Theological Life Today In The 21st Century
ISSN 3141-8058
thema21.hu/en/

Nolo episcopari – 'Until We Find the One Man'

Kodácsy Tamás
Reformed Theological University of Sárospatak
ORCID: 0009-0002-9524-0375

Translated by: Kodácsy Tamás

English translation
Published: September 7, 2026
License: CC BY 4.0

Abstract. What happens when the election of a Reformed bishop turns into a campaign months before nominations, reducing the community to choosing from predetermined names? The Church's task is broader: not only to elect but also to nominate – to recognise and approach, as a community, those who are not campaigning, have not put themselves forward, and may never have considered themselves candidates for leadership. The tradition of nolo episcopari and Calvin's doctrine of calling remind us that church office arises neither from self-nomination nor from a publicly proclaimed inner conviction, but from the convergence of the community's external call with the secret call that remains before God and restrains ambition. The question, then, is not only whom we choose as bishop. Do we dare to seek out – and even approach – someone who would never have come forward on their own?

Keywords: püspökválasztás; jelölés; elhívás; vocatio arcana; Kálvin János; egyházkormányzás

"If our faith comments on government at all, its comment must be this – that the man should rule who does NOT think that he can rule. […] the Christian saint must say, 'Nolo episcopari.' If the great paradox of Christianity means anything, it means this – that we must take the crown in our hands, and go hunting in dry places and dark corners of the earth until we find the one man who feels himself unfit to wear it."[1] – writes G. K. Chesterton in Orthodoxy.

[1] Chesterton, Gilbert: Igazságot! Szent István Társulat, Budapest, 2004. 168.

The Christian saint's refusal evokes an ancient tradition: *nolo episcopari*, literally, 'I do not wish to be made a bishop'. The phrase concerns those who confer the office as much as the nominee.

What can this reluctance towards the episcopal call tell us today? More broadly, how should we understand the relationship among the various calls to ecclesiastical office? The question is especially pressing in the current church elections. Prospective candidates for bishop have begun appearing publicly at an early stage, effectively launching a campaign within the Reformed Church in Hungary several months before the elections and importing the logic of secular politics. In this campaign, a prospective candidate is someone who 'would accept nomination if nominated for the office of bishop or chief steward'.[2] Yet before the diocesan nominating assemblies, statements of intent – whether affirmative or negative – have no legal force. A person need not declare their willingness to serve until the nominating assembly, *after* the vote on nominations has taken place.[3]

Early declarations of intent readily import the practices of political elections into the Church. Potential candidates are first 'put forward' so that voters can get to know them; the community then chooses from among the people pre-selected and presented in this way. The Church's electoral system partly follows the same logic: only the candidates who receive the highest number of nominations, up to a maximum of three, may appear on the final ballot. Although this procedure is legally clear and workable, it is not derived from biblical precept. By quickly narrowing the field, it leaves less room for the community's prayerful discernment, questions and uncertainty. In the biblical call narratives, God's choice often overturns human hierarchies. Jesse did not even present David to Samuel; the youngest son had to be summoned from tending the sheep (1Sam 16). Ecclesiastical discernment should therefore attend not only to those who have gathered the most preliminary support, but also to those whom public opinion or the campaign has excluded from the outset. A viable candidate may be someone who has declined in advance, or said nothing at all, before the nominating assembly. This leaves room for the community to discuss what it needs from its leaders, rather than allowing a secular-style campaign or candidates' own statements to set the terms. Attention can then turn to people who have remained outside the campaign spotlight. Church tradition suggests that precisely such people deserve serious consideration. Why?

1. An inner calling is not an authorisation to hold office

We generally consider and recommend pastors and elders who would accept nomination. They often speak of an inner call to office. But if only three people can be

[2] PAROKIA.HU: *A megalapozott döntésekért,* https://www.parokia.hu/v/a-megalapozott-donteseket/Letöltve: 2026.09.04.

[3] *KÉZIKÖNYV a Magyarországi Református Egyház választási szabályairól szóló 2022. évi IV. törvény alkalmazásához,*https://reformatusegyhaz.hu/documents/3843/KEZIKONYV_a_valasztasi_torvenyhez_2026.09.02.pdf21. Letöltve: 2026.09.04.

nominated for an office, how has the Holy Spirit given four or five people the same inner call? Is the Spirit of the Lord unaware of the relevant provisions of our Church's electoral law? Or is someone misreading the Spirit's call? Can the community test whose inner call is genuine? These are the wrong questions. Reformed theology does not recognise a *vocatio interna*to a particular church office. The office-specific understanding of inner calling emerged later within the Protestant churches and was already being criticised at the beginning of the twentieth century. Publicly asserting such an inner call – and the anachronism lies precisely in making it *public* – becomes especially problematic when the external call, by which the church community recognises a person's fitness for ministry, weakens or is distorted. During the socialist era, when the state influenced the selection of church leaders, an appeal to a personal inner call could understandably carry more weight than an external call compromised by institutional interests. In that politically constrained setting, the language of a distinctive inner call became more prominent. State pressure distorted the external call: loyalty to the state, political reliability and acceptance of the 'peace priest' line could take priority over suitability. Yet even within those constraints, God raised up spiritual giants in the Church – among them Sándor Joó, Kálmán Cseri and József Farkas – who became influential leaders for generations without holding high office. That period may have left us with a tendency to seek a prospective bishop's private conviction and personal call, rather than the external call emphasised by Calvin or the candidate's record as a theologian and pastor. Today we can more freely ask whom the community recognises and calls, and whose gifts, fruits of ministry and charisms best fit the duties of the office.

Luther's insight was that God's call is not confined to priests and monks. It is universal, and every baptised person may fulfil a task and mission in the world, whether as a street sweeper, a farmer or a pastor.[4] In the same vein, Calvin does not connect inner calling with a particular office but with the conversion of every believer; every Christian is therefore to fulfil their duty in the world: 'This inward [inner] calling is therefore the infallible pledge of salvation' (Inst. 3.24.2). We testify to this inner call – that is, to salvation – and to God's redeeming power in word and deed. Because the inner call is universal, it cannot be invoked as a specific 'inner call' to a particular office. There is, however, a third call to office. Unlike the inner call, it is not publicly articulated but held in silence; it is not a testimony but a restraint; it cannot be investigated because it remains secret.

2. The external call and the secret testimony of the heart

The distinctive importance of the external call lies in the fact that, in accordance with the public order of the Church, it determines who is best suited to each office. This discernment cannot be limited to interviewing those who have already declared

[4] Kodácsy Tamás, *Ökumené az egyetemes papság elvében*, in: Puskás Attila; Perendy László; Hoványi Márton (szerk.): Reformáció és ökumenikus párbeszéd. Teológiai tanulmányok – Varia theologica 9. Szent István Társulat, Budapest, 2018. 143-155. 147.

their willingness to serve. An individual's call can be understood only within the common calling of God's people. God's call is ordinarily mediated: it becomes recognisable through the preaching of the Word, the teaching of the Church, and the community's discernment of needs, gifts and opportunities for service.[5] Yet if the external call receives exclusive emphasis, a related third dimension – what Calvin calls the 'secret call' (*vocatio arcana*) – disappears from view.

'I am speaking of the external and formal call which relates to the public order of the Church, while I say nothing of that secret call of which every minister is conscious before God, but has not the Church as a witness of it; I mean, the good testimony of our heart, that we undertake the offered office neither from ambition nor avarice, nor any other selfish feeling, but a sincere fear of God and desire to edify the Church.' (Inst. 4.3.11).

Calvin does not deny this personal dimension of ministry before God, but he does not make it a publicly verifiable basis for ecclesiastical procedure. The Church cannot witness the motives of the heart directly. A person's inward recognition of God's call cannot serve as public proof of that call. An appeal to it alone does not support wise discernment; it invites an unauthorised analysis of hearts, requiring the community to judge inner certainties it cannot witness. Reformation history also warns that a sense of prophetic mission elevated above communal and scriptural discernment can become destructive, as shown by Thomas Müntzer and, later, the 'Kingdom of Münster'. This context helps to explain Calvin's restraint: he regards the secret call as real before God, but not as a subject for the Church's judgement. Publicly proclaiming the secret call is showy and contradicts Calvinist humility: before God, the candidate must lay aside ambition, the desire for power and greed, seeking not personal advantage but the building up of the Church. The inward conviction expressed by *nolo episcopari* properly remains unproclaimed; such silence is integral to a Reformed understanding of vocation.

3. From reluctance to an obedient 'yes'

The external and secret calls should not be treated as two independent certainties. They meet within the candidate and shape one another. The secret call is characterised not by striving but by restraint. The heart's inward reserve gives way to a sincere response to the encouragement, invitation and recognition conveyed by the external call, while remaining alert to the temptation of power. At first, this may take the form of withdrawal – a legitimate expression of nolo episcopari. In the Old Testament call narratives, mission begins not with human ambition but with divine initiative. Moses protests his unfitness and inability to speak; Jeremiah points to his youth; Isaiah confesses his impurity; and Amos denies belonging to a guild of prophets. Jonah's flight, however, warns that reluctance is not in itself a virtue: it may express humility, but it may also be disobedience. The authenticity of the

[5] Schuurman, Douglas J.: „Vocation." Encyclopedia of Christianity Online. Brill, https://referenceworks.brill.com/display/entries/ECO/V.17.xml

prophetic mission lies not in protest alone, but in the eventual obedient response to the divine call.

Church history is full of reluctant leaders. According to tradition, Martin of Tours hid to avoid becoming a bishop and was betrayed by cackling geese; Ambrose tried to evade episcopal election; and Augustine accepted ordination in tears. During the Reformation, Farel pressed Calvin to remain in Geneva. Their reluctance showed that they had not sought office for themselves, but had accepted it in response to the community’s call. The lesson of nolo episcopari is not that persistent protest alone qualifies someone for leadership. A church office should be neither a prize to be sought nor merely a burden imposed from without. It is where call and response, gift and order, conscience and community meet. In a healthy Church, there is room for reluctance; gifts can be recognised, ambition restrained and mistakes corrected. Pastors and elders alike can freely say ‘yes’ to what they did not seek for themselves – but not before the nominating assembly.