

On "Calling" and "Office"

1. From the standpoint of Christian faith and witness, one's call as a Christian is distinctive because one is thereby placed among the decisively called.

2. The decisively called are distinguished from both the implicitly called and the explicitly called.

3. Any being who is human is placed among the implicitly called as soon and as long as she or he is human at all—being human and being implicitly called being simply two ways of saying one and the same thing.

4. Any human being who is religious or for whom the claim of some religion is a genuine option is placed among the explicitly called as soon and as long as she or he is religious at all or has a genuine option of becoming such—being religious or having the option of becoming such and being explicitly called being simply two ways of saying one and the same thing.

5. Any human being who is Christian or for whom the claim of the Christian religion is a genuine option is placed among the decisively called as soon and as long as she or he is Christian or has a genuine option of becoming such—being Christian or having an option of becoming such and being decisively called being—from the standpoint of Christian faith and witness—simply two ways of saying one and the same thing.

6. But what is distinctive, exactly, about one's call to be a Christian? It is not that one is called thereby to authentic existence, since both the implicitly called and the explicitly called are, in their respectively different ways, also called to that. It is distinctive, rather, in one's being called both to the effective use and to the valid administration of the *primal* sacrament of the Christian religion, viz., Jesus Christ. Thereby implied, of course, is the call both to use and to administer the *primary* sacrament of the Christian religion, viz., the visible church as such, together with such other *secondary* sacraments as the church in turn may constitute.

7. Obviously, the same point could be made by speaking in terms of word rather than sacrament—or, more generally still, in terms of means of salvation. The underlying general idea, in any case, is that, if a religion is "a means to ultimate transformation" (Streng), it follows that, from the standpoint of a particular religion, it is the means by the effective use of which a human being undergoes the ultimate transformation from inauthentic to authentic existence and then becomes a minister to her or his fellow human beings in undergoing the same transformation.

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"Calling," or "vocation," is a systematically ambiguous term because it has a number of different uses in the terminology of traditional Christian witness and theology. But its first and foundational use can be clarified as follows.

As is clear simply from the word, "*ecclesia*," Christians have from the very beginning understood themselves to be called, indeed, *the* called, the *decisively* called, just as they have understood Jesus Christ to be the one through whom God has decisively called them into the community of the decisively called, the "*ecclesia*," the church. But from a Christian standpoint, Christians as those whom God has decisively called are not alone in having been called by God. On the contrary, the decisively called understand themselves to belong to a much larger and more inclusive community of the called, comprising both the explicitly called and the implicitly called.

But wherein, exactly, does one's being a Christian, and so one of the decisively called, consist? It does not consist simply in one's being called to authentic existence in relation to the whole as well as oneself and all others, since both the implicitly called and the explicitly called are, in their different ways, also called to that. Being decisively called consists, rather, in one's being called to exist authentically in a very specific way, namely, both by the effective use and by the valid administration of the specifically Christian

means of salvation. The means include not only the representative and so *secondary* means of word, sacraments, and special ministry, or even the constitutive and so *primary* means that is the visible church as such, but also, and above all, the *primal* means that is Jesus Christ himself. To be decisively called is to be called to exist authentically by effectively using Jesus Christ and the visible church as well as everything that in turn re-presents them in the way in which God intends that they all be used—namely, by *faith*; and then, to join in the general ministry of validly administering these same means of salvation, so that others, too, may effectively use them—and this by *good works*, by works of mercy as well as of piety, in John Wesley's terms, or, as may also be said, by *witness*, by implicit as well as explicit witness.

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The decisive call re-presents the implicit call and sublates all other explicit calls, confirming everything that is valid in them even while eliminating all that is invalid.

5 June 1990; rev. 30 January 2002; 1 September 2006

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Does it make sense to say that being a human being simply as such is having or holding a (general) office?

Yes, it does—at least in terms of any theistic, or perhaps, even any religious, outlook. In Christian terms, any woman or man simply as such is subject to the imperative to accept the truth about her or his existence and to lead her or his life accordingly, believing only what is true and doing only what is right. To this extent, she or he is a *de jure* authority having all the rights and responsibilities belonging thereto. Specifically, she or he is authorized to witness to the truth about human existence and to call others,

also, to accept it. This includes the executive authority to address all human beings directly with the command, "Accept the truth about your existence, and lead your life accordingly"; and it includes the nonexecutive authority to address them indirectly by teaching this truth and exemplifying it in one's own life.

9 July 1996; rev. 30 January 2002; 1 September 2006

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"If "[t]o be a man . . . is, as it were, to have an office," so that it makes sense to speak of a woman's or man's "office as a human being" (Adams), there is still the question of the sense it makes. The answer, arguably, is that the sense it makes is like the sense made in speaking about "the authority of reason or of facts" (De George). That is, it is an improper, nonliteral, or, possibly, analogical or symbolic sense—in essentially the same way in which speaking of reality generally as a "society," or a "polis, or a "commonwealth" involves using such terms in improper, nonliteral, extended senses. Thus, for example, God is not simply "*an* authority," not even the highest or supreme authority, because God is also the *primal source* of all authority. Likewise, my being a child of God and authorized by God to live as such is not properly or literally a matter of my being authorized to fill an "office." True as it is that no one can fill an office, properly so-called, without authorization, it is not true that any ^uauthorization must be an authorization to some office, again, in the proper sense. In other words, there is an exact parallel here with the statement that, although every authority, properly so-called, is as such also a source of authority, the converse is false: not every source of authority is *an* authority in literally the same sense as any other.

8 September 1999; rev. 30 January 2002; 1 September 2006

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1. The idea of "office" needs to be explored in several different directions.

2. Thus, for example, it needs to be explored in relation to the idea of "authority" as well as the several other ideas that "authority" presupposes or implies.

3. It also needs to be explored in relation to the idea expounded by Luther that being a Christian is itself a matter of having an "office": the office of being Christ to one's neighbor.

4. This suggests yet another direction in which "office" needs to be explored—namely, in relation to christology, along the lines of Luther's claim that Jesus is called Christ, not because of his person, but because of his office (cf., e.g., WA, 16, 217; 17, I, 255).

5. This, in turn, suggests that "office" also needs to be explored in relation to the distinction fundamental to christology between the empirical-historical Jesus and the existential-historical Jesus. (If, in general, an "office" exists in order to meet some human need, and anyone meeting this need can be said thereby to occupy or perform the corresponding office, then corresponding to the need to come to an explicit understanding of oneself that is true and authentic there exists the office of explicitly/decisively representing such a self-understanding. What is properly meant by saying that Jesus is existentially significant, or that, *as* existentially significant, he is the existential-historical Jesus, is that he performs this office.)

6. "Office" may also need to be explored in relation to the traditional dogmas of the triune nature of God (one substance in three offices, or one office in three persons?) and of the divine-human person of Jesus Christ (one person in two offices, or one office in two natures?). Luther's description of creatures generally in respect of their several offices as *larvæ Dei* may also need to be kept in mind—in connection, say, with the use of the term, "*persona*."

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1. Just as religion, although one form of culture among others, is unique in being in its own way basic to all of the other cultural forms, so the office of being religious in some way or other, although one office among others, is unique in being in its own way basic to all the other offices. Although it is and remains *qua* office distinct from the person performing it, it is related to the person, and the person to it, in a unique way, so that, like the person, it is in its own way basic to all of the other offices that a person may perform.

2. But if being religious and therefore being Christian as well is a matter of performing an office, however unique, being a Christian, like being religious in any other way, belongs to this world, to the sphere of works, by which we are precisely *not* justified.

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1. Religion is one "cultural system" alongside others, distinguished from the rest by the fact that it makes explicit on the primary level of self-understanding and life-praxis the answer to the existential question that all cultural systems imply.

2. Correspondingly, being religious in the sense of asking and answering one's own existential question in the terms of some religion as a "cultural system" is a matter of performing one cultural role or office among others, distinguished from all the rest analogously to the way in which religion is distinguished from all the other "cultural systems," or forms of culture.

3. Being ultimately rather than merely naturally religious in the sense of asking and answering one's own existential question in the terms of some

ultimate religion as a "cultural system" is likewise a matter of performing one cultural role or office among others.

4. But so, too, then, is being a Christian, in the sense of asking and answering one's own existential question in the terms of Christianity as a "cultural system."

5. Moreover, this conclusion is explicitly drawn in the Christian theological tradition itself—with exemplary clarity by Luther when he makes clear that being a Christian in the sense of bearing witness with the word of faith is itself an office and commission to which one is appointed in relation to the world, to perform the service that falls to one to provide, to carry out, as God's instrument, the work of God to which one is appointed in the world, indeed, precisely as one under commission and in God's place to avail oneself of the authority, to make good the power, to say what is entrusted to one to say (cf. G. Ebeling, *Luther*: 232-237).

6. But this conclusion also has radical implications—not least for reflection on the question of whether there is one true religion or many; for it means that being a Christian, no less than performing any other cultural role or office, even if in a somewhat different way, has to do with our identity *coram mundo* or *coram hominibus*, not *coram Deo*. Therefore, it can have only a representative or declarative, never a constitutive, significance for the actualization of authentic existence.

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