

The Process of the Divine Call

by
Kristofer Carlson
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The article of doctrine concerning the divine call to the ministry of Word and sacrament is nowhere expressly stated in scripture but is inferred from a multitude of passages (just like the article of doctrine concerning the Trinity.) Well-established principles of scriptural interpretation are involved here, and we won't tread these well-worn paths at this time. Instead, the *process* of the call is our appointed theme.

We should be careful not to be doctrinaire regarding the process of the divine call. The one holy and apostolic church has used different processes to accomplish God's purpose. Nevertheless, certain common elements remain true over time. Robert David Preus writes that the variety of call processes involve the three realms of the church: the political, the ecclesiastical (the ministers,) and the economic or domestic, (the people.) In some times and places the civil authority exercised the political authority as the protector of the faith. In some times and places where there is a separation between church and state, the political authority is part of the church body. In all times and places, with purely local and temporary emergency exceptions, the same basic process holds.

The basic call process in The AALC follows this template. We will outline the steps below, as derived from our governing documents.

- 1) A vacancy is reported through the regional pastor to the national headquarters.
- 2) The national headquarters provides candidates from the clergy roster to the regional pastor.
- 3) The regional pastor, in consultation with the Presiding Pastor, the regional pastors, and the local congregation, nominates candidates to the local congregation.
- 4) Since the office was established by Christ, and the call is from the Holy Spirit, candidates are presented to the church one at a time. The church accepts or rejects the candidate. No further candidates are given to the local congregation until they reject a particular candidate, which rejection is accepted as being the Holy Spirit's leading through the local congregation. (This step is derived from scripture, and is not expressly stated in our governing documents.)
- 5) The call of the local congregation, having been accepted by the candidate, is confirmed through a letter of call from the national headquarters. The call is further confirmed at that candidate's installation and, if it is his first call, his ordination.

Of course the basic process only covers candidates who are already in possession of a divine call---pastors for whom this is a transference of call. But what of new pastoral candidates? These candidates fall into two categories: candidates who have a "sense of call" and are in preparation for the ministry, and pastors from another church body who request affiliation with The AALC. In both cases the national headquarters, through the Clergy Commission, examines these men. This formal examination or dialogue is known as the Colloquy.

Once a seminarian has been colloquized and has been approved by the Joint Council and the General Convention, he becomes eligible for call. Because a candidate is not a pastor until he has been extended and has accepted a call, the candidate should accept the first call that is extended to him. Similarly, when a pastor wishing to transfer his allegiance to The AALC has been colloquized and has been approved by the Joint Council and the General Convention, he becomes eligible for call. Because the call to ministry is permanent, a transfer pastor need not accept the first call extended to him.

In all cases---whether a transference of an existing call, a pastoral candidate seeking a call, or a pastor newly entered onto our clergy roster---a pastor who needlessly delays entering the ministry and is not actively seeking a call is failing to perform the duties for which God has called him.

The call to the ministry is from the Holy Spirit, as mediated through the church. This means that the call is permanent. Marquart points out that removal from office, according to scripture, takes place for only three reasons: unsound doctrine (Hos 4:6; Rom 16:17,) ungodly life (Tit 1:5ff,) or incompetence (I Tim 3:2; II Tim 2:24.) Because the call is permanent, congregations must be careful to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. They must understand that they are not hiring a pastor, but serving as a local expression of the church through which the Holy Spirit calls its ministers. Therefore the dismissal of a pastor apart from scriptural grounds is a sin against the Holy Spirit.

It is nevertheless true that The AALC has a congregational church polity. The local congregation may, within certain boundaries, do as it pleases. In our polity, the pastor has no recourse or appeal to The AALC should a congregation dismiss him for unscriptural reasons.

The holy and apostolic church has always used some formal process to prepare, examine, call, install, and ordain its ministers. The exact form of this process has varied from time to time, and from place to place, yet certain constants remain. One such constant is that each church body determines for itself the proper order for this process. The churches that are part of that church body agree to abide by its orderly process for calling pastors. The call process in The AALC, as laid out in its governing documents, is in line with the scriptures, the doctrine of the church, and its historic practice. Our pastors are His ministers to His church. Thanks be to God!

SIDEBAR

We will briefly lay out the scriptural and confessional foundation for the divine call. Our primary source is Paul's question, "how are they to preach if they are not sent?" (Rom 10:15; cf Jer. 23:21; Isa 6:8). Preachers are always sent. No self-called preacher has a valid call. Examples of the call to public ministry may be found in the following passages: Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17, 28, 31; I Tim 3:5, 7; Tit 1:5-7; Heb 13:17; I Pet 5:1-3. In the confessions we refer primarily to the Augsburg Confession, article XIV, although a relationship is seen between articles XIV (Ecclesiastical Order,) VII (The Church,) VIII (What the Church Is,) and XXVIII (Ecclesiastical Power.) Ultimately, of course, article XIV is connected to articles III (The Son of God,) IV (Justification,) and V (The Ministry of the Church).