

Called to the Ministry

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THE word ‘apostle’ means ‘one sent’. In the strict and official sense it denotes ‘the twelve’ (and Paul, of course,) all of whom were immediately ‘sent’ by the Lord and who therefore may be described as ‘the apostles of Jesus Christ’ (Lk 6:13; 1 Cor 1:1; 1 Pet 1:1; 2 Pet 3:2). In a more general sense, however, the term applies to anyone ‘sent’ through ordinary means. So ministers of the gospel generally are described as those ‘sent’, as in Matthew 9:38 and Romans 10:15: ‘Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers in his harvest’; ‘How shall they preach, except they be sent?’

Immediately the question arises: What exactly is intended by this word ‘sent’? Scripture teaches that there is a personal and secret call, heard in the heart. The Holy Spirit refers to it when, speaking of Barnabas and Saul, he says, ‘I have called them’ (Acts 13:2). This inner call will normally find recognition and expression in the outer call of the Church, through election and ordination. It did, in fact, in the case just mentioned. As the church worshipped the Lord, the Holy Spirit said, either directly or through one of the prophets, ‘Separate me Barnabas and Saul’ (v 2). As a result, the church chose and set apart the two men, and then ‘sent them away’ (v 3). Thereafter they were called ‘apostles’ or ‘sent ones’ (Acts 4:4, 14; 1 Cor 9:5, 6). Saul – or Paul as he came to be known – was an apostle in the proper and unique sense of the word; Barnabas was simply a gospel emissary dispatched by the church at Antioch (cf 2 Cor 8:23 – ‘messengers [literally, apostles] of the churches’).

Evidently, a minister should know deep inside himself that he is ‘called’ to gospel work. This call was once described by Dr J. H. Jowett as ‘a sense of

the divine initiative, a solemn communication of the divine will, a mysterious feeling of commission’. As you can see, it is not exactly easy to define; but one thing is clear: only the Lord can call men. He is the Sovereign; and it is his prerogative to appoint his servants. ‘No man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God’ (Heb 5:4). Paul tells us that it was the Lord, and no other, who put him ‘into the ministry’ (1 Tim 1:12). Christ ‘sent’ me, he says, ‘to preach the gospel’ (1 Cor 1:17). As this is a continuing work, the Lord still issues a distinct call to his chosen servants.

Ministers are ‘ambassadors’ (2 Cor 5:20); and as the Puritan Thomas Manton correctly observes, ‘If any should usurp the place of an ambassador without the prince’s leave and command, it would be accounted horrible pride’. Indeed, the Lord condemns those who invade the ministerial office and intrude into its sacred functions. It was Korah’s great fault that he wanted to take upon himself the priesthood; and this fault was accounted rebellion and judged accordingly (Num 16:1-3, 8-10, 31-33; cf Jude 11). Referring to others who dared to assume a preaching role, the Lord says, ‘I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran’ (Jer 23:21). Unspeakably solemn are the words which follow: ‘Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord’ (Jer 23:21, 30-32). There are other passages to the same effect e.g. Num 18:7; Deut 18:20; 1 Sam 13:8-14; and Ezek 13:1-3. Although similar to Manton’s words, quoted above, the remarks of Dr Breckinridge are worthy of inclusion here. ‘For a man, then, to presume to be an ambassador for Almighty God, and that touching questions no less awful than the glory of his throne, and the endless state of his rebellious subjects, without a settled conviction in his own soul, that

this fearful trust is laid on him by the King eternal, is insane audacity’.

No-one should therefore enter the ministry without a distinct consciousness of the “Scripture teaches that there is a personal and secret call, heard in the heart.” divine call. This must be stated with full clarity and emphasis. For:

(i) If we do not insist upon it, the Lord will be provoked by blatant disregard of his revealed will. When Jeroboam opened the priesthood to all and sundry, ‘this thing became a sin unto the house of Jeroboam’ (1 Kgs 13:33, 34).

(ii) Unsuitable men will enter this work and, as a result, the cause of Truth will suffer. ‘The wicked walk on every side, when the vilest men are exalted’ (Ps 12:8).

(iii) A ministry will be performed without real authority. Not only does the call constitute the commission but it is indispensable for the proper exercise of that commission. The Pharisees’ question could well be put to those who hold office without calling: ‘By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?’ (Matt 21:23; cf Titus 2:15).

(iv) There will be confusion rather than order in the Church. According to the apostle, ‘God hath set some in the church...teachers’ (1 Cor 12:28). Now ‘some’ cannot possibly be made to mean ‘all’. Paul himself makes that clear when he proceeds to ask, ‘Are all teachers?’ (1 Cor 12:29) His question expects a negative answer. We conclude that God intends that his ministers should be distinguished from others, not least by reason of the fact that they are specially appointed by him.

(v) In times of severe difficulty and discouragement, a man without a sense of calling is likely to lose heart and perhaps give up altogether; but a man whom God has charged with a work will

endure all manner of hardship, believing that, come what may, he must faithfully discharge his duty. Take Jeremiah for an example. Faced with opposition and persecution, he addressed those who were desiring his death as follows: ‘The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and against this city...As for me, behold I am in your hand: do with me as seemeth good and meet unto you’ (Jer 26:12, 14).

(vi) Promises of the Lord’s presence and of success in the work are only made to those properly called. ‘Go’, said God to Moses, ‘and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say’ (Exod 4:12. See also: Is 6:7,8; Jn 20:21,22).

Uncalled men can hardly expect to enjoy the divine blessing. The Lord says: ‘I sent them not, nor commanded them: therefore they shall not profit this people at all’ (Jer 23:32). Luther remarks on this verse, ‘Though they preach some profitable truths, yet do they not profit the people’.

(vii) The great purpose of the ministry is to bring glory to God (1 Pet 4:10, 11); but how can a man glorify God when he is acting independently of him? A master is honoured when his servants act at his command. Thus the centurion’s rank was evidenced by the fact that he could issue orders to men. ‘I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it’ (Matt 8:9). Surely the Lord is honoured by the same kind of obedience.

What are the elements, then, which constitute a true call of God?

First of all, there must be some indication of the divine Will through the Scriptures. The Bible is ‘quick’ or ‘living’ and there are times when it seems particularly to ‘talk’ to us (Heb 4:12; Prov 6:22). As we read and meditate upon it, certain words, verses, or passages become prominent, impressing themselves repeatedly upon our hearts. ‘God hath

spoken once; twice have I heard this...' (Ps 62:11) In this way, the Lord reveals his purpose.

Secondly, there develops a strong and irrepressible desire to engage in the work of the ministry. Paul writes: 'This is a true saying, if a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work' (1 Tim 3:1). Two different words are used here. The first really means 'to reach out after' or 'to stretch oneself towards'. It suggests that the subject has a high view of the ministerial office and that he seeks it, not for some carnal or ambitious reason, but because it will enable him to proclaim the glorious gospel of grace to sinful men (Acts 20:24; Eph 3:8). The second word lays stress upon the actual emotion and it could be translated 'sets his heart upon'. The thought here seems to be that there is, in one truly called, a strong inclination of heart to consecrate the entire life to the work of the ministry. Neither difficulty nor discouragement is able to remove or suppress this desire (Rom 1:14, 15; 15:20, 21).

Thirdly, there must be possession of the necessary gifts. Whom the Lord calls, he qualifies and enables. Paul writes: '(God) hath made us able ministers of the new testament' (2 Cor 3:6). The word 'able' really means 'sufficient'; and one commentator, coining a word for the purpose of bringing out the meaning, renders the clause as follows: '(God) hath *sufficienced* us'. This gives the sense exactly. Elsewhere, speaking rather more personally, Paul says the Lord 'enabled' him so that he could enter 'into the ministry' (1 Tim 1:12). The same point is being made: namely, that a vital part of the call is the God-given ability to teach and lead others. In one particular place, the apostle seems almost to equate the call with the gift. He describes himself as 'made a minister', not in consequence of some special call, but as a result of 'the gift of the grace of God' - that is, the ministerial gift, as the context itself makes clear (1 Tim 1:2, 8).

Fourthly, a call to the ministry will involve real

and deep conviction. 'The preparations (margin: disposings) of the heart in man...is from the Lord' (Prov 16:1). That word 'preparations' suggests 'a placing of things in order' or 'a setting of things in battle-array'. What God does, in the sovereign outworking of his Will, is to concentrate a man's thoughts upon a particular matter. As a result, one idea predominates in his heart. There is a striking example of this in the case of Nehemiah. In his personal memoirs, he tells us, 'I arose, neither told I any man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem' (Neh 2:12). Through the sovereign operation of the Spirit, then, the Lord's servants become aware of their duty and so strong is the conviction that they feel compelled to preach. 'Necessity is laid upon me', wrote the apostle, 'yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel' (1 Cor 9:16; cf Gal 1:16; Jer 20:9).

Fifthly, the opinions of spiritual men and women constitute another vital factor. No one should take it upon himself to judge his own competence. The consent and approval of the Lord's people are vital elements in a true call to the ministry. According to the Book of Acts, Timothy was 'well reported of by the brethren' before being called to minister along with Paul and Luke (Acts 16:2). Sometimes this is more than mere recognition or confirmation. The Lord can actually issue a call through others. Take the case of John Calvin, for example. While passing through Geneva, he met with Guillaume Farel, the minister, who became convinced that God had chosen Calvin to preach the Gospel. He told him as much, adjuring him to remain in the city; and, later, Calvin recalled Farel's words and their effect upon him. It was, he said, 'as if God had from heaven laid his hand upon me to arrest me'.

Sixthly, there should be some evidence of the divine blessing. A young mechanic who thought the Lord was leading him into the ministry said to one of his church's elders, 'I feel that I have a call to preach'. The wise old man replied, 'But have you

noticed whether the people have a call to hear you? I have always noticed that a true call of the Lord may be known by this, that people have a call to hear you'. The fact is, that special blessings are promised to ministers; and even when they first begin to exercise their gifts, these blessings are usually in evidence (Exod 4:10; Jn 20:21, 22; 2 Cor 3:5, 6). Their early attempts at preaching are often blessed to the conversion of souls. God said of those who claimed to be prophets, 'If they had stood in my counsel, and had caused my people to hear my words, then they should have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their doings' (Jer 23:22).

Seventhly, and lastly, a man's call is made clear by the leadings of providence. The apostle came to see that God had been at work in his life from the very beginning, ordering everything with a view to his entrance into the ministry. 'God', he wrote, 'separated me from my mother's womb' (Gal 1:15). The more he thought about it the more he realized that he had been 'separated unto the gospel of God' (Rom 1:1). Now, where there is a real call to the ministry, there

will be a similar realization. Reviewing the past, it should be possible for a man to see that God has equipped him with specific qualities, provided him with adequate training, directed him in his studies, granted him particular experiences, and opened to him a door of opportunity. Through the gracious illumination of the Spirit, there will be, not only a recognition of God's providential leading, but also an understanding of his Will with respect to future service. 'Thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it...' (Is 30:21)

We need ministers today. But no-one should even attempt the work unless he has an unmistakable conviction that the Lord has called him. Since the Lord alone can issue this call, we must pray that he will call more men into the holy ministry. There is a prophetic scripture which says, 'The Lord gave the Word: great was the company of those that published it' (Ps 68:11). May that scripture find still further fulfilment, to the glory of our Triune God!