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It was a common question in Jesus day. Could one divorce their wife “for any reason?” This question of course was posed to Jesus on one occasion. There is becoming a similar question all the more common in our churches these days. Can a congregation dismiss their pastor “for any reason?” Especially since in our current polity nearly all pastors are called to the ministry as a result of congregational action, the question has been asked: can't the same congregations dismiss their pastor whenever they feel that it is best? This question has been posed in our own district publically. I will argue in this paper that the answer is unquestionably no.

First, it is important to define terms. The term dismissal is being used by many to speak of the act of removing one from a particular call but not the Office of the Public Ministry. I will use this term in that way throughout this paper. There has been much written which shows that in the Lutheran tradition this entire practice of pastors being dismissed from their call and yet not removed from the office is a foreign one. Historically, pastors remained in their calls as long as they were fit for the office until called elsewhere. If adherence to false doctrine or a scandalous life made them unfit to serve as pastors, they were deposed from the Office of the Public Ministry completely. Anyone who wants better understanding into this question from a

historical theology perspective should read the fine paper entitled *The Unbiblical Removal of Pastors* by Scott Porath.¹

Since that paper and several others have well summarized the Lutheran position on this from a historical perspective, I will not seek to do so here. In this paper, I seek to simply lay out the biblical principles which undergird that position. I seek to show why it is not proper for a congregation to dismiss their pastor “for any reason.” I should note here that I will use that phrase in an idiomatic way in this paper to refer the practice of dismissing one’s pastor for any reason a congregation desires. When I use this phrase, I do not mean to suggest that the traditional reasons for deposing a pastor for the office are invalid. I use it in the sense it was used in the question Jesus answered about marriage.

To some the decision to remove one pastor in the likelihood of replacing him for another might appear wise. Reason might suggest it could yield good results. We see similar practices in all sorts of other areas of life. However, this is not any other area of life. It is the Church. And the Church has its own God’s given order. In that order, the pastor is not a worker who simply serves at the bidding of a congregation. He is a man sent by God given authority by God to watch over a particular flock of God. While seeking to dismiss a pastor might seem wise in worldly ways, we understand that true wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. We trust his Word to show us which ways lead to green pastures and to still waters. Let us turn there that we might consider this question in the light of God's wisdom.

First, we must truly understand what the Office of the Public Ministry is from the Scriptures. In the Scriptures, we receive this understanding as we look at the things to which the apostles and their successors were called. We quickly learn that the Office of the Public

¹ http://www.goodshepherdlincoln.org/file_download/26cd0b10-cfd6-466f-ba1e-34dd12ad680c

Ministry is ultimately all about delivering the forgiveness of sins which Christ Jesus has won for the world. In John 20, Jesus makes this clear saying to his Apostles, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld." ² As we read the rest of the Scriptures, we understand the means by which God has accomplished this work. He has attached his word of promise to baptism³, to absolution⁴, to the preached word⁵, to the supper⁶. And so, the one called to the Office of the Public Ministry is the one who publically preaches the Word and delivers the Sacraments. This is why the Augsburg Confession says, “To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments.”⁷ The Confession makes clear that the institution of the Office of the Public Ministry is the provision of the Word of Gospel and Sacraments. Therefore, that is what those called to the Office do daily in this vocation.

Since they are called primarily to these things, pastors are only removed from a call when they are no longer able to perform these duties faithfully in the place they are called. Therefore, the Church has always ended a particular call for only one of three reasons. First, it may be brought to an end when another call is extended and accepted. In this case, he is called to perform these duties elsewhere in the kingdom and therefore can no longer serve in his present location. Secondly, the man can be removed from the congregation because the man with the call persists in false doctrine or a wayward lifestyle in a way that brings disrepute on the Office

² John 20:23

³ Acts 2:38

⁴ Matthew 16:19

⁵ Romans 10:17

⁶ Matthew 26:28

⁷ *The Book of Concord the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. 1959 (T. G. Tappert, Ed.) (31). Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press.

and Christ himself. In this case, he is no longer able to perform these duties anywhere in the kingdom according to the Word of God.⁸ The pastor is not only removed from a congregation but from the Office of the Public Ministry as well. Finally, the pastor is freed from his call at the time of his death.

The idea of dismissing a pastor “for any reason” is therefore set against the scriptural understanding of the call. The wisdom of man is here set against the wisdom of God and proved foolish. While it can certainly be noted that God gives particular talents to each person, this does not mean that one man can be dismissed from a call in order to get a man who has different talents. Since the true work of the Office of the Public Ministry is to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments, every called man who remains able to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments is the right man. To contend that one who is preaching the Word and administering the Sacraments needs to be replaced is to suggest that what needs to be accomplished in a place or location cannot be accomplished by the Word and Sacraments alone. It suggests there is something else that needs to be present in order for the Church to remain and accomplish God’s work in that place. This stands against every passage which assures us that the Word and Sacraments are the only means by which God does his life-giving work.⁹ And the Smalcald Articles state, “We should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil.”¹⁰

We do not have a single example in the scriptures of a man called to lead in the Church being dismissed from a call without being deposed from the Office he was called to serve in.

⁸ 1 Timothy 3:2-5

⁹ Genesis 1:3; John 5:24; Romans 10:17

¹⁰ *The Book of Concord the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. 1959 (T. G. Tappert, Ed.) (313). Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press.

The example of Moses being removed in order that Joshua could lead has been offered up by those suggesting that dismissal “for any reason” is proper. The scriptures make obvious that this decision was made due to sin and not mere preference of one man over another. Moses is removed from his prophetic office due to his unfaithfulness.¹¹ He is not merely dismissed from a call but is deposed from his Office.

There are three other accounts concerning Moses that are relevant to the discussion. When Miriam and Aaron decide that they would remove meek Moses from his God given prophetic office, God is not pleased. Miriam is punished with seven days of leprosy.¹² Even more telling is the account where the Israelites decide that since they do not trust Moses’ leadership and will choose a new leader to help them journey back to Egypt. All except for faithful Joshua and Caleb who rejected this option were told they would never step foot in the Promised Land.¹³ Finally, when Korah and other sons of Levi decide they would no longer accept Moses as prophetic leader, God opens the earth to swallow them.¹⁴ Moses’ life gives perfect testimony to the fact that God does not give his people the power to choose a new leader when God has already given one to them for their good. They cannot dismiss him “for any reason.”

In the New Testament and particularly in the book of Acts, again we often see the people of God calling a minister in their midst.¹⁵ However, we never see even one case of the people of God dismissing a pastor “for any reason.” They are involved in deposing pastors, but never simply dismissing one from a call for whatever reason seems wise to them.

¹¹ Numbers 20:12; Deuteronomy 1:37-38

¹² Numbers 12

¹³ Numbers 14

¹⁴ Numbers 16

¹⁵ Acts 9:36; Acts 10:5; Acts 16:9

All of the narratives of scripture show forth that due to the nature of God’s call, one remains in that call until called to another location or to rest with Christ. The only exception is when they are deposed for failing to remain fit for ministry.

Forbidding the people of God from dismissing their pastor “for any reason” serves to stand against the tendency of man to reject the Word of God sent through the messengers of God.¹⁶ The flesh is always looking for a way to dismiss what God would say. Allowing a congregation then to dismiss their pastor “for any reason” makes all the more likely that it will act in a way which dismisses the pastor who speaks to them a hard word which their flesh does not want to hear. Consider how Amaziah told Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”¹⁷ Allowing dismissal “for any reason” would assure that the whole Church would be filled with nothing but pleasers of men, ticklers of ears.¹⁸

The whole idea of a congregation dismissing a man from his specific call according to their desires flies in the face of the Table of Duties laid out in the Scriptures and collected in Luther’s Small Catechism. God may well use a congregation to call a pastor into the Office of the Public Ministry. He may also use his people to remove one from the Office when it is necessary due to adherence to false doctrine or wayward life. But while the relationship between Pastor and People exists, having been brought together by God through whatever means, the Table of Duties makes clear that pastors are given a share of Christ’s authority over the

¹⁶ 2 Timothy 4:2-4

¹⁷ Amos 7:12-13

¹⁸ 2 Timothy 4:3

congregation. As Christ is the head of the Church, the husband is the head of the wife.¹⁹ So also the pastor is the head of the congregation.

Some, including a new document adopted for use by the Council of Presidents entitled “Guidelines for District Presidents’ Assisting Congregations in Biblical Due Process of the Removal of a Pastor from a Divine Call,”²⁰ have suggested that our own confessions teach the opposite in the eleventh paragraph of the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope. They quote briefly where many translations say, “In 1 Cor. 3:4–8 Paul places ministers on an equality and teaches that the Church is above the ministers.”²¹ They neglect several facts. First, this phrase quoted in both the Latin²² and German²³ can also be translated as “the Church is more than the ministers.” Here the confessors rightly note that the Church is not solely its pastors, but pastor and people together. Secondly, it is obvious that the Church mentioned here is the Church in the largest sense and not a single congregation. Lastly, the context makes clear that the Confessors here are seeking not to speak of the relationship between individual pastors and people but rather the relationship between the Pope and the Church at large. To imply that our Confessions suggest that every congregation or individual member has authority over its pastor is to suggest the Confessions speak in error against the clear teaching of the Scriptures about the relationship of each pastor to the people of the congregation. 1 Thessalonians 5:13 speaks of pastors as those who “are over” the people using a greek phrase²⁴ that speaks of headship and

¹⁹ Ephesians 5:23

²⁰ This document can be found in the Circuit Counselors’ Manual (Revised 2012).

²¹ *The Book of Concord the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. 1959 (T. G. Tappert, Ed.) (321). Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press.

²² *docet ecclesiam esse supra*

²³ *ministrosdass die kirche mehr sei den die Diener.*

²⁴ προΐσταμένους ὑμῶν ἐν κυρίῳ

authority. Hebrews 13:7 speaks of pastors as the “rulers of you.”²⁵ And therefore, in Hebrews 13:7 the people are called to be persuaded by (most translations use the word obey) them and submit to them.²⁶ The Confessions do not teach that congregations have authority over their pastors. If they did, we would be bound to reject them.

It is important to note that this authority is not given to the pastor for his sake but for the sake of those he is given to serve. He is forbidden from lording authority over the people as if his authority is more than Christ’s Word.²⁷ It is an authority given to him in order that they can serve the people under their care with the life of Christ through Law and Gospel, Word and Sacrament. The pastors can never forget the Lord’s word to his Apostles, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.”²⁸ Likewise congregations cannot forget the instruction given to them regarding this relationship.

In each set of relationships described in the Table of Duties, one party is to mirror Christ’s love to the Church while the other is to mirror the Church’s submission to Christ.²⁹ This is made most explicit by Paul in regards to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5, but is true of all of these relationships. In the case of pastor and people, the pastor mirrors Christ’s love and the

²⁵ τῶν ἡγουμένων ὑμῶν

²⁶ Πείθεσθε τοῖς ἡγουμένοις ὑμῶν καὶ ὑπέικετε

²⁷ 1 Peter 5:3

²⁸ Mark 10:42-44

²⁹ Hopefully this simple chart helps illustrate this point.

<u>Mirrors Christ’s Love</u>	<u>Mirrors the Church’s Submission</u>
Husband	Wife
Parent	Child
Master/Boss	Slave/Worker
Government	Citizen
Pastor	People

people mirror the Church’s submission to Christ. To suggest then that a congregation may dismiss their pastor “for any reason” would suggest that they are given authority over their pastor rather than called to live in submission. This would also then be to suggest that the Church could rightly dismiss Christ as Lord rather than submit to Him. Imagine if children were able to dismiss their parents “for any reason” or workers could dismiss their boss. Imagine the chaos that would result. So also when the Church acts in authority over the pastor rather than submitting to him, chaos also results. A pastor can be removed from his place of authority when he is no longer fit for the office including if he is unrelentingly domineering seeking to have authority apart from the Word and Sacraments in the congregation. However, he is not dismissed “for any reason.” It is contrary to the place the congregation has been given by God. The Pastor must not lord over the people because he is to show Christ’s love. But the people must not act as if they are in authority over the pastor because they are to show forth the Church’s submission to Christ.

Finally, the Scriptures make clear that even when particular talents are needed for a situation, God is able to make the one he has called able to stand. He used Moses who could not speak, David who was not even thought of by his father due to his place in the family, and Saul who sought to imprison and kill those of the Way. And these men are but a few examples. If a particular call requires certain aptitudes or character traits, God is able to make the one he has called able to serve. In fact, it can be said that God most often works with people who are not prepared or capable of the call when it is issued. And yet, he makes his man to stand.

In summary, it is not only the question of whether a dismissal can happen “for any reason” that is similar to marriage. In marriage one has the right to marry and also the right to divorce if there is just cause. However as Jesus made clear, the married person has no right to

just dismiss their spouse “for any reason” they see fit. So it is also with the relationship between congregations and pastors. Congregations by virtue of being Church have the right to call pastors. Also, if there is just cause (as outlined in the scriptures), they have the right to depose the pastor from the Office of the Public Ministry on behalf of the entire Church. However, they do not have the right to dismiss their pastor “for any reason.” A clear understanding of the nature of the Office of the Public Ministry makes this clear. Time spent reading the passages collected in the Table of Duties confirms this belief. And conviction that God is able to make his called ones stand makes one firm in this understanding. This is the testimony of the Scriptures and is also the historic practice of the Church. We do well to listen to the Scriptures and follow in the footsteps of the faithful who lived before us in Christ’s Church. Pastors cannot be dismissed “for any reason.”