

ON THE DOCTRINE OF THE CALL

No One Takes This Honor for Himself

The External Call, the Enthusiast's Error, and the Comfort of Rite
Vocatus

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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Ask an evangelical how he knew he was called to preach, and you will usually get a story. There was a night, or a summer camp, or a low season, and somewhere inside it a certainty settled over him that would not lift. He *felt* it. God laid it on his heart. A door swung open. A verse leapt off the page as if underlined by an unseen hand. A warmth in the chest told him what his life was for. The story is sincere, often moving, and it does real work: the inward experience is offered as the *evidence* that God has called this man to the office.

Then a young man raised on that grammar of the heart wanders into a confessional Lutheran congregation, senses a pull toward the ministry, and waits for the same lightning to strike. He waits for the burning, the unmistakable inner voice, the sign that would make it certain. And often enough it does not come. The pull is real but quiet. There is no Damascus road, only a growing sense that this work is good and that others keep saying so. He begins to wonder whether he was ever called at all, because the one piece of evidence he was taught to look for—the feeling that proves it—is missing.

He has been looking in the wrong place. Not because feelings are worthless, but because the evidence of a call was never meant to be found inside the man. The whole Lutheran instinct is to put it outside him. And that instinct is not a quirk of church polity; it is the same reflex that runs through the entire Reformation, the same refusal to let God be sought anywhere except where He has promised to be found.

What This Is Not

Before the warning, a fence. To say that the call is not a feeling is not to say the Spirit is idle, that the heart is irrelevant, or that the ministry is a merely bureaucratic transaction stamped by a committee. The Spirit is at work in every stage of a man's formation. He gives the desire, He gives the gifts, He gives the church that recognizes them. When a congregation calls a pastor, the Holy Spirit is not watching from a distance; He is the one who has made overseers (Acts 20:28). None of what follows denies the interior life of the man who is called. It denies only that his interior life is the *proof*.

Nor is this a caricature of everyone who speaks of a sense of calling. A man may rightly feel drawn to the work, and that drawing may be genuine and Spirit-given. The error is not in feeling anything. The error is in treating the feeling as self-authenticating—as the thing that settles the question—rather than as a prompting that must be brought out into the light, examined, and confirmed by something outside the self. The difference is the difference between a symptom and a diagnosis. A symptom you notice; a diagnosis is rendered by another.

Two Calls

The Lutheran fathers distinguished carefully between two ways God calls men into His service. There is the *immediate* call, the *vocatio immediata*, in which God summons a man directly, without human means. The prophets were called this way. So were the apostles, and John the Baptist. It was an extraordinary call, and it came with extraordinary credentials—signs, wonders, a word that vindicated itself in history. Chemnitz, treating this in his *Enchiridion*, is blunt about it: whoever claims an immediate call today must be able to prove it as the prophets and apostles did, and no man now can. The immediate call is not the ordinary furniture of the church's life. To claim it is to claim too much.

Then there is the *mediate* call, the *vocatio mediata*, which is how God ordinarily calls men into the ministry now. It comes *through means*—through the church, through the congregation that calls, through the pastors who examine and ordain, through the whole appointed order by which the body of Christ sets a man apart. And here is the point on which everything turns: the mediate call is not a lesser thing than a divine call. It is the divine call. God has not stepped back and left the matter to men. He calls through the church exactly as He forgives through a man's voice in absolution and feeds through bread and wine. The congregation is the mask of God, the instrument in His hand. When the church calls a man rightly, it is Christ who calls him. The externality of the call does not make it merely human. It makes it *mediated*—which is precisely how God has chosen to give nearly everything He gives.

This is why the missing lightning is no cause for despair. The absence of an inward thunderclap does not mean the absence of a call. It may simply mean that God is calling the way He usually calls: through the ordinary means He appointed, from the outside in.

Rite Vocatus

The Augsburg Confession states the principle in a single clause. In Article XIV, on ecclesiastical order, it insists that no one should teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless he is *rite vocatus*—rightly, regularly, legitimately called. The Latin phrase is small and load-bearing. The Confession does not say *unless he feels called*, or *unless he is inwardly certain*, or *unless he has received a sign*. It says *rightly called*, and the rightness is a matter of the church's external act. The certainty of a call is anchored in something the church does, in the open, in time and space, and not in something the candidate privately undergoes.

This follows directly from what the Confession says the ministry is *for*. Article V teaches that God instituted the office of preaching—the ministry of Word and sacrament—pre-

cisely so that the Spirit might be given through these means. The office exists to hand over the goods of the gospel. It is inherently outward, public, and instrumental. A call to such an office is therefore fittingly outward, public, and instrumental as well. It would be strange indeed if the office whose whole purpose is to deliver grace externally were entered by a purely internal transaction. The call matches the office. Both come from outside the man, for the sake of others, by appointed means.

The Enthusiast's Error

Now the warning proper. To relocate the evidence of a call into the candidate's inner experience—into the feeling, the burning, the impression, the sign—is not a small pastoral misstep. It is a species of the one error the Reformation fought hardest against. Luther had a name for it: *Schwärmerei*, enthusiasm, the conviction that God deals with us apart from His external Word.

In the Smalcald Articles, treating confession, Luther turns aside to deliver one of his most searching indictments. Everything hangs, he says, on this: God will not deal with us except through His external Word and the sacraments. Whatever is praised as coming from the Spirit apart from that Word and those sacraments is not the Spirit at all. He traces enthusiasm all the way back to Eden—Adam and Eve were seduced by the promise of a knowledge of God that bypassed His spoken command—and forward to the papacy and the radicals of his own day, who each in their way claimed a Spirit that spoke inside them, above and beyond the plain external Word. The whole enterprise, Luther says, is the old serpent's, and it is the source of every heresy.

Hold the inward call up against that light and it shows its family resemblance. A man who grounds his call in a private burning has located God's decisive dealing with him inside his own chest, apart from any external word spoken to him by the church. He has made his emotions the organ of revelation. The idioms give it away. *God laid it on my heart. I felt led. I had a peace about it. A door opened. I put out a fleece. There was a burning in my bosom.* These are the native tongue of enthusiasm, and they are all the more dangerous in the matter of the ministry because they are so reverent, so warm, so apparently pious. But an inward sign is still a sign sought apart from the Word, and a call authenticated by feeling is enthusiasm wearing a clerical collar.

Consider even the fleece, that favorite of earnest young men deciding their futures. Gideon's fleece was not a method of guidance to be imitated; it was the weak faith of a frightened man asking God to indulge him one more time, and one more time after that (Judges 6). To make it a template—to lay out our fleeces and read our circumstances as God's private telegrams—is to ask for exactly the kind of unmediated word that Luther

says God has refused to give. The Christian is not left to divine God's will from the weather of his own life. He is given a Word from outside, and, in the matter of the ministry, a church that speaks with that Word.

The Place of Holy Desire

Someone will object, and rightly, that Scripture does not treat the desire for the office as nothing. Paul tells Timothy that if anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble work (1 Timothy 3:1). There is such a thing as holy ambition for the ministry, and a man wholly without it is unlikely to be fit for it. The warning of this essay is not that desire is illegitimate. It is that desire is the *prompt*, not the *proof*.

Watch how Paul handles that very desire. He no sooner grants the aspiration than he buries it under a list—the overseer must be above reproach, sober-minded, self-controlled, hospitable, able to teach, gentle, not a lover of money, and much more (1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9). The desire is not left to certify itself. It is dragged immediately into the open and measured against objective, observable qualifications, most of which only *other people* can judge. Whether a man is above reproach, whether he can teach, whether he manages his own household well—these are not feelings he consults but facts the church weighs. The desire begins the process; the church, applying the Word, confirms or denies it.

The great texts on the call all point outward in the same way. “No one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was” (Hebrews 5:4). Note how Aaron was called: not by a private impression in the desert, but publicly, externally, before the whole assembly, through the appointed word and rite. The honor came to him; he did not reach in and grasp it. Over against Aaron stands the false prophet of Jeremiah: “I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied” (Jeremiah 23:21). The self-sent man is precisely the one running on his own inward impulse, mistaking the heat of his own zeal for the voice of God. And Paul asks the decisive question in Romans: how are they to preach unless they are sent (Romans 10:15)? Preaching presupposes sending, and sending is done by another. Even at Antioch, where the Spirit spoke plainly to set apart Barnabas and Saul, the word was not left to inward certainty; it was ratified by the church in fasting, prayer, and the laying on of hands (Acts 13:1–3). The most direct call in the book of Acts still came to its completion through the external act of the congregation.

So there is an order to the thing, and the order matters. Inclination comes first—a man finds himself drawn to the work. Then examination: the church tests his gifts, his character, his doctrine, his life. Then the call: the external summons of the congregation, God's own call through His people. Then ordination, which publicly ratifies and seals what the

call has done. The feeling stands at the head of that sequence as a prompting to be tested. It does not stand at the center as the ground of certainty. A man who reverses the order—who plants his certainty in the feeling and treats the church’s confirmation as a formality—has built his house on sand, and the storms of the ministry will find it out.

A Mirror for Our Own House

It would be comfortable to leave this as a critique of someone else—of the revivalist, the evangelical, the enthusiast across the aisle. It would also be dishonest. The inward call is not merely a foreign error we observe from a safe confessional distance. It came home to Lutheranism long ago, and it did so under a pious name.

Pietism, in its zeal to warm a formalized church, shifted the center of gravity of the Christian life inward—toward the conversion experience, the datable moment, the felt assurance, the measured intensity of one’s own devotion. It was not wrong to want living faith rather than dead orthodoxy; it was wrong in *where* it taught men to look for the marks of that life. And once the Christian life generally is authenticated by inward experience, the call to the ministry follows the same road. The felt call, the experiential summons, the inward certainty as credential—these grew as naturally in Pietist soil as in revivalist soil, because they are the same crop.

Which means the recovery of the external call is not merely a stick with which to beat outsiders. It is a discipline for our own house. Walther and the fathers of confessional Lutheranism did not labor over the doctrine of the call because they enjoyed abstractions. They labored over it because enthusiasm is perennial, and it wears a Lutheran coat as easily as any other. The warning of this essay is aimed first at the mirror.

The Comfort of the External Call

If the warning were all, it might sound merely severe—as though the Confessions were determined to strip the ministry of its warmth and hand it over to committees. Exactly the opposite is true. The external call is not a colder doctrine than the inward call. It is a kinder one. It is, in fact, one of the tenderest comforts a pastor possesses, and it is felt most keenly precisely when everything inside him has gone dark.

Consider the man whose call rests on a feeling. What happens to him in the dry season, when the fire he once felt has guttered to a coal? What happens when the sermon lands flat, the visits go unanswered, the sheep bite the shepherd, and God seems to have withdrawn behind a wall of iron? If his call was proved by an inward experience, then the loss

of that experience threatens the call itself. In his *Anfechtung* he will torment himself with the question no man in ministry should have to ask at his lowest: *was I ever called at all?* His office rises and falls with the tide of his emotions, and the tide always goes out.

Now consider the man who is *rite vocatus*. In the same darkness he has somewhere to stand that his feelings cannot reach. He can say: *The church called me. I did not seize this honor; it was laid upon me by God through His people. My office does not depend on the temperature of my heart this morning. Christ called me through His church, and Christ has not rescinded it.* This is the pastoral genius of the external call. It gives a man an objective place to stand outside himself, exactly where a drowning man most needs one. Walther, in his pastoral theology, makes precisely this the great consolation of the certainty of the call: when the devil assaults a faithful pastor and whispers that he has no business in the pulpit, the pastor's answer is not to search his feelings for a spark of assurance but to point to the call itself, God's own summons through the congregation, and to stand there unmoved.

The doctrine cuts against presumption on the one side and despair on the other, and it comforts both wounds. The man who *feels* called but is not fit is spared his own delusion, because the church, not his feeling, renders the verdict. And the man who is fit and truly called but cannot summon the requisite emotion is spared his own false accusation, because his call was never his to feel into being in the first place. Feelings will make some men too sure and other men too afraid. The external call rescues both, because it takes the whole question out of their trembling hands.

Called by Ordinary Means

In the end, the call comes the way grace always comes. It comes from outside the man, through appointed means, by the Word and the church He has joined to that Word. It is gift, not achievement; summons, not self-discovery; something done *to* a man and *for* others, not something he manufactures in the furnace of his own experience. The office that exists to deliver ordinary means is entered by ordinary means. There is a deep fittingness in that, and a deep mercy.

So to the young man still waiting for the lightning that has not come: stop waiting. Bring your desire into the light. Set it before the church and let it be tested against the plain qualifications of Scripture. Learn, study, serve, and let others who can see what you cannot render the judgment you cannot render on yourself. If God is calling you, He will call you the way He calls—not with a private fire in the chest, but with a Word spoken to you from outside, through His people, in the open. And if that call comes, you will have something far steadier than a feeling to stand on when the dark seasons come. You will have the one thing no *Anfechtung* can take from you: *He sent me. I did not run. I was rightly called.*

No one takes this honor for himself. Thank God that no one has to.