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Κλησῖς - Call and Calling

Kevin Condon

The Greek word κλησῖς is not an obscure or difficult word. No resounding controversies have arisen in connection with it. Apart from one particular text (1 Cor 7.20; cf.1.26), its meaning throughout the NT is quite clear: God's call to salvation. Nevertheless, ever since the Reformation there have been two distinct tendencies in regard to its translation. Catholics use the word 'vocation', and mean a vocation to the religious life (though with less emphasis now than formerly). Protestants use the word 'calling' and think more in terms of one's calling in the world. This is especially true of the highly coloured German word Beruf, with its Lutheran overtones. The difference is subtle, but of no small consequence. Here we shall examine the NT from the standpoint of these two divergent positions.

Firstly, as regards antecedents in the OT, there is no word in the Hebrew that corresponds exactly to the Greek κλησῖς. But this is not surprising, since the verbal nouns or abstracts are not very common in the Hebrew anyway. /1 What is more surprising is the the verb qara (καλέω) occurs but rarely in a religious sense, and this solely within Second Isaiah. Where one would expect to find it - in the call of a prophet - one does not find it. In almost all cases the call to the prophet comes through an oracle, a 'word of Yahweh', which proclaims what the mission of the prophet is to be. /2

But in Second Isaiah one finds texts such as the following:

41.9: "You whom I took from the ends of the earth; and called from its furthest corners, saying to you, "You are my servant (LXX πᾶς) I have chosen you (ἐξελεξάμην) and not cast you off."

- 42.6: (the servant): 'I have called you in righteousness, I have given you as a covenant to the peoples, a light to the nations.'
- 48.12: 'Hearken to me, O Jacob, Israel whom I called.'
- 48.15: ἐγὼ ἐλάλησα, ἐγὼ ἐκάλεσα ('I have spoken, I have called')
- 50.2: ἐκάλεσα καὶ οὐκ ἦν ὁ ὑπακούων (אַיִן תְּשׁוּבָה: 'no one to answer'; Greek 'no one to obey'- the true response to the call is 'obedience' ὑπακοή)

We find also an emphasis on the idea of naming:

- 43.1: ἐκάλεσά σε τὸ ὄνομα' σου, ἐμός εἶ σύ ('I have called you by name; you are mine')
- 45.3 ἐγὼ κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὁ καλῶν τὸ ὄνομα σου, θεὸς Ἰσραὴλ: 'It is I, the Lord God, the God of Israel who call you by your name' /3

All in all, the call is to Israel. And the effect of this 'call' or 'naming' is that Israel has been 'chosen', has become 'God's people.' This election is frequently traced back to the call of Abraham eg in Deuteronomy 7.7f we read:

"It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples."

or again:

"You only have I known among all the families of the earth; therefore will I punish you for your iniquities." (Amos 3.2; cf. Psalm 80.16; Isaiah 41.8; 44.1f; 48.12. In Isa 48.12 we have the form 'My called one': מִי־קָרָא)

Coming to the NT one finds that κλησικς is above all a Pauline or post-Pauline technical term. For, although καλέω is often used in the gospels in a 'neutral' sense viz 'to summon'. 'to invite', 'to name', it has a religious meaning only in such texts as, 'I have not come to call the righteous but sinners (Mark 2.17 and pars.) or the 'calling' of the disciples (Mark 1.10

and par.). Also, perhaps, in the parable of the invitation to the feast where the κεκλημένοι anticipates the people hinted at in the parable: those who are invited to share in the Kingdom of God. In St. John's gospel the words καλέω/κλησις (call/calling) do not occur in a religious sense; nonetheless the idea of 'calling' (and separation) is quite pronounced (cf. Jn 1.43;13.36f;21.19; 6.66ff; 12.32; 14.3,6; 15.1-10, 16-19; 17.14ff)

But in the Pauline epistolary the two words are frequently used in a deeply religious sense. Thus καλέω in a very explicit way in Rom 8.30:

"Those whom he predestined he also called;
and those whom he called he also justified;
and those whom he justified he also glorified",

where the three verbs, προορίζω (predestine), δικαιώω (justify) and δοξάζω (glorify) give us a distinct colouring to the idea of "calling". It includes the whole process of salvation. Elsewhere, God (or Christ) is the "one who calls" (Rom 9.12;Gal.5.8); he has "called" the descendants of Abraham in Isaac (Rom 9.7); he has "called" both Jews and Gentiles (Rom 9.24); he has "called" into fellowship with his Son (1 Cor 1.9); He "calls" in peace (1 Cor 7.17); he "calls" by the grace of Jesus Christ (Gal 1.16; cf.1.15); he "calls" to freedom (5.13). Each should walk as he has been "called" by the Lord (1 Cor 7.18 et alia). "Calling" (klēsis) occurs in Rom 11.29: "The gifts(charismata) and the call (klēsis) of God are irrevocable," where "call" (klēsis) seems to have more the meaning of "election". Also 1 Cor 1.26 ("look at your calling, brethren") and 1 Cor 7.20 ("Let each remain in the call (or calling?) wherein he was called.") Here it is debated whether klēsis means "state of call", or "estate", "condition of life" (see below). Finally, Phil 3.14, "the reward of the heavenly (anō, lit "up") calling". Thus already in the earlier epistles of Paul one finds the oscillation of meaning between God's (initial) call and, in the individual, his "calling", his state of being called.

This distinction appears to gain ground in the later epistles, where the sense of "calling" is made all the stronger by the introduction of a sacral terminology. Thus 1 Thess 2.12: "he called us into his own kingdom and glory"; but, on the other hand, 4.7: "not in impurity but in sanctification". Likewise 2 Thess 2.13: "God chose you to be saved in sanctification of the Spirit and belief in the truth to which he also called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." So too, 2 Tim 1.9: "He saved us and called us with a holy call (klēsis) (God's call, or our calling?); Hebrews 9.19: the Christians who are said to be the κηκλήμενοι to an eternal inheritance are in 3.1 the κλήσεως ἐπουρανίου μέτοχοι (sharers in God's call, or sharers in a divine calling?) Other verses that share the same ambiguity include: "that God may make you worthy of the call (klēsis)" (2 Tim 1.11); "Strive to make firm your klēsis and your election" (2 Peter 1.10). The "call" comes from God; the "calling" works itself out, and this in terms of "sanctification" (ἀγίασμος).

The sacral terminology is particularly striking in the expression κλητοι ἅγιοι (lit. "called saints"). In Rom 1.6 the "klētoi of Jesus Christ" are in the following verse klētoi hagioi ("called (to be) saints"). (In 8.28 οἱ κατα πρόθεσιν κλητοι, "the called according to his purpose"). The klētoi hagioi are those who have been sanctified (ἡγιασμενοι) in Christ Jesus (1 Cor 1.2)

/5

At Gal 1.15 one reads: "But when he who had set me apart (aphorisas) before I was born and called (kalesas) me through his grace....". The religious idea of "setting apart" is here closely related with the idea of "calling"; that which is "set apart" is (to the religious mind) "hallowed", "consecrated". On two occasions Paul uses of himself the expression klētos apostolos (Rom 1.1; 1 Cor 1.1). Even grammatically it cannot mean "called to be an apostle" as the RSV translates it. It means "called as an apostle, /6 and the religious connotation "set apart", "hallowed", "consecrated" cannot be entirely excluded. /7

Thus, briefly, klēsis in the Pauline epistles is, on the one hand, God's "call" to salvation. (So too in the OT; but in the NT the outlook is more transcendent: the end is "eternal life", the "glory of Jesus Christ," the kingdom of God.). On the other hand, the fact that a terminology of religion is used, that the klēsis is anō (upward) and "heavenly" (epouranios) and especially hagia (holy), and that the goal is "sanctification" (hagiasmos) shows that there is a question not of God's call only but of the individual's "calling", and this in a very religious sense. He is called to "holiness".

There are, however, two passages in which the word might well have the meaning not of one's "divine call" but of "one's condition in the world." 1. "You see your calling (klēsis), brethren, that..." (1 Cor 1.26) 2. "Let each one remain in the calling (klēsis) in which he has been called (eklēthe)." (1 Cor 7.20)

Debate centres mainly on the second. In 1931 Hans Lietzmann wrote in his commentary on 1 Corinthians: "klēsis here, as is clear from the context and from v24 ("Let each abide (by that) in which he was called") means the condition of being circumcised or not. Therefore something like Stand, or "state" as in our word Beruf. There are no parallels to this usage." /8

Subsequently Karl Ludwig Schmidt, in his article on κλησις in the TDNT, was critical of Lietzmann for introducing into his exposition of a NT word an understanding which was specifically Lutheran, weighted with theology. In all other cases, he writes, the word κλησις means "call"; therefore it must mean the same here. (He translates it "(state of) call"). So too Preuschen-Bauer, who consider it "daring" of Lietzmann to introduce a new interpretation of the text for which there are no parallels. /9

But then Bauer himself (the editor of Preuschen-Bauer) does come up with parallels from Greek sources. He quotes Libanius, a writer of the fourth century AD: τὴν τοῦ μαχαίροποιοῦ κλησιν ἔλαβεν - "he took up the job of swordmaker"; and also Philo (Legat.ad Gaium, 163): a god's calling (θεοῦ κλησις) (ie the position or status of a god is so sacred to the Alexandrians that

they allow animals to share in it.) Bauer therefore translates klēsis in 7.20 as "station in life", "position", "vocation." (Beruf). /10

So far as Paul's argument is concerned, it makes little difference whether one translates the word as "(state of) call", or "calling". The difference in the context is not that great anyway. But it does make a difference if one introduces the German word Beruf (or "calling" in the sense of Beruf). For Beruf, to the German mind, means not simply "one's calling in the world" but one's God-given calling in the world; and this is certainly not what Paul is talking about. This very nuanced understanding of Beruf has arisen not exactly by design, for Luther himself used it at 7.20 but understood it to mean Stand or "state"; /11 it arose rather from Luther's adoption of the word Beruf elsewhere, in his translation of Sir 11.20: "Beharre bei deinem Beruf" ("Be faithful to your (God-given) calling.") This new and very characteristic Lutheran understanding of Beruf has influenced the use of the word throughout the whole of German culture, and possibly has had a profound effect upon the German mind. And this is so not because of any carefully formulated theological thesis but solely through the genius of a Bible translator, Martin Luther, who introduced his own spirit rather than followed the spirit of the original.

This thesis is proposed by Max Weber in his well-known book "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism", in a brilliant analysis of the background and history of the idea of "call" and "calling". /13 He observes that the term Beruf (to which corresponds in the English Protestant world the term "calling", though it is probably not so weighted as Beruf) still retains, even in our secularized society, a profoundly religious colouring. The idea of a God-given calling in the world has no analogy previously in any other language.

Neither in the Greek or Latin, nor in the Latin-derived languages, nor even in the Bible, is there any word with the precise religious connotation of the German Beruf. In the Greek one can think of τὰ προσήκοντα ("Things that are one's concern, one's business"), but it is colourless; in the Latin, of opus (work) or officium (duty), or munus (office, function); but these are "neutral" words for "work"

or "duty". On one occasion, in Seneca (de benef., IV), the words officium comes near to meaning Beruf; Cicero can use the word profiteor or professio (cf "non intelligit quid profiteatur": "he does not understand what his business (or profession) is") with a certain nuance of spiritual duty, as in Beruf. But neither has any religious overtone.

On the other hand, there is no word in the Latin-derived languages corresponding to the German Beruf. In the Vulgate klēsis is always translated vocatio (ie the divine call) but never do the derivatives, such as the Italian vocazione, or chiamamento, mean objectively man's life-calling. (The nearest would be the Spanish vocacion). Whereas, on the other hand, such words as do connote one's profession in the world, the Latin magisterium, or officium (and the derivatives) or the Italian impiego, have no religious connotation whatsoever.

Not only that but the word Beruf (English, calling; Dutch, Beroep; Danish, Kald; Swedish, kallelse) is never used in any pre-Reformation translation of the Bible with the nuanced meaning of a God-given assignment in the world. /14 All the translations influenced by the Reformation have it; whereas all those not so influenced do not have it. /15

Where then do we first find trace of this innovative nuance? Did Luther set out from the start to give to the world this new meaning? Hardly. He always translates klēsis as Beruf; and he was well aware that it meant the divine call, and has nothing to do with worldly callings. Even in 1 Cor 7.20, where he might have introduced something of his own theology, he does not do so; for he interprets his word Beruf here as meaning Stand (ie state or condition of life; cf Erlangen edition of Luther's works, Vol LI p51) /15 At the same time, 1 Cor 7.20 gives him a starting point for a new understanding of the Greek klēsis, and this he presents unequivocally in his (later) translation of the apocryphal Ben Sirach, at 11.20:

στῆθι ἐν διαθήκῃ καὶ ὁμιλεῖ ἐν αὐτῇ
καὶ ἐν τῷ ἔργῳ σου παλαιώθητι

Condon, Calling, IBS 6, April 1984

μη θαύμαζε ἐν ἔργοις ἀμαρτωλοῦ
πίστευε δὲ Κυρίῳ καὶ ἔμμενε τῷ πόνῳ σου

Luther's translation is:

Bleibe bei den was dir anvertraut ist, und
Übe dich darin, und halte aus in deinem Beruf,
und lass dich nicht davon beirren, wie die
Gottlosen zu Geld kommen, sondern vertraue
du Gott und bleibe in deinem Beruf

(Cf RSV

Stand by your covenant and attend to it,
and grow old in your work.

Do not wonder at the works of a sinner,
But trust in the Lord and keep at your toil.)

The first word of the Greek passage διαθήκη Luther transliterates. He had no way of knowing that the Hebrew original was ḥoq. /16 Had he known this he might well have translated διαθήκη as Beruf, for ḥoq stands for anything that is established and ordained by divine decree.

His choice of Beruf for ἔργον (m^ela'kah) (work) is not wide of the mark, if one discount the theological nuance. For m^ela'kah, coming from a root la'ak, contains the notion of a sending or a mission; whence, work (Cf Prov 22.29: In suo opere diligens (or, as 18.9 negligens) ie diligent in your work (or negligent). In these texts of Proverbs, Luther had already translated m^ela'kah as Geschäft). It means especially such "work" as that of the king's ministers (1 Chron 29.6); or the temple servants (Nehemiah 11.16; et al.); or the Levites (the 'anse m^elakah: 1 Chron 25.1)

At the second point where he uses the word Beruf the Greek has πόνος. But here the text is corrupt, and Beruf is a deliberate but rather arbitrary choice. /17 In both instances the meaning that emerges is: "Be faithful to your God-given calling in the world", which is surely not intended by Sirach. From this time on the nuanced Lutheran notion of Beruf became established in the cultural life of Germany and had its influence on all other translations of the Bible.

Weber observes that it was just about this time, when

Luther was translating the Apocrypha (ca 1530) that the question of the evaluation of man's work in the world began to be discussed. He writes:

"In the meantime (or about the same time), in the Augsburg Confession, the Protestant dogma of the inavailability of the Catholic attempt to excel worldly morality was established, and in it the expression "einem jeglichen nach seinem Beruf" ("To each one according to his calling") was used. In Luther's translation, both this and the positive valuation of the order in which the individual was placed, as holy, which was gaining ground just about the beginning of the 1530s, stand out. It was a result of his more and more sharply defined belief in a special Divine Providence, even in the details of life, and at the same time of his increasing inclination to accept the existing order of things in the world as immutably willed by God. Vocatio in the traditional Latin meant the divine call to a life of holiness, especially in a monastery, or as a priest. But now, under the influence of this dogma, life in a worldly calling came for Luther to have the same connotation. For he now translated ἔργον and πόνος in Jesus Sirach with Beruf, for which, up to that time there had only been a Latin analogy, coming from the monastic tradition. But a few years earlier, in Prov.xxii.29, he had still translated the Hebrew m^ela'kah (as in other passages: Gen xxxix.11) with Geschäft (Septuagint ἔργον, Vulgate opus, English "business", and correspondingly in the Scandinavian and all the other translations before me)."

Weber's thesis is an essay in sociology, an attempt to show the "paradox of unintended consequences" and how new ideas (especially in the realm of religion) can go awry and lead to results unintended by their original proponents. The concept of Beruf, once the religious aspect had ceased to dominate, led not a little to the professionalism and bureaucracy of the modern world. His analysis is brilliant, but one can hardly say that he has demonstrated his case. At the same time, in the light of his other studies on religion, it merits consideration;

for the general conclusion is that radical rationalisations (of religion) lead with the inevitability of fate to irrational results. If this is true, one wonders what results will emerge for society from the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council!

Notes

1. Correspondingly with the Hebrew, the LXX does not use the word klēsis in a religious sense. Mostly it means "invitation" (to feasts etc).
2. Occasionally laqab is used of God's "taking" the prophet (eg Amos 7.15); more often salab of God's "sending" him (Judges 6.8; 2Sam 12.1; Isaiah 6.8; 42.19; 48.16; 61.1; Jer 25.4; 28.15; Ezek 13.6; Mal 3.1,23)
3. In the Targums the "naming the name" (qara' (be) sem) is consistently changed to rabbi (be) sum, in the sense of exaltation, "glorifying the name" (TDNT III 490, n.6)
4. How this "call" or election worked itself out in the life of the individual Israelite is a question that may be asked. One naturally thinks of the individual's faith and his loyalty to the covenant. But one cannot rule out a feature that is common to all religions - viz., the dialectic of the "holy" - any more than one can rule it out from the NT, or late Judaism. "You shall be holy, as I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 18.2 et al.) is a call with a fundamentally religious basis which presupposes a meaningful understanding of such terms as "holy", "unholy", "set apart", "calling," "consecrated," etc
5. klētoi hagioi is strikingly reminiscent of the mysterious miqra' qodes that one meets in Ex 12.16, in Lev 23 (passim) and in Num 28 and 29 (passim). (In Isaiah 1.13 and 4.5 the word miqra occurs without qodes)
Exodus 12.16 reads as follows in the RSV: "On the

first day you shall hold a holy assembly (miqra'qodes) and on the seventh day a holy assembly (do.); no work shall be done on those days; but what everyone must eat, that only may be prepared for you." The usual modern translation for miqra'qodes is, in fact, "holy assembly" or "convocation". And yet, it is by no means a certain translation. It is curious, for instance, to find the prohibition of work linked with the "holy assembly". The link would make much better sense if, instead of "holy assembly" one were to understand miqra'qodes as a "declaration of holiness". For this is how the LXX appears to have understood it: in the first instance (Ex 12.16 above), klēthēsetai hagia (it shall be called holy), and in the second instance, klētē hagia estai humin (it shall be called holy by you). (The Targum, admittedly, reads "irua'qaddis (plural. 'eru^cin qaddisⁱn) and the meaning is "holy convocation(s)". (So Jastrow). Nonetheless, as in the Hebrew miqra', so too there is an ambiguity here. In the Aramaic there is a double root 'ara', one of which means to "meet", "to join", and the other "to declare".

The idea of the "holy", of "sanctifying" or "setting apart" holy vessels, of "proclaiming the holiness" of certain days or seasons is commonplace in Rabbinic Judaism (cf Jastrow, Dictionary, s.v. qadas:piel). The noun qēduṣṣah means "the declaration of the sanctity of the day or the occasion, in prayer or at meals;" the qēduṣṣah 'al hak-kos means the "proclamation of the sanctity of the day over a cup (of wine)". Jastrow, s.v

6. So Bauer (Arndt-Gingrich). s.v.
7. The religious context is unmistakable. Therefore to exclude the idea of "separation" or "consecration" and with it the dialectical notion of the "holy" is to miss out on a very important element in Paul's outlook.

Examples from hellenistic circles are rare: one comes from the Metamorphoses of Apuleios - "the priest (of Isis) who is keklēmenos (called: ie in order to do certain things)"; another from Pausanias

(X,32,13) - again speaking of the initiates of the Isis cult: "there is no access to the sanctuary for any others except those whom Isis herself has previously honoured and called through dreams (visions)."

TDNT, III, 490

8. Hans Lietzmann, An die Korinther, I/II, ⁵1969, p32
9. E. Preuschen, Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch, Ed. W. Bauer, 1958, s.v.
Zorell in his NT Lexicon translates: "in eo vitae genere in quo (ad fidem Christianam) vocatus estforte etiam 1 Cor 1.26 huc revocari potest" (in that kind of life in which one is called (to Christian faith,.....perhaps 1 Cor 1.26 may also be recalled here). He refers to an etymology from Dion of Halicarnassus (Ant.Rom.IV,18,2): "There were six divisions, which the Romans call classes, naming them after the Greek klēsis." But the best authorities regard Dion's etymology as an invention of his own. (TDNT, III,493,n.6)
10. W. Bauer /Arndt-Gingrich/, s.v.
11. Erlangen edition, IV,158
12. In the Augsburg Confession the Lutheran idea of Beruf is only implicit and but partially developed. In Art XVI, the expression "Jeder nach seinem Beruf" (each one to his calling) only occurs in German and is not in the Latin, from which the official English translation was made. Other articles (XXVI and XXVII) mention the word "calling" or Beruf only in a passing way.
13. Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, tr. by Talcott Parsons, London 1930. The book was first published in 1905 and re-published in an expanded edition in 1920.

According to the OED the word "calling" means position, estate, or station in life. "Founded on 1 Cor 7.20...where it stands for the condition or position in which one was when called to salvation; but afterwards often mixed up with the

(previous) sense (viz, summons, invitation, or impulse of God to salvation or to his service)

1382 Wyclif: Eche man in what clepyng he was cleped, in that dwelle he.

1534 Tindale: in the same state wherein he was called.

1539 Cranmer: in the same callinge wherin he was called.

1582 Rheims: in the vocation that he was called.

1555 A sermon of Latimer: We are commanded...to apply ourselves to goodness, each one in his calling (Jeder nach seinem Beruf)

14. In pre-Reformation German translations klēsis is rendered either as Ruf, or Berufung, or Ruffunge; the verb as "Von Gott geruffet," or "gefordert." It is maintained by some that Luther was influenced by the German mystic Tauler, who wrote: "(peasants) follow their Ruf better than the geistliche Menschen (spiritual men) die auf ihrem Ruf Acht nicht haben (who have no regard for their calling)

15. Some German Catholic bibles do have the word Beruf, following Luther; but the Lutheran sense would not prevail in the Catholic mind

16. בְּנֵי עֹמֶר [בְּתוֹקָה וְבוֹ [תְּהִנָּה] וּבְמִלְאֲכֵתָהּ הִתְנַשֵּׁן:
[אֵל־תַּתְמָה] בְּפִעְלֵי אֶן הָאֲמֵן לִי וְקוּה לְאוֹרוֹ:

The spelling of hoq is defective, which is frequent in the Hebrew text of Sirach. diathēkē which can mean any form of established or statutory law or order (Quell, in TDNT II, 107), is used some ten times to translate hoq in the book of Sirach. (Zorell: hoq equals "pensum laboris"ie the duty of work)

17. Hebrew wēqawweh le'oro: "And hope for his light" ie illumination, guidance, salvation. What text lies behind the Greek version, it is not easy to determine.
The Vulgate text reads:

Condon, Calling, IBS 6, April 1984

Sta in testamento tuo, et in illo colloquere

Et in opere mandatorum tuorum veterasce

Ne manseris in operibus peccatorum;

Confide autem in Deo, et mane in loco tuo

(English translation:

Stand by your covenant, and talk about it(?)

And grow old as you do the work entrusted to you

Cut yourself off from the deeds of sinful men

But trust in God and hold on to your vocation)

All Hallows College

Dublin, 9