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He only needs twelve!

# 1

## 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. Don't waste time waiting for a signal from heaven.

In *Decision Making and the Will of God* (Multnomah, 1981), 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.

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.

Friesen exhorts us to make decisions on the basis of wisdom. Gather all the information you can, weigh the pros and cons, and make your own decision in faith.

What about all the men called by God in the Scriptures? he asks. Because God spoke audibly, they had no doubt as to His will for them. But He 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.

We also believed that a Damascus-road experience was needed to be called to the ministry. Short of that, we felt obligated to choose a "secular" vocation.

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 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.

*The guidance of the Spirit.* What about the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit in a believer's life? Spurgeon and Graham, along with 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's telling him that he could leave the ministry if he wished without leaving the will of God. On the contrary, Paul urged him to fulfill his ministry.

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 convic-

tion 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" (*The Preacher, His Life and Work* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968], p. 21).

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

*What a call means.* 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. 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 God-given compulsion is not deterred by obstacles. It gives the single-mindedness needed for effective ministry.

Of course, we don't all have to be called the same way. Circumstances and temperaments vary. For some, the conviction may be sudden; for others, gradual. A person may sense no call at all until encouraged by discerning members of the Body of Christ. Yet despite those differences, there is a sense of purpose. Woe is me if I preach not the gospel!

Second, the Word of God must confirm it. We have to ask whether a person has the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3. Is he mature? Does he have the gifts needed? Has he labored in the

Word of God in doctrine? Or might he have disqualified himself through moral or doctrinal compromise?

No doubt mistakes have been made when the scriptural qualifications have been overlooked in deference to a call. If a man says he's called, that has seemed to be reason enough to thrust him into ministry. But the Word of God should be used to confirm his inner compulsion.

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.

Third, the Body of Christ helps us understand where we fit within the local church framework. 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.

My own ministry was confirmed when my pastor asked me to preach occasionally when I was in Bible school. The affirmation I received confirmed what I believed to be the leading of the Spirit within my heart and mind.

Often a person senses a call to the ministry but has no leading to a particular organization or church. God often uses the Body of Christ or, in the case of a missionary, a mission board to clarify the next step.

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 woman with a settled assurance that he or she is doing what God desires.

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" (*The Preacher, His life and Work*, p. 12).

Spurgeon discouraged men from entering the ministry. He told them plainly that if they could take another vocation they should. He wanted only those who felt strongly that they had no other alternative. They were called of God.

How do I explain those who have dropped out of the ministry? Should they feel as if they have failed in their calling? Of course, it's possible that some have. That doesn't mean God can't use them in other vocations, for He is always working in spite of our failures.

But there may be other explanations. Perhaps they 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. We would have considered Isaiah's ministry a failure.

Then again, some 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 rid us of a divine sense of calling that gives us our courage and authority.





your Dad's a minister?  
what does he do the  
rest of the time?

## 2

### A Congregation's Expectations: Can We Adjust?

“If you have the reputation of being an early riser, you can sleep till noon.”

I don't remember where I read this bit of insight, but it reminded me that a congregation's perception of its pastor influences for good or for ill the effectiveness of his ministry. If he's perceived as dishonest or inept or as one who cannot keep a confidence, his words and actions will be interpreted through a negative grid; if he's thought of as godly and competent, he will be given the benefit of the doubt even when he fails.

Often, this situation puts him at a disadvantage. If he should lose the congregation's goodwill, his ministry might soon be over. But if he consciously attempts to establish and maintain a correct impression, he courts spiritual disaster.

*Pressures of public ministry.* Pastors are constantly open to public evaluation. Preach nine good messages and one blooper, and some will remember only the one that bombed. Walk past a deacon without acknowledging him, and you might rankle his feelings. And if a disgruntled church member begins some gossip, a little leaven could leaven the whole lump.

We're also under pressure because few members of the congregation know the demands of our schedules.

One pastor asked his deacons to outline how they thought he spent his time. They had difficulty coming up with a forty-hour week, though he was working seventy.

We've all laughed at the child who says to the pastor's kid, "My dad isn't like yours—he works for a living." But it hurts just the same.

Once you've gained a reputation, you're more or less stuck with it. I read about a pastor who was at a baseball game when a church member needed him. The irate parishioner spread the story that the pastor spent all his time at the ballpark. The pastor nearly ruined his health and family working overtime to correct the false impression. Even so, it lingered.

Such perceptions, whether true or false, can wield awesome authority over us. If we are self-conscious, always wondering how well we are liked, we'll soon be a slave to the pulse of our popularity. Everything will be done with an eye on our ratings.

At that point, we'll lose our authority to minister. "The fear of man brings a snare" (Proverbs 29:25). We'll desire to remain neutral in disputes, trying earnestly to agree with everyone. Church discipline will not be administered for fear of criticism. We'll back away from any unpopular stand, even when it's right.

I'm not saying we should be insensitive. We've all met the pastor who takes pride in "not caring what anyone thinks," callously disregarding the feelings of others. I'm talking about a lack of boldness even in matters that are scripturally clear.

We'll also find it difficult to rejoice in the success of other pastors. Television has brought the super church to our parishioners' living rooms. Comparison is inevitable.

We may even take secret delight in another's failure. One assistant pastor, who was an apparent threat to the senior pastor, told me, "Nothing would delight him more than if I were to blow it."

When we're overly sensitive to what others think, we'll also live with guilt—the nagging feeling that we could be doing more. Since by definition our work is never finished, we then carry it home with us. My wife would tell you that sometimes I'm not at

home even when I'm physically present. I'm preoccupied with the pressures of the day and the ones I'll face tomorrow.

In the process, our faith is eroded. Christ directed this question to the Pharisees: "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another, and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God?" (John 5:44). The desire for human praise and the faith to minister cancel each other—seek the one and the other eludes you.

When in conflict with the Pharisees who were somewhat less than enthusiastic about His ministry, Jesus said, "And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him" (John 8:29).

*Freedom to serve.* Our Lord was free from men's opinions about Him. Though He cared what they thought, because He had the words of eternal life, His actions were never calculated to gain their praise. The will of the Father was all that mattered. And if the Father was pleased, the Son was pleased.

I've known pastors like that—surrendered, secure, and free from actions motivated by a desire for human praise. No need to prove themselves or be in the limelight. No grudging admissions about other people's successes—just freedom and joy in the work of the Lord.

What characteristics could we expect if we were brought to such a place of surrender?

First, we would not let people push us into their mold. We all live with the tension between what we are versus what others want us to be. We'd like to fulfill the exalted expectations that many people may have for us, but we can't. If we know ourselves realistically, both our strengths and weaknesses, we'll not think that we are God's gift to every human need.

Christ faced this tension, too. After He fed the multitude, the crowd sought to crown Him king. But He went off by Himself, refusing to consider the offer even though He knew that He was a disappointment to His followers. His miracles generated expectations He simply could not fulfill at the time.

Yet before His death He could say He had finished the Father's work, though hundreds of people were still sick and thousands more had not believed on Him. But the pressure of those needs did not blur His vision to please the Father only.

The more blessed people are by our ministry, the greater their expectations of us will be. If we let them, they will lead us to believe that we're the only ones who can lead people to Christ, counsel the emotionally troubled, or visit in the hospital.

And if we believe that we are God's answer to every need, we'll also accept every invitation for lunch, attend all committee meetings, and take outside speaking engagements when asked—all at the expense of our families, our health, and, most of all, our relationship with God.

Let's not let our successes propel us into a role that is beyond our strengths and abilities. Our self-image must always be adjusted to fit reality. Saying no graciously is an essential characteristic of a man who has submitted his will to God.

Second, we would profit from criticism. No one likes criticism, particularly when it's unfair. Furthermore, we usually don't get a chance to give our side of the story without risking additional misunderstanding.

Yet sometimes, even when the criticism is valid, our pride prevents us from learning during the experience. When we think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think, we may believe we are beyond rebuke.

Paul also received criticism. He was under fire for going to the Gentiles and was imprisoned because he refused to compromise the inclusive claim of the gospel.

Sometimes the condemnation was personal and vindictive: "His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive, and his speech contemptible" (2 Corinthians 10:10). But he was undeterred. He knew that God would vindicate him.

Every leader has his critics. If we are especially sensitive, if we cannot tolerate differences of opinion and refuse to learn from criticism, we're still clinging to our reputations.

Many lies were published about revivalist George Whitefield to discourage the crowds from hearing him, but he responded by saying that he could wait until God rendered the final judgment. Such a man of faith cannot be destroyed.

Third, we would not be afraid to let our humanity show. Our congregations believe that we are different—free from the emotional and spiritual struggles of others. After all, if we are not walking in uninterrupted victory, who is there left to lean on? Heroes are in short supply, and a pastor who has been a blessing to his flock is a good candidate to fulfill the role.

If we refuse to talk about our failures and share only our victories, we'll reinforce that distorted perception. Eventually, it will give way to myth.

One pastor confessed in exhaustion, "My congregation expects me to be perfect."

Our lack of authenticity creates a burden that is too heavy to bear. Struggling under its weight, we'll assume we have indeed arrived spiritually and hence be blind to our shortcomings or kill ourselves trying to live up to others' expectations. We'll also tend to withdraw, fearful that people will get to know what we're really like.

Yet, what pastor hasn't done some things he's ashamed of? If our congregations could open our minds for inspection, we'd all resign in shame and disgrace.

We can help our people better when we let them know that we stand with them in the quest for righteousness, neither above nor off to the side where the arrows of Satan and the passions of the flesh can't touch us. Honesty communicates much better than a false sense of perfection.

A letter written to a pastor by a member of his congregation said in part, "Are you as human as we are? Have you struggled with some of the same problems we face during the week? Is there discord in your home? Heartache? Anguish? Won't you share that with us, too, as you share your doctrine, your theology, your exposition?"

Finally, we would not see the success of another as a threat to our own ministry.

When the Holy Spirit came upon the seventy elders during the ministry of Moses, two men continued to prophesy. Joshua, jealous for Moses' reputation, suggested that Moses restrain them.

But Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!" (Numbers 11:29).

Here was a man who could rejoice in the success of others. He did not want to keep his gift to himself, nor did he have to defend his call to the ministry.

Many pastors struggle over the success of another, especially if that individual is on the same staff. The fact that God sometimes uses those who are less gifted, or even less authentic than we would like, brings the sin of envy to the surface.

But the person who has died to himself will bow humbly, resisting the temptation to be envious simply because God is generous.

In the parable of the workers in the vineyard, the landowner said to those who had worked longer hours and grumbled about equal pay, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?" (Matthew 20:15).

It's God's prerogative to bless some people more than He should. Apart from such grace we'd all be lost.

Friends of John the Baptist were concerned because some of his disciples were leaving to follow Christ.

John responded, "A man can receive nothing, unless it has been given him from heaven" (John 3:27). If we believed those words, we'd be free from all comparisons, competition, and self-consciousness in the ministry. We'd serve with a glad heart, accepting our role.

Later, John added, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

Even if our ministry should be diminished, we can accept it more easily if Christ is honored through submission to His will.

Since it is God-given, we can take no credit for it nor can we insist that it continue.

If we have become men-pleasers, let's repent. Such an attitude is an affront to God. Subtly, we are preaching ourselves, not Christ.

If you have the reputation of being an early riser, you can sleep till noon. But God knows when you get out of bed, and His perception is the one that really counts.