



## God's Call and Our Calling

“Even if we add together all the various duties of daily life we still sense that our calling implies something more, beyond the sum of them all.” These are the words of Einar Billing written a long time ago (*Our Calling* [Uppsala, 1909; ET, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964] 1).

Billing wrote these words in connection with his treatment of the concept of vocation. The “something more” to which he referred is the call extended to all Christians through the gospel to accept the forgiveness of sins and to live out the new life in Christ. That is a *call* which precedes all other *callings* (vocations) which Christians may have.

The thought is intriguing and significant theologically and vocationally. Those who have sensed a call to ordained ministry and have entered into it may tend to think of their call to the ministry as the only call of significance; it is the only call they ever reflect upon. The unfortunate result of such habits of thinking is that the minister thinks only of the work performed in ministry as his or her response to God's call: God's call to me is his call to ministry; my response to God's call is my work. Work ethic and call become fused together. Indeed they become confused.

The call through the gospel of course is not identical to our or anyone else's calling (vocation). The Christian doctrine of vocation can be considered a matter of the “kingdom on the left,” not the right. Vocation is a summons from God to work for the sake of the neighbor through common earthly work and tasks. Therefore Christians farm, teach school, drive trucks, do data processing, manage corporations, work as nurses, preach the Word and administer the sacraments, and do many other things as well.

But there is a call from God which is common to all Christians, and that is the call through the gospel to accept the forgiveness of sins and to live out the new life of Christ in the world. To hear that call—regardless of our calling (vocation)—enables us to die and rise daily to renewed life, to rejoice in God's grace, and to go on our way to do the tasks of our calling, whether in the ordained ministry or in any other.

Some days are filled with seemingly trivial tasks and just plain hard work, and these realities hardly seem to represent heroic responses to God's call to the

ministry. We forget that even the apostle Paul spent time and energies at rather common tasks in a trade, in travel, and seeking out housing arrangements, secretarial services, and even daily meals. He was called to be an apostle (Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:15). But he could also speak of God's call through the gospel to all Christians (1 Cor. 1:9; 1 Thes. 2:12) into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ, and of the “upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14). That call through the gospel to all Christians is the call which, as we hear it, transforms us and helps us to see all of life and its tasks from a renewed angle of vision. Our salvation does not depend upon our own

perceived faithfulness (or lack thereof) to our calling to the ordained ministry and its tasks any more than it does for others in faithfulness to their vocations, for no work is to be done before God—even this work—as though to gain favor. Salvation is a gift extended through the gospel by God who calls, gathers, and enlightens his people over the face of the earth, declaring forgiveness of sins and “gracing” our lives for service in the world, freed from the bondage of self-analysis.

A few months ago Joseph Sittler spoke to the graduating class of Luther-Northwestern Seminaries on “Spirituality and Discipline.” He said some things worth repeating, and I hope that I represent him accurately. Spirituality is a concern of theological students and clergy these days. In his perceptive analysis of various forms of spirituality Professor Sittler declared that in the Protestant tradition—but this could also be fitting for our readers from other traditions as well—there is a spirituality which centers in God’s Word. Since it is through his Word that God communicates himself to us, and since we know God through his Word and not sufficiently otherwise, it is there—in attending to God’s Word—that the evangelical form of spirituality exists.

Professor Sittler has given us a helpful insight. It coheres with the emphasis above. Listening to God’s Word, and struggling like Jacob with God in our study of Scripture—that is the most profound form of spirituality there is. Likewise, listening to God’s call through the gospel is to hear the call which is prior to and attending all other calls there may be to particular forms of service in the world, including the call to ordained ministry.

But what of the pastoral vocation, the ordained ministry as calling? All Christians are members of the one body of Christ, and all share in the ministry of Christ. But there is in ecumenical Christianity a task to which certain persons are called, and that is known as the ordained ministry. “For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same functions,” so there are varieties of gifts and tasks to which God calls each one (Rom. 12:4-8).

Anders Nygren, upon becoming Bishop of Lund (1949), sent a pastoral letter to the clergy of his diocese which has been published as a slim book. In one place he gets to the heart of the matter of what the pastoral vocation entails. He cites examples of how persons have misunderstood what is essential in the minister’s calling. Pastors are not, he says, primarily instructors and guardians of pure doctrine, nor are they religious virtuosos imparting God-consciousness, nor are they propagandists for particular world views and ideologies, nor are they even primarily spiritual guides with good psychological and therapeutic insights. Rather, he says, “*We are heralds*—that and nothing more. The Gospel which we have received from God constitutes our whole being as ministers” (*The Gospel of God* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1951] 21).

God’s call is his gospel. And the call to the ordained ministry is a call to herald that gospel in the church and to the world. Here God’s call to all persons and his call to the pastoral ministry intersect, but they are not identical, and they should not be confused.

The essays which follow deal with various facets of the pastoral vocation. It is good—for the sake of the gospel—to think critically about this particular vocation. Herbert Chilstrom asks

why there seems to be a lack of joy and courage among clergy. He traces the cause to a lack of an irresistible call to proclaim the gospel and a lack of discipline in maintaining physical health. Mark Ellingsen identifies two strands of thought in Luther's understanding of the ministry, and he shows how important each is in the pastor's self-understanding and work in ministry. The two strands, it could be argued, are significant not only for Lutherans and other heirs of the Reformation, but for the ecumenical church, offering a synthesis of classic form and evangelical substance. Wayne Stumme writes that the theological responsibility informs and shapes all other aspects of the pastoral calling. There is a distinction between the work of academic and pastoral theologians, but their respective tasks are complementary. He outlines four components of the calling of the theologian-pastor and illustrates them in specific ways. Sheldon Tostengard, in discussing preaching, asks whether language is a good medium of communication. He goes on to illustrate that the electronic media have actually—to our surprise—given new emphasis to speaking and hearing. So Christ has chosen wisely in choosing language as the medium of revealing himself. Henry Horn writes of changing forms in worship and pursues the question whether we are ready for the changes taking place and whether present trends lead toward effective mission and the creation of true *communitas*. Clyde Steckel deals with the question of whether the ministry is a profession in the traditional sense of that term. He concludes that it is, but also that the term does not adequately express the concepts of calling, character, and charisma. Our Resources section is devoted chiefly to major books on the ministry. The Conversation on a new, important book was convened by James Burtness, who has a lively interchange with others, and Richard Vangerud has furnished us a rich fare in a survey of other literature in the field. A brief article by Eugene Kreider and Kent Johnson concerning some key studies in religious education concludes the section.

Something new is being added to strengthen the journal. On the inside cover of the next issue there will appear a list of persons constituting a Council of Advisers. The Council is in the process of formation at present. We are grateful that these persons are willing to serve by providing us with advice, response, and stimulation from settings in ministry other than our own. Their experience and perspectives will enrich the journal.

Some transitions will be noted on the inside cover of the present issue. As James Burtness indicated in the last issue, his sabbatical has necessitated a change in editorship. To Professor Burtness goes the gratitude of all who have been engaged in the work of the journal. He has been active in the project from its beginning and has provided creative leadership in many ways. We welcome David Tiede and Paul Fransen—who have both been active in the project also—to the editorial staff, and Sylvia Ruud as editorial assistant and office manager. The

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journal has gotten off to a good start and continues because the seminary community is made up of so many persons with talents, skills, and willing hands. It has truly been and continues to be a community effort. Our hope remains that this journal will be a valuable resource, providing “theology for Christian ministry.” To that end we strive, for “if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?” (1 Cor. 14:8).

That question from Paul deserves a bit of thought as we reflect on the pastoral vocation.

A.J.H.