

Calling a Minister

By Rev. Donald Beaton

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In a Presbyterian Church the main steps in the calling and induction of a minister are of a very solemn nature. Minister and people enter into obligations of a binding nature, which ought always to be regarded as such. The minister is asked: “Do you promise to submit yourself willingly and humbly, in the spirit of meekness, unto the admonitions of the brethren of this Presbytery, and to be subject to them, and all other Presbyteries and superior judicatories of this Church, where God in His providence will cast your lot; and that, according to your power, you shall maintain the unity and peace of this Church against error and schism, notwithstanding of whatsoever trouble or persecution may arise, and that you shall follow no divisive courses from the doctrine, worship, discipline and government of this Church?” The careless answering of this solemn question has often been commented on and rightly condemned as a trifling with solemn things. The thoughtless way in which a call is signed by some, if one is to judge by their after actions, has not, however, been so often commented on.

In the Free Presbyterian Church the privilege of electing and calling a minister belongs to members in full communion. It is usual for the Kirk-session to bring forward the name or names of ministers upon whom they have decided. But the communicants’ right of choosing their minister is not thereby usurped, for they are at liberty to bring forward the name of any minister they think suitable for the charge at the congregational meeting called for the election of a minister, and full liberty is to be given them to do so. The Interim-moderator’s duty is to see that this privilege be not in any way denied to the communicants. If they feel that their rights are in any way interfered with, they may have recourse to the Presbytery.

When the communicants, thus exercising their privilege, give a call to a minister they do so by signing their names to the following: “We, the undersigned Elders, Deacons, and Members of the Free Presbyterian Church congregation at . . . , desirous of promoting the glory of God and the good of the Church, being destitute of a fixed pastor, and being assured by good information and our own experience, of the ministerial abilities, piety, literature and prudence, as also of the suitability to our capacities of the gifts of you, Mr . . . preacher of the gospel, have agreed to invite, call, and entreat, like as we, by these presents, do heartily invite, call, and entreat you

to undertake the office of pastor among us, and the charge of our souls; and further, upon your accepting this our Call, *promise you all dutiful respect, encouragement, and obedience in the Lord*". Adherents sign a *concurrence to the call*, declaring their "hearty concurrence in the Call addressed by the members of the said congregation to Mr . . . to be their pastor". The obligations thus entered into, one would think, are of a sufficiently binding nature as not to be undertaken by anyone who had not the intention of carrying them out to the full. The light-hearted breach of promises solemnly and voluntarily undertaken brings it within the category of sins forbidden in the Ninth Commandment – "breach of lawful promises" – as defined in the Larger Catechism.

Some time ago we heard one of our ministers remark in public that, after being settled in his charge he discovered that there were a considerable number who had signed his call who were not entering the place of worship from one Sabbath to another. On his pastoral visits he asked one of these why he was not attending the means of grace. " Well, sir," was his answer, I used to attend the prayer meetings and the service on the Sabbath, but I took ill and was confined to bed for some time. When I got better I did not go out, and the habit of staying in grew on me until at last, when I would make up my mind to go out, I thought the people would say that a change for the better had come over me and I stayed in." "How long have you been neglecting the means of grace?" asked the minister. "Fourteen years", was the answer. The devil certainly had found in this man material of a very pliable nature. Another of our ministers told us that, when the congregation were shaking hands with him at his induction, one man gave him a specially hearty shake and said: "Until death do us part". The minister remarked that the man attended the services for about three months and then forsook his congregation altogether.

No doubt, these are exceptional cases, but it is necessary to remind all who are failing in their duty to fulfil their promises that it is with God and not man they have to do in the end. No compulsion is used to make a man sign a call or concurrence with a call. It is a voluntary act, an obligation solemnly entered into and not to be treated as a scrap of paper when the name is put to the call. Further, every minister has a right to expect that those who promised him "all dutiful respect, encouragement and obedience in the Lord" would implement their promise. Our people, we believe, as a general rule, are faithful attenders on the means of grace, but there are not wanting signs that the spirit of non-attendance on these means, which is a characteristic of the age, is infecting some of them and that the flimsiest excuses imaginable are advanced for non-

attendance – excuses which they would be ashamed to advance for non-attendance at business or work.

2. Signing a Call to a Minister. For the benefit of those interested in the subject, the procedure leading up to, and in connection with, the signing of a call may be briefly outlined:

[1.] *Election of a minister.* The interim-Moderator of the Kirk Session is expected to call a meeting of the congregation at an early date after intimating the vacancy, unless there are special grounds for delay in filling it up. When an election has taken place, the Presbytery proceeds according to the laws of the Church, but if the circumstances are such that the Presbytery do not feel warranted in proceeding to moderate in a call they are to hold a meeting with the congregation and are not to proceed until they have exhausted all means for producing harmony; and should these efforts fail, the matter is to be referred to the superior courts. As already indicated, the election of a minister rests with the members in full communion. Where there has not been complete unanimity, the proceedings in connection with the signing of the call, as will be seen later on, is affected thereby.

[2.] *Request for moderating in a call.* When a congregation of a sanctioned charge are prepared, or think themselves prepared, to call a minister, it is usual for them to appoint a deputation to represent them at the bar of the Presbytery, and to convey their desire that the Presbytery would moderate in a call. The Interim-moderator of the Kirk Session usually reports to the Presbytery the condition of the congregation and the amount of their agreement as to the choice of a minister. If this report be unsatisfactory, the Presbytery are called upon to proceed in accordance with rules laid down in Act IV of the General Assembly of the Free Church (1859).

[3.] *Moderating in a call.* When a Presbytery are prepared to moderate in a call, they fix a day and hour for doing so. Notice of day, hour and place must be given from the pulpit of the vacant congregation, at least seven days intervening between the notice and the day appointed. (a) *Open Call, or Call at Large.* Where there has not been complete unanimity among the communicants at the election, the Presbytery must moderate in a call at large – that is, no person's name is inserted when the form of call is produced. (b) *Closed Call.* If there has been unanimity in the election, the name of the minister who is the choice of the communicants is inserted in the form of call.

The Presbytery meet in the place and at the time appointed. Divine worship is conducted and thereafter the form of call is produced and read. In the case of an open call the congregation are asked: "Whose name is to be inserted in the call?" In the case of a closed call the question is asked: "Are the congregation willing to proceed with the call?" When the call has been agreed to, the persons present whose names are on the communion roll sign the call and these only. Adherents simply concur in the call given by communicants. No one who is not in full communion and whose name is not on the communion roll has a right to sign the call according to church law. The communion roll must be produced at the time of the signing of the call, carefully revised and attested by the Presbytery. It is needless to say that communicants who have not communicated for years have no right to sign the call; ill health, however, for a considerable time would not be considered a sufficient reason for removing a name from the communion roll.

When an open call is moderated in, it can only be signed by communicants present at the time of the moderation. A closed call may be subscribed by communicants who are absent, if a mandate authorising subscription is produced. It is always advisable that these mandates should bear the signature of the communicant.

[4.] *Attestation of Call.* When the call has been subscribed by all the communicants and adherents present who desire to subscribe it, or by mandatories, the Moderator of the Presbytery attests it as subscribed.

[5.] *Sustaining the Call.* If it has been subscribed by a large number of communicants on the roll in proportion to the whole number, and if there be no dissents given in, the Presbytery sustain the call in ordinary cases. ⁽²⁾ If there be dissents implying a serious division in the congregation, the call cannot be sustained unless signed by a majority of the whole communicants on the roll present or absent, and even then the Presbytery may find it necessary to refer the matter to the superior courts.

[6.] *Dissents against a Call.* Dissents against a call can be received only when they are given in immediately after the call has been attested by the Moderator. The fullest opportunity must be given to communicants for stating their objections and it is the Presbytery's duty to deal with the objections tendered. If these dissents are numerous, or the objections serious, the Presbytery may decline to sustain the call, and if there is no complaint or appeal to the superior court against their decision, the call falls to the ground.

Endnotes:

1. Mr Beaton, in 1934, when editor of this Magazine, regarded it as expedient to draw attention to the procedures which ought to be followed at all stages when a minister is called by a congregation and comes in due course to be settled over it. In view of recent and impending inductions, this may be a suitable time to do so again. What is written here is, more or less, what flowed from Mr Beaton's pen except that two articles have been combined. *JM*

2. If the sustained call be to the ordained pastor of a congregation in another presbytery of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the induction cannot be proceeded with until a judgement has been obtained in favour of the translation, either from the presbytery within whose bounds that congregation is situated, or from the superior court which has jurisdiction over that presbytery. . . . Act IV, Free Church Assembly 1882 provides that, in the procedure in calls from one presbytery to another, the commissioners from the presbytery and congregation calling shall be received and heard only at one meeting of the presbytery to which the minister called belongs; and that in the event of no ordinary meeting of a presbytery being held within three weeks of the time when the Clerk receives official intimation that a call to one of its members has been sustained by another presbytery, he, along with the Moderator, shall be empowered to send intimation of the call to the minister's congregation, and to summon them and all parties to the next ordinary meeting, that the call may be disposed of then. (*Practice of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland*, p 49.)