⁰

Other questions concerning the divine call into the pastoral and into auxiliary ministries have arisen and have been addressed by the church. Other questions may yet arise and will be addressed by the Synod in its God-given wisdom and freedom. In the process, it is very important for the church always to distinguish what the New Testament does teach and what it does not teach regarding the divine call and matters pertaining to it.

One "postscript." Neither the Bible nor the LC-MS teaches a doctrine of a kind of immediate call referred to widely in American Protestantism as an "inward call" or "inner call." An informative discussion of this matter is presented in an article by David J. Peter, "A Lutheran Perspective on the Inward Call to the Ministry," which appeared in the 1986 Concordia Journal.¹¹

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ENDNOTES

1. See The Ministry, Offices, Procedures, and Nomenclature, a Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, September 1981, p. 12.
 2. The New Testament passages cited in the present paper are quoted from the Holy Bible: The New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979). The Greek text on which this investigation is based, and from which Greek words are cited in transliteration, is the Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece (Twenty-sixth edition; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1979).
 3. Other passages in which kaleo-family words appear as referring to the call to saving faith, or the Christian life following upon faith, are the following: verses in which a form of the verb kaleo is used--Romans 8:30; 9:24; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 7:17,20-22,24; Galatians 1:15; 1 Timothy 6:12; 1 Peter 5:10. Verses in which a form of the noun kleesis is used are Romans 11:29; 1 Corinthians 1:26; Ephesians 1:18; 4:1,4; Philippians 3:14; 2 Thessalonians 1:9,11; Hebrews 3:1; 2 Peter 1:10. Verses in which a form of the verbal adjective kleetos is used are Romans 1:7; 8:28; 1 Corinthians 1:2,24; Jude 1; Revelation 17:14.
 4. Other words the New Testament uses for Christ's act of bringing the original twelve into association with Himself as disciples and apostles are "appointed," epoieesen, Mark 3:14, and "chose," eklexamenos, Luke 6:13. Matthias came to be "numbered with the eleven apostles" (after Judas' suicide) through the expedient of the Jerusalem church's casting of lots, edookan kleeorous autois kai epesen ho kleeoros epi Maththian, Acts 1:26. Paul writes concerning himself that with regard to the gospel and its promulgation he was "appointed [etetheen] . . . an apostle," 2 Timothy 1:11. -- As for Christ and his high priesthood, Hebrews 3:2 reports that He "was faithful to Him who appointed [poieesanti] Him" (compare Hebrews 5:1-6; 7:20-21).
 5. Though the New Testament in only a few passages employs "call" (kaleo-family) vocabulary in its report of Christ's summons of certain of the twelve to discipleship and apostleship, in a number of others it describes the direct encounter of a number of them with Jesus, leading to his invitation of them to follow Him. See John 1:35-51, the account of the initial calling of the first six disciples; and, for the account of their later summons to discipleship, Matthew 4:18-22 (Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:1-11) and Matthew 9:9 (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27-28). In Matthew 10:1-5, Mark 3:13-19, and Luke 6:12-16 the twelve disciples, also called apostles, are depicted as being and working full-time with Jesus. Paul's first speaking with Jesus and his commissioning to serve as apostle occurred at the time of his conversion on the Damascus Road, Acts 9:3-6; 22:6-15; and 26:12-18.
- The Old Testament, it may be observed, generally does not use "call" vocabulary in speaking of God's bringing a man into his special service. (For exceptions, see Exodus 35:30-32; Isaiah 22:20-21). This is said to be

accomplished rather, according to Scriptural report, in connection with words of appointment spoken by God in theophanies (Exodus 3:2-22; Judges 6:11-16; 13:2-5; Ezekiel 1:1-3 & 28 to 2:1-3 & 7) or in visions (Isaiah 6:1-10; Obadiah 1:1, Nahum 1:1) or in another (undescribed) kind of direct communication with selected individuals (Joshua 1:1-9; Judges 4:6; 1 Samuel 3:10-20; 9:15-10:1; 16:1-13). Frequently it is stated that "the Word of the Lord came" to a man and designated the man to be God's prophet (Jeremiah 1:4-10; Hosea 1:1; Joel 1:1; Jonah 1:1; 3:1; Micah 1:1; Zephaniah 1:1; Haggai 1:1; Zechariah 1:1). Micah also states that the Word of the Lord which came to him he also "saw" (1:1). Similarly, the prophecy of Habbakuk opens with the words "The burden which the prophet Habbukuk saw" (1:1); of Amos, with the declaration, "The words of Amos . . . which he saw" (1:1). With respect to the period of the judges in Israel, the Book of Judges simply offers the summary observation that the Lord from time to time "raised up" judges, or deliverers, of the people in response to their prayers (2:16; 3:9). In a number of instances the text does not supply details as to the way in which He did this; in others (as noted above) it does.

6. Compare the involvement of the Jerusalem congregation in the apostles' appointment of the seven men who assisted the apostles by attending to the distribution of food supplies to widows in the church's membership, as described in Acts 6:1-6. -- See Martin Chemnitz's discussion of the matter of congregation involvement with other apostles in the calling of a pastor, in Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion, translated and edited by Luther Poellot (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), section 26, p. 34-35.

7. Dallmann, William, W.H.T. Dau, and Theodore Engelder (editor), Walther and the Church (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1938), p. 79.

8. The Ministry. . . , 1981 CTCR Report, p. 29.

9. Ibid., p. 33

10. Ibid., p. 31.

11. July 1986 (volume 12, number 4), p. 121-129.