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## Preaching 2 The Call to the Christian Ministry

### The Context of the Call

It ought to go without saying that no one should ever dream of entering the pastoral ministry, or for that matter missionary or any other form of “full time service” without a clear and definite call from God.

The Christian ministry is not just a profession or a means of earning a living. Neither is it a desirable social distinction or a means of personal advancement. It is a task whose origin is to be found in the will and purpose of God and so the initiative in calling men to His service rests with Him. It is the Holy Spirit who appoints overseers over the people of God (Acts 20:28). Pastors and teachers who are responsible for preparing God’s people for works of service (Ephesians 4:11) are gifts of the ascended Lord to His church. Before men preach they must first of all be sent (Matthew 9:38; Romans 10:15).

This call should be seen in the wider context of the call which comes to every Christian to serve the Lord. It is quite mistaken to imagine that only pastors, evangelists and missionaries are called by God, for every genuine conversion is followed by a call to service of some kind. There is, therefore, a sense in which every true Christian should see himself in “full time service”. The renewed emphasis on this aspect of New Testament teaching is one of the many debts which we owe to the Reformation. Every Christian is a priest and should look for a vocation to serve God both in the church and in the world. In fact it may be said that the priesthood of all believers implies also the prophethood of all believers. When J.G.Oncken, who founded much modern Baptist work on the Continent, was asked how many members were in his churches he mentioned a certain number. When he was then asked how many missionaries his churches had, he stated exactly the same number, adding, “With us every member is a missionary.”

But while every Christian is under obligation to serve the Lord and to spread the Gospel as his gifts and opportunities allow, not every one is called to the ministry of the Gospel in the more specialised sense of that term. In this case a man separates himself from every secular calling to devote himself entirely to spiritual work, at the same time depending on the people of God for his maintenance since all his time and energy are directed to their interests. Clearly not every one is called to this kind of work nor has everyone received the gifts for it. If all were shepherds and overseers (1 Peter 5:2) there should be no one left to be fed and overseen!

### The Biblical Teaching about the Call

It is quite surprising just how much of the Biblical record is concerned with the call of those who in a special way were God’s messengers and the undershepherds of His flock. The stories of men like Moses (Exodus 3:1-10), Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-8), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:4-10), Ezekiel (Ezekiel 3:1-4), and the apostles (Mark 3:14; Acts 9:1-15)

all illustrate the reality and power of God's call to His servants. Furthermore the prophetic phrase, "Thus says the Lord", and the apostolic terms "steward" (1 Corinthians 4:11) and "ambassador" (2 Corinthians 5:20) all suggest a definite appointment to ministry by a superior who expects His message to be faithfully delivered. As Ian Macpherson says, "if God means you for the ministry, He will tell you so Himself. He will break the news to you personally. He will not suffer you simply to guess, to speculate, and to conjecture. He will make you dead sure. You will know past all doubts that this and this alone is to be your personal destiny. You will hear the call." In other words, it is not enough for a man to understand that a need exists or to feel that he has the necessary ability to be a minister of the Gospel. There is no substitute for a personal call to the heart which leaves no option but to obey.

At the same time the Scriptures contain solemn warnings against attempting to speak in God's name without being called and sent by Him. Every aspirant to the Christian ministry ought to ponder carefully the words of the Lord recorded in Jeremiah 23:21,32, "I did not send these prophets yet they have run with their message. I did not speak to them yet they have prophesied... They do not benefit these people in the least." Spurgeon expresses the same idea in a more modern idiom, "that hundreds have missed their way and stumbled against a pulpit is sorrowfully evident from the fruitless ministries and decaying churches which surround us... it would be a curious and painful subject for reflection – the frequency with which men in the possession of reason mistake the end of their existence and aim at objects which they were never intended to pursue."

Without a definite call from God no man can be truly happy in the work or able to accept without resentment the many difficulties and self-denials which a conscientious application to the task inevitably involves. W.E.Sangster warns the man who enters the ministry without a real call that he may begin happily enough but eventually the chill indifference of the world will freeze him and then the middle years will come and mock his early enjoyment at hearing himself. "Nothing can keep him going with real devotion if he cannot look back and say to himself, 'I was called'."

### The Nature of the Call

Every genuine call has its own uniqueness as it is mediated through personal circumstances to the individual soul. For one, the call involves a steadily growing conviction over many months, while for another there is a sudden awareness of the constraint of God on his life. Frequently the sense of call comes through the reading of the Scriptures or through the challenge of members of the church to which a man belongs. It is deepened as, with the eyes of the Master, he sees the crowd harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36). Their pathetic condition creates a desire to say to them in the words of Wesley, "O let me commend my Saviour to you."

But while the manner in which the call may come varies from person to person, there are certain things which all genuine calls have in common. There is a strong sense of divine initiative at work in a man's life and an overwhelming conviction that he has been personally commissioned to preach the Word of God. He is in the grip of an iron hand from which he cannot escape and he knows that he cannot be fully effective for

God in any other work. The man may have resisted the call for a long time and may even have sought to evade it in various ways, but in the end he can hold back no longer. For him the ministry of the Word is not a preference among alternatives; at the end of the day he has no alternative. Indeed there are moments in his experience when he feels that he was born for this very work. With Jeremiah he experiences God's word in his heart like a burning fire (Jeremiah 20:9) and with Paul he can say, "I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:16). The yearning to preach finally becomes an obsession which will not let him go. A man thinking of the ministry who lacks this kind of conviction and is content to continue in his present occupation should by all means be persuaded to stay there.

An awareness of God's call awakens various emotions in a man's heart. He is amazed at the wonder and immense privilege of being personally commissioned to preach Christ's unsearchable riches. The solemn responsibility which is placed on him insists that he should be his best for God. It banishes all flippancy and triviality and ensures that he goes about his work with dignity and humility.

But at the same time the divine call generates a deep sense of unworthiness and inadequacy, and a consequent shrinking from the work. The minister of the Gospel constantly knows Paul's experience of "weakness and fear and much trembling" (1 Cor. 2:3). Such a sense of utter unworthiness and insufficiency has always characterized the great men of God. Martin Luther used to say that if he could choose his calling again he would prefer to dig or do anything rather than take the office of a minister. John Calvin after he had completed his magnum opus, the "Institutes of the Christian Religion", said he felt "insufficient to undertake the weight of the ministerial function."

### The Testing of the Call

It is one thing to feel called to the ministry but how can any one be sure that the call is genuinely from God? This is an exceedingly important question because for certain kinds of people the preacher's office holds a great and fatal fascination. Impressionable young men can be swayed by a passion to imitate a great preacher whom they constantly idolize, or they long to enjoy a sense of power over a great congregation, or they are drawn by the supposed honour and rewards which the work is believed to bring.

At this point, some very fundamental questions need to be fearlessly and truthfully answered. The most basic one of all concerns the candidate's personal experience of God's saving grace. Professor James Denney insisted, "No man ought to preach nor can he really preach who cannot make great assertions about Jesus Christ." In similar vein D.L.Moody used to say, "No man can lead another nearer to Christ than he is himself."

The next question must concern the motives which drive a man into the ministry. Is a desire for God's glory and to do good to others really uppermost in his mind? How strong and compelling is the sense of call? The oft-quoted advice remains ever valid, "Do not enter the ministry – or go to the mission field – if you can possibly avoid it." But on the other hand, as Spurgeon put it, "If you can say that for all the wealth of both the Indies you could not and dare not espouse any other calling, as to be put

aside from preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, then depend upon it, if other things are equally satisfactory, you have the signs of this apostleship.” Is this supposed call the latest bright idea or does it persist and grow with time despite rebuffs and all the inducements to the contrary – not least when promotion and an increased salary are offered in one’s present employment?

At the same time the counsel of spiritually minded people and especially the local fellowship to which a man belongs, must be sought. The opinion of those who live near to God is never to be lightly set aside. The duty of counselling and commending a character for the ministry can create problems for a local church as the members feel a strong affinity with a young man who has grown up in the fellowship from his earliest days, and they are also aware of the presence of members of his family in the church. Yet the nettle has to be grasped and the issues have to be very honestly and frankly faced. Is this man characterized by spirituality of life, and is he a man of prayer? Does he have a grasp of basic Christian truth? Is he a loyal and dependable church member? Does he know men and human nature? Does he have the ability to speak clearly and effectively and does he have sufficient intellectual ability to be able to handle correctly the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15)? Has he already preached to the profit of the people of God and are there evident signs of God’s blessing on his work? Despite obvious immaturity at present, does he appear to possess the potential to be one day an effective minister of the Gospel?

But it should be added that while the opinions of mature Christians are obviously to be taken very seriously, they are not to be treated as infallible. There have been occasions when some of the greatest preachers were initially discouraged by well wishers, when they were turned down by their denominations or its colleges, or when their first attempt to preach in a college sermon class was regarded as a joke if not an utter disaster.

In the end the final confirmation of a man’s sense of call comes when a local fellowship recognises his gift and invites him to be its pastor. As an old Baptist Confession puts it, “Although every believer is a member of the body of Christ yet is not everyone therefore a teacher, elder or deacon but only such as are orderly appointed to such offices. The vocation or election of the said officer is performed by the church, with fasting and prayer to God.” Thus the external call must confirm the internal call before the work of the ministry can be undertaken.

It is worth adding that our Baptist forefathers took very seriously the work of the ministry. This was demonstrated in the very exacting standards they imposed on those who claimed to be called to the work and in their solemn ordination services which included, of course, the scriptural practice of the laying on of hands. A few years ago some one caustically remarked that whereas in the old days ordination services were preceded by days of fasting and prayer, nowadays such services are usually accompanied by a tea which consists of eating sticky buns and telling funny stories. Changed days!

One final word

One more point must be made and it deserves to be underlined most emphatically. No man should ever assume that he is called to the Christian ministry merely because he is unable to get a job or because he has failed at every one he has ever tried.

The Christian ministry needs and deserves the very best and most capable of men. Ideally they should be those who could have got to the top of the tree in any other work but who could not keep out of the ministry because of the overwhelming constraint which the divine hand placed on them.

Let Spurgeon have the last word on this matter. "The ministry needs the very best of men and not those who cannot do anything else ... a really valuable minister would have excelled at anything. There is scarcely anything impossible to a man who can keep a congregation together for years and be the means of edifying them for hundreds of consecutive Sabbaths: he must be possessed of some abilities and be by no means a fool or a ne'er do well. Jesus Christ deserves the best men to preach His Cross, and not the empty headed and the shiftless."