

THE CALL OF GOD TO PREACH THE GOSPEL

By Don Whitney

I am sitting in a restaurant with a prospective student for our seminary. Brow knitted, he leans forward and asks, "How can I make *sure* God has called me?"

I hear this question, or one much like it, in various settings at least once a month. Each time, I recall my own sense of astonishment and struggle when I first began to wonder, "Is it possible that God is calling *me* to be a preacher?"

Whether the possibility of God's call is a seed recently planted in your mind, or a deeply rooted question that has been growing in your thoughts for months, this piece is for you.



WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY "GOD'S CALL"?

The term "God's call" can be used in many ways. The most important is God's call to everyone through the Gospel (that is, the message of salvation through Jesus Christ) to repent and believe in Jesus (see Acts 17:30). No one should expect any other call from God without first clearly responding to God's call to follow Christ.

All who have come to Christ are also called by God to serve in His kingdom (Ps. 100:3; Eph. 4:12; Heb. 9:14). In this sense every Christian is a God-called minister. Thus, each believer should find ways (especially in the church) to serve.

Beyond God's calls to Christ and to service, however, there is one other call mentioned in the New Testament. *This is God's call to a vocational ministry of the verbal proclamation of the Gospel.*

I am not saying that God doesn't guide people to other types of work. God directs people to be tradesmen, nurses, clerks, homemakers, executives, and teachers as well as preachers. Whatever you do with your life, spend it doing what you believe *God* wants you to do.

Nevertheless, there is a *unique* call to the ministry of preaching God's Word, and that is the subject of this piece.

In the New Testament this call was always to men to devote themselves as much as possible to the preaching of the Gospel so that the lost might be evangelized and the church strengthened. In today's terms we would speak of this as a call to pastoral, church-planting, evangelistic, or Bible-teaching ministry. Nowadays there are countless other kinds of ministries on church staffs, the mission field, Christian organizations, etc., ministries to which people are guided by God. But here I am writing to those who are struggling with whether God is calling them to the "Gospel ministry," that is, a ministry where their *primary* task is to preach the Word of God.

In summary, this call is God's planting the desire for vocational ministry, and His persuading both the man and his Christian brothers that, when tested by Scripture, he has the qualifications which would reasonably point to proclaiming the Gospel and building up the church as his work.



IS A UNIQUE CALL FROM GOD NECESSARY FOR PREACHERS?

Why do preachers need a special call?

As I said earlier, all Christians should sense the Lord's guidance to their life's work. And since every Christian is to do his or her work "as for the Lord rather than for men" (Col. 3:23), any work to which God guides is "full-time Christian service."

Furthermore, all Christians-not just those in the preaching ministry-have the right and the responsibility (a call!) to spread the Gospel (Mt. 28:19-20). While these things are true, "Affirming the office and calling of every believer," writes John Armstrong, "does not prevent us from affirming the unique ministry God gives to ministers."¹ Prior to that unique *ministry* there must come a unique *call*.

In the Old Testament, no one could assume the role of God's spokesman without first receiving His commission. See Num. 12:1-2, 16:1-31; 1 Kin. 13:33-34; Isa. 6:8, 48:16, 61:1; Jer. 1:4-10; Ezek. 2:3, 3:1. In one passage, the Lord expressed His anger by saying, "I did not send these prophets, but they ran. I did not speak to them, but they prophesied." (Jer. 23:21).

In addition to every Christian's call to evangelize, the New Testament makes plain that God gives a special call to those whom He sends to preach the Gospel.

- Matt. 9:38, "Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest *to send out* workers into His harvest."
- Acts 13:2, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which *I have called them*."
- Acts 20:28, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among *which the Holy Spirit made you overseers*."
- Romans 10:15, "And how shall they preach unless they are *sent*?"
- Ephesians 4:11, "And *He gave* some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers."

"A preacher is not a Christian who decides to preach," declared the great British preacher, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "It is God who commands preaching, it is God who sends out preachers."²

You can no more send yourself into the pulpit than you can send yourself to China as an official ambassador from the US. A Gospel minister must be God-called.

Certainty of the call of God is not only necessary for sending you into the ministry, nothing is more essential for keeping you there. Regardless of the blessings and fruitfulness God grants to your service, there will be dark, heavy days when you would

walk away from the Gospel ministry if it weren't for the bedrock of assurance that you are doing what God Himself has called you to do.

Not having an unshakable sense of divine call is one of the main reasons why so few who begin to preach stay devoted to it for a lifetime. But preachers who, like Jeremiah, are sure of the fire of God's call in their bones (Jer. 20:9), can, as Jeremiah did, endure glaciers of opposition and icebergs of discouragement.



HOW WILL I KNOW I'M CALLED TO PREACH?

God's call to preach His Word is much more than a personal spiritual experience. When God calls a man to the Gospel ministry He calls him both internally and externally. Each of these twin features of God's call also has two aspects of its own.

THE INTERNAL CALL

Part of the internal call is *aspiration*, that is, an irrepressible desire to engage in the work of the ministry. The imperative presence of this compulsion is reflected in 1 Tim. 3:1, "It is a trustworthy statement: if any man *aspires* to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he *desires* to do."

This may also be termed a "secret call" since this desire often begins to grow long before others recognize the person as a candidate for ministry. Some people first become aware of the call originating through their reading of the Bible. Many recall the powerful effect of a sermon or a book that initiated their sense of summons. Others will refer to the influence or example of a minister they admired. Regardless of the means through which God began to awaken you to His purpose, your encounters with the Scriptures should continually nourish and affirm the secret call.

So the internal call should be a *continuing* aspiration. Without choosing to think about it you find it keeps surfacing in your thoughts. The more you wish to ignore the possibility that God is calling you, the more preoccupied you become with it.

This aspiration for the Gospel ministry is also *self-sacrificing*. You feel drawn to preach God's Word, not for what it will do for you, but because you long to glorify God through the proclamation of His Gospel, the conversion of souls, and the building up of His church.

Besides aspiration, the other half of the internal call is the *qualification of life and character*. Those who would be the most visible representatives of Christ to His church and to the world must be growing in Christlikeness. Above all else ministers should model personal piety and devotion to Christ. Without this no one can be an example to the flock (1 Pet. 5:3).

Compare your life and character to the necessary ministerial qualifications revealed in 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9. Only Christ Himself would be perfectly qualified by these standards. If God demanded sinless conformity to such criteria there would be no ministers. Moreover, it is a false humility that denies the evidence of grace and the

presence of gifts given by God. And yet, these standards aren't meaningless. A glaring violation means disqualification.

God equips with the needful gifts and abilities all those He calls. One essential skill for pastoral ministry, according to 1 Tim. 3:2, is the ability to teach. As I have, you've probably heard pastors who cannot teach. When God guides people to be accountants He gives them a facility with figures. When He directs others to be farmers or musicians He gives them the physical abilities they need for their job. And when God calls people to preach He gives them the ability to communicate His Word. Ministerial training is extremely important, and good training will develop gifts. But training cannot furnish what God has not given.

For some who sense the internal call there is a strong temptation to enter the preaching ministry immediately. While this zeal is commendable, wisdom would delay such decisive action in order to test one's ability to instruct and edify his hearers.

THE EXTERNAL CALL

One aspect of the external, or public, side of God's call to the preaching ministry is *confirmation by others*. As your fellow Christians observe your life and service, and compare what they see with the Scriptural qualifications for ministry, the Holy Spirit bears witness to them that God has called you, and they tell you so.

Who are the "others" whose opinions you should solicit regarding the evidence of God's call upon you? Normally you should include your pastor and perhaps other ministers you may know, as well as several spiritually mature believers in your church family. When possible, recognition of your call should be sought from your entire local church body.

The second factor in the external call is *verification in the response to your ministry efforts*. In other words, when you minister from the Word of God and serve in the church, do people often respond in ways that verify the presence of God's blessing upon your work?

This was how the Lord first manifested His call in my case. In college I was part of a group of athletes who were often invited to churches and youth groups to tell of our faith in Christ. As months of doing this went by, increasing numbers of hearers would ask if I were called into the ministry. The more I heard it, the more I began to consider and pray about that possibility.

Remember, however, that no matter how strong your sense of internal *or* external call, God's true call includes *both*.



DO THESE THINGS MEAN I'M CALLED TO PREACH?

None of the following, as desirable as many of them are, should be the reason why you believe God has called you to the ministry of preaching.

- Ambition to be noticed, to prove yourself, or to "make a difference."

- Confidence that you could do well in the ministry.
- Compassion for hurting people.
- Confusion about a mystical experience.
- Fluency in public speaking.
- Knowledge of the Bible.
- Failure at all other types of work.
- Belief that ministry would be the best means to an easy life, study and intellectual pursuits, or wealth.
- Acquiescence to the expectation of a parent or the selfish opinion of others.
- Conviction that the church needs you.

Do not enter the ministry if one of these is your main motivation. You must be called.



WHAT DO I DO WHEN I THINK GOD IS CALLING?

Once you believe God is calling you to preach His Gospel, the first step is *presentation* of yourself to your pastor. Tell him of your consciousness of call. He can give you not only experienced counsel, he can also inform you of any formal process you should follow in your church. Your next step is *preparation*. A call to preach is a call to prepare. Would you want a physician who'd had no preparation? Preparation is even more important for a physician of *souls*. Develop your spiritual disciplines, especially those of the Word and prayer. Devote yourself to your local church. Find a place to teach there. Study the Bible and theology as much as you can. Seriously consider enrolling in a solid seminary. When I told my dad (a layman) that God was calling me, he wisely advised, "If you can do anything else and be happy, do it." He was right. But I had to exclaim with the Apostle Paul, "I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16). All along God knew better than I the path that was most joyful for me.

For further reading:

- Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Call to the Ministry," Lecture 2 in Lectures to My Students (any edition).
- James M. George, "The Call to Pastoral Ministry," in John MacArthur, Jr. and the Master's Seminary Faculty, *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry* (Dallas: Word, 1995), 102-115.

1John Armstrong, "The Ministry of the Word and the Call of God," *Update* 5, no. 6 (May-June 1996): 1.
 2Iain Murray, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *The First Forty Years* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), 80.

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