

# **The Call to Ministry**

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It is imperative that one possess a clear, distinctive call of God upon his life to the ministry of the Word of God. Though there is a general call to every believer to service within His Kingdom, for all have been saved to serve (Eph. 2:10; 1 Pt. 2:9), there is a specific call to the ministry of the Word of God (Acts 20:24). God has uniquely set apart some whose mission in life is to publicly proclaim His Holy Scripture.

We see such an external call placed upon men, such as the apostles and the prophets. Paul, in 2 Timothy, refers to God as He "who has saved us, and called us with a holy calling ... for which I was appointed a preacher and an apostle and a teacher" (1:9, 11). He further declares in 1 Timothy that "for this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle" (2:7). He refers also to the "glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I was entrusted" (1:11). The Apostle states as well that to him "the very least of all the saints, the grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ (Eph 3:8).

We, therefore, see this external draw from God in the life of Paul. One needs only to witness the events of his conversion (Acts 9:15, 20, 27, 28), his designation as a preacher even from birth (Gal. 1:15-16), and his testimony (Acts 20:24; 26:15-18). This call was given also to Barnabas along with Paul when the Holy Spirit said to the Church in Antioch, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them...And when they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God" (Acts 13:2, 5).

We see also among the prophets an external call which could not have come from other men or themselves. Jeremiah's call came from God to preach His Word to a people who would not repent, which was not a desirable occupation (Jer. 1:4-6). In fact, most of the prophets received the same type of ministry. Men like Ezekiel (Ez. 2:1-7) and Isaiah (Isa. 6) most certainly did not choose their responsibility to preach what they were called of God to do because they thought it would be an easy job; but because they were drawn, even pulled (i.e., Jonah and Moses), by the Spirit of God to fulfill their calling.

We, therefore, see this as a calling which a minister of God must receive. An unalterable draw into full-time ministry. This call, then, is clearly to the ministry of the Word of God. All of these men were called to proclaim God's words to their people. None of them were called to proclaim cultural ideas, sociology, psychology, science, or rather humorous and amusing antidotes (none of which are necessarily bad, but they are not the focus of the call). Rather, they were called to sola scriptura, "Scripture alone," or at least the revelation that would become Scripture. Therefore, the calling of the man of God is to specifically proclaim the Word of God.

From the beginning, therefore, we must recognize that this call of God is a divinely sovereign call upon a man's life. What we have said, then, can be summed up by a famous Puritan, John Newton: "None but He who made the world can make a Minister of the Gospel. If a young man has capacity, culture and application [it] may make him a scholar, a philosopher, or an orator; but a true Minister

must have certain principles, motives, feelings, and aims, which no industry or endeavors of men can either acquire or communicate. They must be given from above, or they cannot be received.”

Four Signs of a Called Man: One might now say, "How can I tell whether God is calling me to full-time ministry, especially if He is not going to tell me audibly like He did the apostles and prophets?" We know He called them, but we must decide who He has called now. This, we have concluded, can be seen in four clear signs in a man's life.

**1) The Subjective Call:** The first sign in a man's life is the subjective call. The Apostle states, "If any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do" (1 Tim. 3:1). Spurgeon has described this desire, or aspiration as a "raging thirst," "an overwhelming craving." As Paul again states, "I am compelled, I can do nothing else" (1 Cor. 9:16).

We must clarify, however, that compulsion is not ambition. Ambition will corrupt the pastoral ministry. Compulsion will endure; ambition is driven by ego, self-fulfillment, and accomplishment. The pastoral compulsion is driven by the Glory of God. C. H. Spurgeon once made a good summary of what we wish to convey about a man's desires for the office of ministry: “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 is a fearful calamity to a man to miss his calling, and to the church upon whom he imposes himself his mistake involves an affliction of the most grievous kind... (if anyone) could be content to be a newspaper editor, or a grocer, or a farmer, or a doctor, or a lawyer, or a senator, or a king, in the name of heaven and earth let him go his way; he is not the man in whom dwells the Spirit of God in its fullness, for a man so filled with God would utterly weary of any pursuit but that for which his inmost soul pants. If on the other hand, you can say that for all the wealth of both the Indies you could not and dare not espouse any other calling so as to be put aside from preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, then, depend upon it, if other things be equally satisfactory, you have the signs of this apostleship. We must feel that woe is unto us if we preach not the gospel; the word of God must be unto us as fire in our bones, otherwise, if we undertake the ministry, we shall be unhappy in it, shall be unable to bear the self-denials incident to it, and shall be of little service to those among whom we minister.”

We, therefore, conclude that this man of God ought to possess an intense, internal, consuming, passion to be in God's service.

**2) The Objective Call:** In order to perform the task a man is called to, he must have the skills and abilities to accomplish his feat. This man, therefore, must be endowed with the necessary gifts to accompany his internal passion. One must consider it highly illogical for our Holy God to divinely call a man to pastoral ministry and not equip him with the necessary skills and gifts to fulfill his pastoral responsibility.

The objective call, then, takes into consideration the external circumstances, opportunities and giftedness of an individual. The internal compulsion must be linked with the innate talent, spirit-given giftedness of that individual. One is not called to be a surgeon without both the desire to take such a feat on and the ability to use a scalpel. Therefore, this man's circumstances will go along with his calling. He will possess wisdom, discernment, courage, affection for God's people, an ability to rule, and to teach God's Word.

We believe, therefore, that God will so order this man's life that his passion will be matched with his giftedness, or as Spurgeon once put it, "A man must not consider that he is called to preach until he has proved that he can speak. God certainly has not created behemoth to fly; and should leviathan have a strong desire to ascend with the lark, it would evidently be an unwise aspiration, since he is not furnished with wings. If a man be called to preach, he will be endowed with a degree of speaking ability, which he will cultivate and increase. If the gift of utterance be not there in a measure at the first, it is not likely that it will ever be developed."

Therefore, we conclude that this called man of God will possess the ability to teach and the necessary social graces to carry forth an effective pastoral ministry. This does not mean, however, that one must be able to tantalize and entertain his audience (not many preachers in church history would necessarily qualify if that were the case), but rather that he is able to communicate the truth of God's Word to the assembly in a manner to which they can comprehend.

**3) The Collective Call:** The third sign is that the leadership team, as well as the Body of Christ, will collectively begin to encourage the gifted man to pursue the desire of his heart. The Church must always be confirming, supporting, and sending.

A great illustration of this is found in the Acts of the Apostles when Paul was desirous to take Timothy along with him (16:1-3). We should also note the confirmation of God upon Paul through his disciples, who were already established (Gal. 2:1-2; Acts 9:19).

Spurgeon adds another powerful argument in support of this point, "that none of you can be pastors without the loving consent of the flock; and therefore, this will be to you a practical indicator if not a correct one. If your call from the Lord be a real one you will not long be silent. As surely as the man wants his hour, so surely the hour wants its man. The church of God is always urgently in need of living ministers; to her a man is always more precious than the gold of Ophir. Formal officials do lack and suffer hunger, but the anointed of the Lord need never be without a charge, for there are quick ears which will know them by their speech, and ready hearts to welcome them to their appointed place. Be fit for your work, and you will never be out of it. Do not run about inviting yourselves to preach here and there; be more concerned about your ability than your opportunity, and more earnest about your walk with God than about either. The sheep will know the God-sent shepherd; the porter of the fold will open to you, and the flock will know your voice."

We see that these men who were called out were those who were in the context of ministry in the Church of Antioch (Acts 13:1-3). A church can only confirm those that it has witnessed as examples of Christ among them. One does not let a stranger baby-sit his children, but rather only those who he knows well and has observed their trustful qualities, as well as their ability to do the job. 1 Timothy gives the criteria for the close examination of a man's life. This, therefore, must be our criteria in discerning leaders of God's Church. A stranger cannot be examined properly. Therefore, the man of God must be faithful to serve among the people of God, in order that they might evaluate him correctly.

We, furthermore, identify this very element of the collective call found in the Scriptures referring to the laying on of hands, by the Church leadership, in order to confirm the calling, character and

giftedness of a man (Acts 13:3; 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6). We believe as both the early Church Father, Cyprian, and the French Reformer, John Calvin, once stated that, for the believer, "God is his Father, and the Church is his mother." And the two act as one. That which God confirms, therefore, the Church will confirm, for God does not work apart from the institution which He created to work through. The King, therefore, sends a messenger with His message, and that is the Church with His Holy Scripture.

**4) The Effective Call:** Finally, this man must display fruit from his pastoral practice. His effectiveness in handling the Word of God, shepherding, discipling, leading, and counseling should be evident to the body of Christ. An excellent example of this is Apollos (Acts 18:24-28) whose giftedness and fruitfulness was clearly evident within the realm of his present ministry.

Spurgeon said this concerning a man's effective call: "It is a marvel to me how men continue at ease in preaching year after year without conversions. Have they no bowels of compassion for others? No sense of responsibility upon themselves? Dare they, by a vein misrepresentation of divine sovereignty, cast the blame on their Master? Or is it their belief that Paul plants and Apollos waters, and that God gives no increase? Vain are their talents, their philosophy, their rhetoric, and even their orthodoxy, without the signs following. How are they sent of God who bring no men to God? Prophets whose words are powerless, sowers whose seed all withers, fishers who take no fish, soldiers who give no wounds—are these God's men? Surely it was better to be a mud-raker, or a chimneysweep, than to stand in the ministry as an utterly barren tree."

The estimation of the man's effectual call for the work of the ministry must be based upon Scriptural rather than cultural criteria. The effectual calling of a man of God must be examined in light of the providential work of our Sovereign Lord and the personal responsibility of a minister of Jesus Christ. The main evidence of a man's call is going to be seen in his faithfulness to the ministry to which he has been appointed by God (I Timothy 1:12).

These elements of a man's call... the subjective desire, the objective gifting, the collective affirmation, and the effective fruitfulness, must be matched within God's providence for an open door of service.