

THE CALL TO THE MINISTRY

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The myths which circulate with regard to the call to the ministry are legion. The most common, probably, is that such a call is a matter of special revelation. Men observe that prophets and apostles were directly commissioned by God and expect the experience of pastors to be similar. This is to forget, however, the uniqueness of the prophetic and apostolic offices. These men were the organs of special revelation, charged with laying the foundation of the church and endowed with infallible authority and plenipotentiary power. Ministers stand in a different succession and Charles Bridges is surely correct when he writes, "Having no extraordinary commission we do not expect an immediate and extraordinary call". Basically, our vocation comes through providential guidance, biblical teaching and personal reflection and prayer.

Not if you can help it

Equally misleading is the familiar advice, "Do not enter the ministry if you can help it". Not even the fact that it is warmly endorsed by Spurgeon can redeem this principle from the charge of absurdity. This is probably why even its most ardent advocates do not apply it consistently. We do not, for example, apply it to elders and deacons. How many office-bearers would we have if every person elected delayed acceptance until God made it impossible for him to resist? Nor do we apply it to the problems of guidance in general, arguing that the only way to be sure of God's will is to resist it, confident that if something really is His will He will eventually simply force it on us. That, surely, would be to tempt the Lord our God.

In actual fact, it is perfectly possible to disobey a call to the ministry, due to fear or timidity or the pressure of other ambitions or the constraints of relatives or a mistaken waiting for blinding, visionary light or even a false modesty. Too much is made of the reluctance of men like Moses and Jonah. Jonah was blatantly guilty of fleeing from a divine vocation and the Bible explicitly records

God's disapproval of Moses' excuses: "The anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses". That is a high price to pay for a reputation for humility. There is a very real possibility of divine chastening for those who, in the face of divine preparation and endowment refuse to make themselves available for the ministry of the church. "To intrude into the pulpit without a call is doubtless a sin," wrote Robert Dabney: "But to stay out of the pulpit when called to enter it is also a sin, a sin which can only proceed from evil motives and which must naturally result in the damnation of souls which should have been saved through the disobedient Christian's preaching, but were not, and which must bring him under the frown and chastisement of an offended Saviour."

The leadings of providence

Another area where we can fall into serious misunderstanding is in connection with "the leadings of providence". Thee do, of course, have their own importance. If a man has no opportunity for securing basic education or suffers from chronic ill-health or has a serious speech-impediment, then it is fairly obvious that God never intended him for the Christian ministry.

Yet providence is a far from infallible guide. When Jonah was fleeing from God's will everything at first went splendidly and he might easily have argued that "doors opened in a remarkable way". It may indeed often happen that those whom God never called have an easy passage through the years of formal training and at the end of these have no difficulty in finding a settlement. This is only to apply, in the context of the ministry, what is often true of the ungodly in other connections: "They are not in trouble like other men" (Ps. 73: 5). On the other hand, those who are truly called may have to face many difficulties both during the years of training and in the actual work itself. Remember, for example, Paul's experience as described in 2 Cor. 11: 23ff: labour, stripes, imprisonments, rods, stonings, shipwrecks, perils, robbers, false brethren, weariness, pain, hunger, thirst, cold and nakedness "besides that which cometh on me daily, the cares of all the churches". Had Paul followed "the leadings of providence" he would surely have concluded that he was never meant to be a missionary.

Other men in the later history of the church have faced similar trials. Brainerd, Whitefield and McCheyne served through appalling ill-health; Calvin, in Geneva, faced many years of internal friction and opposition; Thomas Boston “passed two years and three months in the character of a probationer”, waiting for a congregation to give him a call. “These years,” he wrote afterwards, “brought in continued scenes of trial to me; being, through the mercy of God, generally acceptable to the people; but could never fall into the good graces of those who had the stroke in the settling of parishes.” Even after his ordination he had to be content with the relative obscurity of two very small country parishes, Simprin and Ettrick; to say nothing of the charges of doctrinal error brought against him during the Marrow controversy. The case of John Brown of Haddington is equally interesting. He had to overcome almost hopeless educational disadvantages and then suffered the mortification of being accused of witchcraft because his progress was so remarkable.

These experiences should remind us of the need to keep a sense of proportion with regard to difficulties, discouragements, closed doors and “impossibilities”. Sometimes, maybe, these things are meant for our guidance. But just as often, they are trials of our faith or messengers of Satan to buffet us or part of our ministerial preparation, equipping us to comfort others with the comfort God gives to ourselves. Doors will often open for the false prophet and just as often appear to close for the true one.

An irrepressible conviction

But there is a fourth myth at the opposite extreme: that an irrepressible conviction of our own vocation is tantamount to a divine call. Usually, such a conviction is traced to a mystical or transcendental experience, a voice or a vision giving a compelling inner certainty.

The trouble with this is that such experiences are authoritative only for the person who has them. They have no value for others and they certainly do not warrant the church ordaining a man without carefully enquiring whether he possesses the spiritual gifts and the personal character which the Bible says are essential in a pastor. Sometimes, a very cursory examination will make plain that the

applicant is deluded. He turns out to be feeble-minded or physically disabled or spiritually proud or censorious and autocratic or even heretical. None of these defects, apparently, is sufficient to prevent a man feeling convinced he is called to the ministry. But all of them, individually or in any possible combination, are quite sufficient to entitle the church to disagree with him.

In some other instances, applications from such a source are purely tentative and exploratory. The applicant regards his own view of his calling as final and he feels no need to submit it to the church for ratification. If one denomination does not recognize him, he will cheerfully go to another; and should none recognize him, he is quite prepared to found his own, happy so long as he can hear the sound of his own voice and unperturbed by the fact that he has excommunicated Christendom. All interviews with candidates for the ministry should therefore contain the question: What will you do if we refuse your application? and if they are not prepared to listen to the judgment of the church we should treat them as heathens and publicans (Mt. 18: 17).

Not a call to evangelism

One further point deserves a brief mention: Men are constantly confusing the call to the ministry with the call to evangelism. It is assumed that the aim of the office is the conversion of sinners, that the basic requirement is the ability to preach to the unsaved and the unchurched and that the final seal of divine approval will be “souls for our hire”.

In the New Testament, however, the work of the pastor is basically quite distinct from that of the evangelist. The pastor is the overseer and teacher of a settled congregation, ministering primarily to people who know the Lord. This does not mean that he has no evangelistic function. He knows that among his regular hearers there are some who are not Christians. He is also concerned for the children of believers; and he is always conscious of the possibility of strangers dropping in to the services. But his basic ministry is to feed the flock and if he spends his life trying to convert the converted and to drum the most elementary doctrines into his people as if they never could move on to solid food the result will be zero growth in the life

of his congregation. Conversely, anyone who can really evangelise is wasting his time in the pastorate. He should be in the spiritual wastelands bringing Christ to the ignorant and uninitiated.

Is it not possible that much of the neurosis in the ministry is due to this confusion? Men are being judged – and are judging themselves – by the wrong criteria. The pastor is not expected to be a Whitefield through whom multitudes are added to the church daily. He is the shepherd of a gathered and settled flock, concerned with the spiritual, qualitative growth of individuals and congregations. The criterion by which he should be judged is not the annual rate of conversions but the progress of his congregation in doctrine, in holiness, in brotherly love and in missionary and evangelistic zeal. The gifts that constitute his calling are not those indispensable to an itinerant, frontier evangelism but those that will enable him, week after inexorable week, to feed the church over which God has made him an overseer.

Myths aside

Myths aside, then what does constitute a call to the Christian ministry? Basically, three things: a God-given desire to engage in the work; God's bestowal of the necessary gifts; and God's leading the church to ordain the individual to a particular congregation.

Desire

Normally, when God calls to the ministry he implants a desire for the work. Paul refers to this in 1 Tim. 3: 1, "If a man desires the office of a bishop he desires a good work." Each of the verbs used indicates *strong desire*. In fact, the second one (*epithumei*) is used in Gal. 5: 17 to indicate the urgency with which the flesh lusts against the Spirit. Spurgeon is justified, therefore, in saying that "the first sign of the heavenly call is an intense, all-absorbing desire for the work. In order to a true call to the ministry there must be an irresistible, over-whelming craving and raging thirst for telling to others what God has done to our own souls."

Two cautions are necessary, however.

First, the absence of desire is not in itself decisive. Some men are truly called who, to begin with, shrink back with horror from the very idea. Sometimes, in fact, the call of the church has come to men like a bolt out of the blue. The classic instance of this is John Knox, who at first resisted all exhortations to preach in public, arguing that he did not consider himself to have a call. Without his knowledge, however, the garrison at St. Andrews resolved that a call should be given to him publicly. A day was fixed for this purpose and after a sermon on the election of ministers, John Rough, chaplain to the garrison, suddenly turned to Knox and addressed him as follows: "In the name of God and of His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the name of all that presently call upon you by my mouth, I charge you that you refuse not this holy vocation, but as you tender the glory of God, the increase of Christ's kingdom, the edification of your brethren and the comfort of me, whom you understand well enough to be oppressed by the multitude of labours, that you take the public office and charge of preaching even as you look to avoid God's heavy displeasure, and desire that he shall multiply His graces unto you." The congregation there and then publicly endorsed Rough's charge. Knox, says McCrie, made an ineffectual attempt to address the assembly but found the whole situation overwhelming, rushed out and shut himself in his room, "his countenance and behaviour, from that day till the day that he was compelled to present himself in the public place of preaching sufficiently declaring the grief and trouble of his heart".

The second and opposite caution is that the presence of the desire, however ardent, is not in itself an infallible sign of a call to the ministry. The desire itself must be scrutinised.

For example, what motive lies behind it? Why does a man desire to be a minister? It may be because he desires the prestige that goes along with it; or because it affords a high measure of security and abundant opportunity for seclusion and study; or because it gives us something to be lords over; or even because it affords a wide and attractive variety of job-experiences – public speaking, counseling, administration, politicking. These are very real dangers and even the best-intentioned can hardly give a confident answer to the question: "Are not zeal for the honour of God, love to Jesus Christ and desire of saving souls, your great motives and chief inducements to enter into

the function of the holy ministry, and not worldly designs and interests?”

It is also important to be sure that the desire is realistic. Sometimes a yearning for the ministry is naïve and visionary. Where there is a true vocation the desire is directed to the work as defined in Scripture – a labour (1 Tim. 5: 7) and a hardship (2 Tim. 2: 3). The problems are legion: the sheer number of services, the mental burden of incessant sermon preparation, the unending routine of visits, the encroachment of one’s work into family life, the loneliness of pastors in isolated situations and the humiliations incidental to living in a tied house. Added to this is the problem of constant opposition: the disaffected in one’s own congregation, the schemers in ecclesiastical politics and, above all, the ceaseless activities of false teachers. One learns that protestations of love and loyalty cannot be taken at face-value; one faces the heart-break of backsliding among one’s own people; and, occasionally, the tragedy of apostasy on the part of those from whom much was expected.

Any realistic desire for the ministry must be aware of these aspects of the work; and yet be prepared in God’s strength to face them and even to count it a privilege to endure them.

Gifts

Where God gives the desire He will also confer the necessary gifts. The reference, of course, is to charismata – to spiritual gifts – not to educational attainments or business acumen or professional experience. These may have their own value. But from a theological point of view the indispensable pre-requisite for the ministry is the possession of God-given and God-sustained charismata.

God confers these gifts at three different levels.

First, at the level of leadership. Pastors (including what we call *ruling elders*) are *over* the church of God (1 Thess. 5:12). They must, therefore, have the gift of government (1 Cor. 12: 28), including such qualities as initiative, courage, vigour, independence of spirit, dynamism, imagination and wisdom. It is absurd to move a man from the back seat of a church to the pulpit and expect the transition to

work wonders. The proper candidates for ordination are those who have been active in bringing outsiders to church, distributing tracts, volunteering for mundane and menial tasks, offering their homes for fellowship and generating interest in Bible-study and evangelism.

Secondly, the pastor requires counselling gifts. For much of his time he will be dealing not with large audiences but with individuals looking for guidance on a vast variety of problems – personal, marital, social and professional. As stress within our society increases and neuroses multiply this side of the minister’s work will become more and more important. To handle it hopefully he must be sympathetic and sensitive, human and approachable, firm in his convictions and yet open to the lessons of experience, able to assess men and situations rapidly, unimpeachable in the matter of confidences and able to rebuke without infuriating and to condemn without driving to despair.

Thirdly, the pastor must have preaching gifts. To this end he must have a competent grasp of the Christian message in all its aspects, doctrinal, ethical and experiential. But he must also possess the ability to communicate the message – the quality which Paul defines as “apt to teach”. This is not the same as being, in today’s terms, “a good communicator”. There is a tension between the art of the rhetorician – “the enticing words of men’s wisdom” – and preaching in the Spirit. Nor does it mean mere fluency. An unceasing verbal torrent can often be aimless, empty and unstructured, serving only to hide from the speaker the poverty of his own thought. The teaching charisma, by contrast, is the ability to express and illustrate gospel lucidly and cogently.

Paul also insists that the preacher should be able to refute objections to the Christian message (Titus 1: 9). Outside the church, believers face an incessant assault on their most basic convictions and although it would be unrealistic (and unbiblical) to expect every pastor to be conversant with the thought of Darwin and Marx, Freud and Heidegger, the pulpit must do all in its power to protect the flock from the chill winds of anti-Christian thought and even to enable the church to carry the battle to the enemy.

Even this brief analysis of the necessary gifts is sufficient to give rise to serious heart-searching on the part of those contemplating the holy ministry. Clearly, no one is adequate to the work. Even John Knox, as we saw, felt himself utterly unprepared and David Brainerd was frequently depressed “considering my great unfitness for the work of the ministry, my present deadness and total inability to do anything to the glory of God.” In the last analysis, of course, we gladly recognize that it is not for us to evaluate ourselves and leave it to the church to decide whether it can use us and if so where. But two things we can do. We can stir up – fan into flame – the gifts God has given us; and we can pray to God to increase our gifts, taking courage again from the example of Brainerd, who notes at one point in his diary, “Was enabled to cry to God with fervency for ministerial qualifications.”

The call of the church

The third step in a vocation to the ministry is the call of the church. This is something we have tended to seriously underestimate – quite inconsistently. In the case of Elders and Deacons we have regarded it as decisive and left little to individual initiative. It would be unthinkable for a man to suddenly announce that he was called to be a Deacon and expected the church to take the necessary steps to ordination. Admittedly, the problem is complicated today by two factors: the long years of training for the ministry and the expectation that the church will provide for a minister’s maintenance. But neither of these can alter the theological fact that ultimately a man is called to the ministry only by the church electing and ordaining him. The individual’s preliminary agonizing as to his fitness for the work is painful enough. But at the end of it he is still not a minister. He is only a candidate offering himself to the service of the church and professing a willingness to acquiesce in its judgment. If unfit men finally enter the ministry, the mistake is the church’s, not the individual’s.

In the practice of the Free Church, the notion of the church’s calling must be extended to include not only the final step but all those that lead up to it: preliminary recognition by the Kirk Session, the Presbytery and the General Assembly (through one of its committees); continuous assessment through all the years of training;

licensing trials; and, at last, the call from a particular church and ordination to its pastoral oversight.

In these various assessments, the church is bound to look closely at the issues already mentioned: Why does the candidate desire to enter the ministry? And does he possess the gifts necessary for counselling, preaching and leading? But the church must also look at wider issues.

For example, we have no right to ordain a novice. Care must be taken, of course, not to define the concept too narrowly. Paul ordained to the eldership in Galatia men who had been Christians for only a few months (Acts 14: 23). Furthermore, by the time a man comes to be ordained he has invariably been under the scrutiny of the church for several years. It still remains questionable, however, whether it is wise to encourage young men to declare themselves publicly as candidates for the ministry within a few months of their conversion. The same is true of men newly admitted to a particular denomination. There may be much misunderstanding on both sides and it seems only appropriate to delay ordination until the individual and the church are firmly bonded together.

The church must also look carefully at simple questions of general character, on which the New Testament lays a quite astonishing stress. A man must be blameless as far as outsiders are concerned (1 Tim. 3: 7). His life must be free from scandal. He must not be self-willed, obstinate or autocratic. He must not be covetous, irascible or violent. On the contrary, he must be vigilant, disciplined, patient and magnanimous.

Naturally, questions of spiritual character are equally important. It goes without saying that the applicant should be genuinely converted. Yet the question should always be put by the interviewing committee, both because the answer cannot be taken for granted and because if a man cannot tell what God has done for his soul he probably cannot tell anything else. Beyond that, it is clear from Acts 6: 3-5 that candidates for the ministry should be “full of the Holy Spirit and of faith”. Not only *believers* and not only *spiritual* but *full*. They should be eminent in personal piety, fully and habitually under

the control of the Spirit. Holy Spirit baptism and Holy Spirit filling are indispensable pre-requisites to biblical ordination.

Again, the church must look at the applicant's reputation as a family man. Specifically: Does he have proper control of his children? Does he bring them up in the knowledge of the Lord? Does he counsel them in the Lord? Or has he by easy-going indifference turned them into sons of Belial, apostate from the church? Or by harsh and inconsistent discipline provoked and estranged them? Does he nourish and cherish his wife and deny himself for her, as Christ did for the church? Does he command her loyalty and respect? And with regard to the extended family: Does he honour his (and his wife's) father and mother? Does he provide for aged and needy relatives (1 Tim. 5: 16)? Paul's reasons for asking such questions are devastatingly simple: "If a man does not know how to run his own house, how can he attend to the church of God?" (1 Tim. 3: 5).

Equally important is the question of a man's ability to handle personal relationships. To a large extent, the ministry consists of man-management, and this makes it a potential disaster area for those who are painfully shy, carelessly extrovert or tactless and insensitive. No one who finds it difficult to relate to other human beings can hope to motivate, discipline and inspire so that every talent in a congregation is fully used and individuals of diverse gifts and temperaments are moulded into a harmonious and effective whole.

Finally, the church must be satisfied with the temperament of the candidate. Not that ministers should be expected to have ideal temperaments. One of the assets they bring to their work is sympathy and that is only possible if they share the susceptibilities of their people. Moreover, some men with fairly serious temperamental problems – for example, the depressive David Brainerd – have been very useful ministers. But the Bible does lay down some very firm guide-lines. Those who are short-tempered are ruled out by Paul's insistence that Bishops must not be "soon angry" (Tit. 1: 7). Those who are over-bearing and arrogant are ruled out by Peter's warning against behaving as if we were "lords over God's heritage" (1 Pet. 5: 3). More broadly, we must surely have serious misgivings about admitting applicants with histories of psychiatric disorders or tendencies that way. There is indeed a place in the ordinary

membership of the church for the victims of nervous breakdowns, clinical depression, neurotic anxiety, paranoia and other forms of mental illness. One may even hope that in the Christian fellowship such people will find a comfort and support unavailable elsewhere. But to impose upon them the burdens of ministry is unfair both to themselves and to the church. The stresses of the pastorate are considerable and may easily induce irretrievable breakdown in those of fragile personality. There is nothing sadder than to see men who might have led perfectly satisfying lives in secular careers broken by pastoral burdens and frustrations they were never equipped to bear. The church, on the other hand, has the right to look to its leaders for strength. If, instead, the pastors themselves are weak, nervous and neurotic, where is the flock to go? A situation can develop all too easily in which the church exhausts itself trying to heal its healers and comfort its comforters.

The Free Church at the moment has good reason to thank God for the quality of those training for its ministry. But our vigilance must be unceasing. Whatever a man's potential to disrupt or deaden the church, so long as he remains an ordinary member, it is increased a hundred-fold by ordaining him to the Eldership or the Ministry. For ourself, we are prepared to give every applicant for membership the benefit of the doubt. With regard to the ministry we are more and more inclined to act on the opposite principle – to seek not merely an uncontradicted but an accredited profession of a call. “If he's doubtful he's out.” To spare the flock.

Further reading:

C H Spurgeon, “The Call to the Ministry” in *Lectures To My Students*

R L Dabney, “What is a Call to the Ministry?” in
Discussions: Evangelical and Theological, Vol. 2