

The Call to the Ministry

Do We Need One?

Suppose Charles Spurgeon and Billy Graham had chosen careers other than preaching. Would it have been all the same to God?

I don't think so. Though the idea is not popular today, I believe God still calls individuals to specific ministries, particularly preaching and teaching His Word.

During the past twenty years, missionaries have been telling us that there is no need for a specific call. Christ commanded us to preach the gospel; so, if we qualify, we should go. We shouldn't waste time waiting for a signal from heaven.

In *Decision Making and the Will of God*, Garry Friesen teaches that God has a sovereign will (His overall plan) and a moral will (His guidelines for life and belief) but no individual plan for every believer that we must "find."¹

He asks us to remember how difficult it was to "find the will of God" when we had to make a particular decision and explains why that happened: we were looking for something that did not exist. We were seeking for a form of guidance that God did not promise to give.

Friesen exhorts us to make decisions on the basis of wisdom. We should gather all the information we can, weigh the pros and cons, and make our own decisions in faith. Of course, an important part of this is to consult with those who know us and to seek the insight of others.

He then asks about all the men called by God in the Scriptures. Because God spoke audibly to them, they had no doubt as to His will for them. God told Jeremiah directly that he was chosen for a specific ministry (Jer. 1:9–10). But God doesn't do that today, so those examples don't apply. We're expected to be obedient to God's moral will, but after that the decisions are ours. Any one of a number of choices would be fine with God.

There's some truth in that. Many of us grew up thinking we had to pry into the secret counsels of God whenever we had a decision to make. We tried to read His diary, but the print seemed blurred. His will was a mystery wrapped in an enigma. Doubtless we should have just gone ahead and made a reasonable decision. As one pastor told a friend, "Get a pure heart, and then do as you please."

We also believed that being called to the ministry required a Damascus-road experience. Short of that, we felt obligated to choose a "secular" vocation. I can remember many young men in Bible college and seminary discussing whether they were "called." Many of them hoped they were called but they weren't sure.

Furthermore, emphasizing a call to the ministry tends to exaggerate the distinction between clergy and laity. Every believer is a minister of God. To say that some Christians are called to specific ministries while others aren't seems contrary to the biblical teaching that each member of the body of Christ is important.

Friesen's position would also explain why some people have felt called to ministries for which they were ill-suited. Put simply, they were mistaken. What they thought was the Holy Spirit's leading was nothing but a personal hunch. You may have heard about the man who was called to preach; unfortunately, no one was called to listen!

One man, burned out at age forty, concluded that he had never been called to the ministry; he entered the ministry only to satisfy his mother. As a youngster he showed great promise in public speaking and church ministry, so she encouraged him to become a pastor. Now he concludes that was a mistake.

Despite the fact that we don't know as much about the "call" as we would like, I still believe that God gives a call to some people that is more than just a general call given to all believers. There is a call that is more than simply being gifted for ministry and even more than just a desire to preach or teach. Charles Bridges has a point

when he says that ministerial failure can sometimes be traced “to the very threshold of the entrance to the work.”

The late J. Oswald Sanders was right when he wrote, “The supernatural nature of the church demands a leadership that rises above the human. The overriding need of the church, if it is to discharge its obligation to the rising generation, is for leadership that is authoritative, spiritual and sacrificial.”² Spurgeon, Graham, and hundreds of other preachers have said that they chose the ministry only because God chose them for it. Apparently Timothy didn’t have an audible call. Yet I can’t imagine Paul telling him that he could leave the ministry if he wished without also leaving the will of God. On the contrary, Paul urged him to fulfill his ministry. And when Timothy began to wonder about his call, Paul urged, “And for this reason I remind you to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands” (2 Tim. 1:6 NASB).

I don’t see how anyone could survive in the ministry if he felt it was just his own choice. Some ministers scarcely have two good days back to back. They are sustained by the knowledge that God has placed them where they are. Ministers without such a conviction often lack courage and carry their resignation letter in their coat pocket. At the slightest hint of difficulty, they’re gone.

I’m disturbed by those who preach and teach without a sense of calling. Those who consider the ministry to be one choice among many tend to have horizontal vision. They lack the urgency of Paul, who said, “Necessity is laid upon me.” John Jowett says, “If we lose the sense of wonder of our commission, we shall become like common traders in a common market, babbling about common wares.”³

Since God called numerous individuals to specific ministries in Bible times, it is only reasonable that He would do so today. Though He doesn’t call audibly now that the New Testament is complete, we have an adequate basis by which to test the inner guidance of the Spirit.

Characteristics of the Call

Let me risk my own definition of a call. *God’s call is an inner conviction given by the Holy Spirit and confirmed by the Word of God and the body of Christ.*

Notice the three parts to the definition. First, it is an inner conviction

tion. Feelings and hunches come and go. They may be based on impressions we had as children when we romanticized the idea of becoming a missionary. Or maybe we idolized the role of a pastor.

But a God-given compulsion is not deterred by obstacles. It gives us the single-mindedness needed for effective ministry. Some of us have had this conviction from our youth; others had a growing sense of urgency as they have studied the Bible; and still others perhaps had a less distinct but no less sure sense of direction. But the bottom line is the same: a strong desire to preach, join a mission team, or perhaps train others in the Word.

Of course, we don't all have to be called the same way. Circumstances and temperaments vary. I've already mentioned that for some people this conviction may be sudden; for others, it may be gradual. A person may sense no call at all until he is encouraged by discerning members of the body of Christ. Yet, despite those differences, there is a sense of purpose. Yes, "Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!" (1 Cor. 9:16 KJV).

Second, the Word of God must confirm our call. We have to ask whether a person has the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3. Is he mature? Does he have the necessary gifts? Has he labored in the Word of God and in doctrine? Or might he have disqualified himself through moral or doctrinal compromise? Character is not all that is necessary, but it is the basic indispensable ingredient.

No doubt mistakes have been made when the scriptural qualifications have been overlooked in deference to a call. For a man to say that he's called is for some people reason enough to thrust him into ministry. But the church should not be hasty in ordaining those who are deemed called to such work. Though some people might have such a compulsion, they might have disqualified themselves, or their own perception might be mistaken.

On the other hand, churches have sometimes erred by refusing to ordain a man whom they deemed unfit for ministry. Perhaps the expected gifts were not present; perhaps the candidate did not appear to have the determination needed for ministry. And yet, as time went by, the man might have distinguished himself as a faithful minister. Even with the best of intentions we fail. But as was already mentioned, character must always be at the center of any evaluation of a call.

Certainly the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 are more descriptive of

the man's present character than his past character. But often his past, particularly since his conversion, is also relevant. If the man fails the test of the Scriptures, he must be excluded from ministry. Perhaps at a later time his call can be realized in another way.

Third, the body of Christ helps us understand where we fit within the local church framework. The leaders of the church in Antioch were ministering to the Lord and fasting when the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2 NASB). The body enables its members to find their spiritual gifts and is a testing ground for further ministry. Those who are faithful in the least may later be entrusted with greater responsibility.

God might choose to confirm the call by special coincidental happenings or human mediation. I think of John Calvin's spending the night in Geneva when the fiery preacher Farrel pointed his finger at the young scholar and said, "If you do not stay here in Geneva and help the reform movement, God will curse you!" Unusual, I'd say, but would anyone disagree that Calvin was called of God to minister in Geneva? This incident was, of course, properly speaking, God's leading to a specific geographical location, but let us never limit the means God might use to get our attention and help us understand that His hand is upon us for special service.

My own call to ministry was confirmed when my pastor asked me to preach occasionally when I was in Bible school. The affirmation I received resonated with what I believed to be the leading of the Spirit within my heart and mind. I felt "called" as a child to preach, but if the body of Christ had not confirmed my conviction, I could not have pursued the ministerial path.

Often a person senses a call to the ministry but has no leading to a particular organization or church. Again, God uses the body of Christ or a mission board to clarify the next step. Often we are unaware of God's leading, but looking back we can see His hand of guidance on our lives. Indeed, some people who were initially unsure of their call have nevertheless done an effective work for God.

Though the details are different in each case, the end result must be the same: a sense of the divine initiative, a commission that leaves a man or a woman with a settled assurance that he or she is doing what God desires.

Our Response to the Call

Our response to God's call should be one of amazed humility. Each of us should have a sense of authority and boldness. We should be characterized by unusual earnestness and diligence in study and prayer. Jowett perhaps overstated it only slightly when he wrote, "The call of the Eternal must ring through the rooms of his soul as clearly as the sound of the morning-bell rings through the valleys of Switzerland, calling the peasants to early prayer and praise."⁴ Spurgeon discouraged men from entering the ministry. He told them plainly that if they could take another vocation they should. He wanted in the ministry only those who felt strongly that they had no other alternative. Luther warned that one should flee the ministry, even if he were wiser than Solomon and David, unless one was called. And "if God needs thee, He will know how to call thee."

How do I account for those who have dropped out of the ministry? Should they feel as if they have failed in their calling? It's possible of course, that some of them have failed. But that doesn't mean God can't use them in other vocations, for He is always working in spite of our failures. Many fallen pastors can be restored as brothers, but they have disqualified themselves from spiritual leadership. Others simply might have considered the ministry as one opportunity among many and therefore lacked the passion that would make them deeply committed to God.

But there may be other explanations. Perhaps such ministers were called, but the body of Christ failed them. Young men have been ruined by critical congregations.

Others may not have failed at all, but worldly standards of success would interpret their ministry that way. Isaiah had a marvelous call, but from a human perspective, he failed in the ministry. Indeed, God told him that practically no one would listen to what he had to say.

Then again, some ministers may be like John Mark; discouraged, they give up at first, but they may become effective in a later ministry.

We do not know all of the contingencies, but let us not allow those difficulties to rob us of a divine sense of calling that gives us our courage and authority. And, as the old saying goes, "If God calls us to preach, let us not stoop to become a king."