



Truth

On Tough Texts

WWW.THESCRPTUREALONE.COM

A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

ISSUE 18 (January 2007)

Is There a So-Called “Call” to Ministry?

Ephesians 4:11; I Timothy 3:1

BEFORE COMING TO OUR CURRENT PLACE of service in June of 1986, my wife and I were in a traveling ministry of music and preaching for four years. It was during that time that I occasionally heard the statement, “There’s no such thing as God’s ‘inward call’ to the ministry; that whole concept is nothing more than a person’s subjective feeling.” Once in a while someone would even add, “Anyone can be in the ministry simply if they choose to be.”

Some twenty years later, however, that once infrequent statement has now been transformed into a full-blown teaching that is being propagated by many evangelical leaders. A growing number insist that “the call” is only outward. As one writer puts it:

This call may be the call of the congregation to the pastorate, or the call of the representative Church to the mission field or to professorships in a theological seminary, or executive offices in the Church, or to any other work in which the Church may be engaged, or which it may find it necessary to perform. . . .¹

We’ll come back to that statement and quote another by the same teacher a little later, but the result of such a view, as I hope to show, is not only a departure from clear biblical teaching and historical precedent but is also a serious weakening of the Church by putting people in leadership who do not belong there.

The Biblical Teaching

Does the Bible teach an inward call to ministry?

First, there is a sense in which *all* believers are called “to *ministry*.” The word “call” is *kaleo* or *kaleomai*. Basically, these speak of an “invitation,” but more specifically “a summons.” A call, therefore, is not just a *request*; it is a *demand*. Of course, all the elect are called (summoned) to salvation (Rom. 8:30; I Pet. 2:9; etc.). Further, however, *all* believers are called to ministry (service). For example, I Peter 1:15 and II Peter 1:3 say we are called (summoned) to virtue and holy living. Likewise, I Peter 3:9, says we are called (summoned) to be a blessing to others, which is another way of saying we are to minister to (serve) others.

Second, however, it is essential to recognize that there is what is called “the call to *the ministry*,” that is, God’s call to what has been termed “full-time ministry,” that is, as one’s vocation. Is this “subjective,” as goes the accusation? Of course it is because it is what God is doing in a man’s heart and mind to compel him to the ministry, but that doesn’t prove that it doesn’t exist. As we’ll see, this is the precedent we see throughout Scripture.

It is also insisted that any kind of ministry is simply one’s personal choice, but we humbly and categorically disagree because that simply is not the biblical precedent. Nowhere in Scripture is this a man’s choice; it is always God’s choice alone. Yes, a local church is to *train* and *ordain* men to the ministry and thereby show that it *recognizes their call and qualifications*. But the actual call is God’s and He works it out between Himself and His servants. Let’s consider two points.

First, we see this *doctrinally* in Ephesians 4:11: And he [Christ] gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers. That verse, of course, lists four “office gifts” that have been given to the Church (the first two, which have passed away, and the two that replaced them). The words He gave are pivotal. The Greek here includes an “intensive pronoun” (*autos edoken*) that yields the literal idea “He Himself gave,” that is, *He and no one else*. In other words, these offices are given by God alone, not by the Church, not by a school, not even by the person who wants to fill an office. Again, the common attitude today is that anyone can say, “I want to teach,” and is then qualified to teach. While such willingness is commendable, it does *not* qualify. As none of the Apostles appointed themselves but were chosen by Christ, neither does any man appoint himself to any of these offices. As one commentator aptly puts it, “The Jesus Who ascended—this, and none other, is the sovereign donor. The provider and bestower are one in the same.”² *It is Christ alone Who calls to ministry.*

This principle is even more graphic in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-8, where there are twenty-four qualifications a man must meet to hold the office of Pastor (Bishop and Elder). The key to understanding I Timothy 3:1-7 is that the qualifications Paul lists are set against the backdrop of the unqualified leaders in Ephesus. Some interpreters view these qualifications as “the ideal”; that is, no one can measure up to all of them so we must simply find as many as possible in each person. Such a view is obviously erroneous because the text neither *says* nor even *implies* such an idea. What Paul does here is place God’s standards against what the Ephesians had allowed the leadership to degenerate into in the approximately six years since he had written the Ephesian letter to them. As one commentator summarizes, “Some of the leaders were teaching false doctrine (I Tim. 1:3; 4:1–3, 7; 6:3–5), turning aside to ‘fruitless discussion’ (1:6), they misused the law, and misunderstood the gospel (1:7–11). Some were women (2:12), though that was forbidden by God’s Word [which Paul notes early in the letter, 2:11–12]. Others were guilty of sin, and needed public rebuke (5:20).”³

He, therefore, says, “Here is what you must look for. If a man does not have these qualities, he is not qualified to lead”—period. These are not “the ideal”—they are the *standard*.

The problems we see in Christianity today—the redefining of the Gospel, the “seeker-sensitive” movement, the entertainment-orientation of ministry, the Relativism and Pragmatism that rule all aspects of Church life, and so on—all come, in part, from the breakdown of leadership, which in-turn comes from *putting people in leadership who Biblically should not be there*. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones put it, “It is largely because the true conception of the work of a minister has become so debased that the

ministry has lost its authority and counts so little at the present time.”⁴

To illustrate, it is noteworthy that when one goes back in Church History, he finds that pastors were great theologians, and when they spoke people listened. Was that because of *their* authority? No, it was because *Scripture alone* was their authority, and they were there because they were called, qualified, trained, and ordained to be there. In stark contrast, today we find very few theologians in the pulpit, and anyone who wants to be “in the ministry” is permitted to be. We have hundreds of voices saying thousands of things, we have mega-churches doing whatever they want, we have celebrities with their own television shows, and we have every “Church program” under the sun. As a result, the ministry means virtually nothing anymore. One voice is just as good as another because the Word of God is simply not the final authority for all we believe, think, say, and do.

So again, Paul, therefore, gives Timothy (and Titus) specific requirements for leadership. Out of a total of twenty-four, there are fourteen *character* requirements, four *social and family* requirements, five *spiritual* requirements, and one *vocational* requirement for those who are to fill the office of Pastor (also Bishop and Elder—we’ll examine these three terms next month). It is that *vocational* requirement that is at the root of Church leadership. We use the word “vocational” here in a stronger sense than it is often used today. Webster tells us that this is “an impulse to enter a certain career.” So, the word means more than most people think. In truth, as Webster indicates, a *vocation* is that to which one is totally dedicated, that for which he has a passion, that which he does because he cannot even imagine doing anything else.

While the list of qualifications in I Timothy 3:1-7 doesn’t *grammatically* begin until the word “then” in verse 2, *contextually* speaking verse 1 also speaks of a qualification: This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. Oh, how this verse has been abused! The word desire has been twisted to mean that anyone can preach or teach as a “side-line” just because he “wants to.” But the Greek words behind desire and desireth say something quite different. Desire is *orego*, which means “to stretch.” One Greek authority tells us: “to stretch one’s self out in order to grasp something; to reach after or desire something.”⁵ Another adds that metaphorically the idea is to “long after, try to gain, be ambitious (in a benign manner).”⁶ So this means far more than what we usually mean by desire. It speaks of a deep longing, a complete disregard for all else. This is exactly what the call to the ministry is: *a desire to preach that disregards all else one could do*. There is in this a sense of constraint; one can do nothing else. How well Charles Spurgeon said it in one of his lectures to pastoral students:

In order to [be] a true call to the ministry there must be an irresistible, overwhelming craving and raging thirst for telling to others what God has done to our own souls . . . “Do not enter the ministry *if you can help it*,” was the deeply sage advice of a divine to one who sought his judgment. If any student in this room could be content to be a newspaper editor, or lawyer, or a grocer, or a farmer, or a doctor, 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 fulness, for a man so filled with God would utterly weary of any pursuit but that for which his inmost soul pants.⁷

In other words, if a man can do anything else and be satisfied with it, and have peace in it, then he is not called to preach. Spurgeon goes on to describe the full extent of such a desire:

This desire should be one which *continues with us*, a passion which bears the test of trial, a longing from which it is quite impossible for us to escape, though we may have tried to do so; a desire, in fact, which grows more intense by the lapse of years, until it becomes a yearning, a pining, a famishing to proclaim the Word.⁸

Anecdotes do not constitute Truth, but if I may interject a personal example, I did not start out to be a preacher—no way. I was headed for another vocation entirely, a surgeon. The ministry was not my plan, but it was God’s. He called me to the ministry and put within me that compulsion. We find the same story of men throughout Scripture (e.g., Jeremiah; 20:9) and throughout Church History.

Now notice the word desireth, which translates *epithumeo*, “to long after, to have a passionate compulsion.” This word often speaks of something bad and lustful, but the word “good” and the surrounding context make it clear that this is for good rather than for evil. In contrast to *orego*, (which doesn’t imply inner motive only outward pursuit) this verb refers to the inward feeling of desire. Taken together, then, *the two terms describe the man who pursues the ministry outwardly because of a driving compulsion inwardly*.

That is the call to ministry.

Second, we see this proven *practically* everywhere we look. It was true of the Apostle Paul, for example. Second Corinthians 5 is about the compulsion of the ministry. In verse 14 he declares: “The love of Christ constraineth us.” Even more pointed is I Corinthians 9:16, where Paul writes, “Necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!” *This kind of desire transcends mere human desire; it is placed by God; it is given according to His grace*. This is not any man’s idea,

not something that he desires before the call, not something he chooses to do because it is as good as anything else. Rather, it is something God does in a man’s life, and that man can do nothing else. If a man does what Scripture demands of him, a mere human desire will fade, just as we see increasingly today.

We see this principle throughout Scripture for men God called to preach. Not only does it describe God’s calling of several prophets (e.g., Jer. 1:1-10; Ezek. 2:1-3; Jonah 1:1-3), it also records the calling of Jesus’ disciples by the Lord Jesus Himself (e.g., Matt. 4:18-22; cf. Mk. 1:16-20; Lk. 5:1-111; Jn. 1:35-42). While the specific call of each one is not recorded, Matthew 10:5 specifies that “these twelve Jesus sent forth,” emphasizing Jesus’ sole power to call and commission. Luke 9:1-2 goes further to say, “Then he called his twelve disciples together, and gave them power and authority over all devils, and to cure diseases. And *he sent them to preach the kingdom of God*” (emphasis added).

At this point, some insist that such examples were only for that time when God called directly and not for today. But such a position is not only inconsistent, it is also dangerous because it clearly implies that biblical precedent (on any issue) is meaningless.

Another key verse is Hebrew 5:4: “And no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron.” This verse, of course, speaks of God’s calling of the Old Testament priest, but the picture is no less graphic—God calls His servants.

A very unpopular application arises at this point, namely, that God’s calling immediately and fundamentally implies that not just anyone can preach, which is the exact opposite of modern opinion. Why? Because not just anyone can disregard all else to *fill* that office and then *fulfill* its responsibilities. A preacher is called of God to preach and *does nothing else*. Many, if not most, people today believe in “lay-preachers,” “laypastors,” and “lay-elders.” But these simply do not match the Scripture, no matter how one tries to justify them. Preaching and teaching the Scripture takes the majority of a man’s time to prepare for; it is not something that can be done as a “side-line.”

Many disagree with that, but please think of it this way: would any of us want a surgeon to operate on us simply because he had read a couple books on how to perform surgery (perhaps one titled, *General Surgery for Dummies*)? Anyone, in fact, could ask the same question of their vocation, such as this: “Could just anyone walk into my office and say, ‘Well, I read a couple of books on your job, so I think I can do it as well as you?’” How ridiculous, and if we may be frank, how arrogant! But this is precisely what many do with teaching the Bible. They think that just a little time in the Word, such as reading

their Sunday School lesson or reading a couple of commentaries, qualifies them to preach and teach. How tragically wrong (not to mention dangerous) that is! Yes, a pastor has many duties, but the majority of his time must be invested in the study of the Word and prayer so he can adequately prepare to feed God's people. We submit, if this isn't a man's attitude, he does not belong in a pulpit. Martyn Lloyd-Jones comments on "lay-preaching" in his classic book, *Preaching and Preachers*:

What is the ultimate criticism of what is called 'lay-preaching?' The answer comes to this, that it seems to miss completely the whole notion of a 'call.' There are also other reasons. . . . My main argument is that the picture I have given of the preacher, and what he is doing, insists not only that this is something to which a man is called, but also something that should occupy the whole of his time apart from exceptional circumstances. It is not something which can be done as an aside, as it were; that is a wrong approach and a wrong attitude to it.⁹

The teacher I quoted at the beginning of this article adds this statement, which demonstrates a serious error: "The so-called inner call is due to Calvinistic or Reformed influence." Shouldn't such a statement greatly trouble us? Does it not clearly attack the basic underlying doctrine of the sovereignty of God? Are we to think that a sovereign God leaves the whole matter up to men to decide who will preach? Is this the only area in which God is not sovereign?

The same teacher again objects to the "inward call" based upon the idea that it "[divides] the Church into two classes, the clergy and the laity." Now I must choose my next words very carefully, for I do not want to be misunderstood. Yes, Roman Catholicism (and even Protestantism) have created an artificial and destructive hierarchy of "clergy and laity," but we should also recognize that there *is* a difference between a *shepherd* and a *sheep*—shepherds are to lead and sheep are to follow, and God does call certain men to be shepherds. Some folks really bristle at the word "layman," but that word is neither an insult nor a term that implies inferiority. How many of us, for example, have heard a doctor first describe a medical condition with half a dozen ten-syllable words and then say, "Now to the layman, here's the problem"? Webster, in fact, defines *layman* as "a person who does not belong to a particular profession or who is not expert in some field." *That* is all the word means in this context. As I would be a layman when it comes to the vocations of the men in my church, so is each one of them a layman when it comes to my vocation.

Many people today still react to this by saying, "You just think you are part of an elite group. Or maybe it is just that you're proud and don't want to share the glory with

anyone else." On the contrary, one of the main reasons we make this so clear is *for their own protection*. As James declares, "My brethren, be not many masters [i.e., *didaskalos*, teachers], knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation" (Jas. 3:1). Here is a serious warning that seems to be overlooked by many today. Such would-be teachers, whether a Sunday School teacher, lay-preacher, or other teaching position, have no idea what responsibility they take on when they presume to teach the Scripture. Every person who takes on that task will give an account of it and will be strictly judged for it. James is telling us, "Be warned! Don't take this on unless God has called you and you have been properly trained for it."

As a pastor, this principle hits me every time I sit down to study in preparation for preaching and teaching. I will answer for what I teach, and it is for that reason that I spend so many hours in study. There are times when I will spend hours, or even days, on one verse, or even a single word, because I want to get it right.

The above attitude of the ministry being a "glorious profession" also shows a total misunderstanding of the ministry. If a man preaches the pure, unaltered Truth, especially in our modern pragmatic, relativistic society, *the last thing he will receive is glory*; rather he will experience resistance, rebellion, and even rage from many, if not most, hearers.

So once again, we are brought back to a distinct call of God, which takes place between Him and His servants. We see once more that this was true of Paul, as Luke records in Acts 13:2: "As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto *I have called them*" (emphasis added).

Calling is not the end, only the beginning of a long journey. A man must secondly be tested according to the qualifications for leadership (I Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9), thirdly be trained in doctrine and practice (I Tim. 3:6; II Tim. 2:2), fourthly be ordained by other leaders (Acts 14:21-25; I Tim. 4:14; 5:22; Titus 1:5;) and then finally be sent forth by the Church (Acts 13:2-3). In other words, *his call must be confirmed by others and then nurtured into use*. But at the very foundation is the irresistible call of God in his life.

The Historical Testimony

As I scoured my library on this issue, a very interesting (and troubling) pattern emerged. While older theologians and commentators consistently recognize the biblical principle of the inward call, most contemporary writers either deny the inward call outright or, more often, simply don't mention the issue at all, as if it is not important enough to deal with. John Calvin, for example, wrote in the 16th Century of "that secret call of which every minister is conscious before God."¹⁰ A century later, the great theologian Francis Turretin wrote:

The [internal call] is that by which the heart itself is excited by God to consecrate itself to the work of the ministry (of which Paul speaks in 1 Tim. 3:1). . . . By it, a man is conscious before God that he is impelled to undertake this office not by ambition or avarice or any other carnal affection, but from a sincere love of God and a desire to build up the church.¹¹

About another century later the great expositor and theologian John Gill wrote:

There must be a call to the ministry of the Word, both inward and outward, previous to this office; *no man*, under the law, took to himself the honour of the priest's office, but he that was called of God, as was Aaron, Heb. 5:4, 5. Nor ought any man to take upon him the office of a prophet, or minister of the word, without a call; there were some in the times of Jeremiah, complained of by the Lord, who were not sent nor spoken to by him; and yet prophesied, Jer. 23:21.¹²

Space does not permit us to cite others here,¹³ but thankfully, there are also some contemporary Christian leaders who agree. One asks, "How important is the assurance of a special call?"

The work of the ministry is too demanding and difficult for a man to enter it without a sense of divine calling. Men enter and then leave the ministry usually because they lack a sense of divine urgency. Nothing less than a definite call from God could ever give a man success in the ministry.¹⁴

Indeed, what man who has been in the ministry for twenty years cannot remember times when he would have quit if it had not been for the fact that *God called him to the ministry no matter what?* Another writes:

A man who is called to the ministry has an internal desire so strong that it motivates him toward external pursuit of that goal. His desire to minister is so strong that he doesn't have any other option. Ministry is his consuming passion, and he pursues preparation and qualification for that task.¹⁵

Still another writes this excellent summary:

The call of God to vocational ministry is different from God's call to salvation and His call to service issued to all Christians. It is a call to selected men to serve as leaders in the church. To serve in such leadership capacities, recipients of this call must have assurance that God has so selected them. A realization of this assurance rests on four criteria, the first of

which is a confirmation of the call by others and by God through the circumstances of providing a place of ministry. The second criteria is the possession of abilities necessary to serve in leadership capacities. The third consists of a deep longing to serve in the ministry. The final qualification is a lifestyle characterized by moral integrity. A man who fulfills these four qualifications can rest in the assurance that God has called him to vocational service.¹⁶

While we rejoice in those statements, and some others we could cite, for the most part the Church is drifting away from this biblical and historical position, and she is reaping the tragic consequences. I would submit, therefore, that Christian leaders who reject the principle of God's sovereign, inward calling of men to His service are (whether knowingly or unknowingly) aligning themselves with a *distinctly modern trend*, a trend that is eroding biblical leadership.

Dr. J. D. Watson
Pastor-Teacher
Grace Bible Church

NOTES

- ¹ C. H. Little, D.D., S.T.D., *Disputed Doctrines: A Study in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology* (The Lutheran Literary Board, 1933).
- ² John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998; reprint of 2nd Edition, 1861), p. 297.
- ³ John MacArthur, *New Testament Commentary: I Timothy* (Moody, 1995).
- ⁴ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ* (Baker), p. 53.
- ⁵ Joseph Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon* (Hendrickson), p. 452.
- ⁶ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (AMG Publishers), p. 1056.
- ⁷ C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures To My Students* (Zondervan, 1974), pp. 26-27 (emphasis in the original).
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28 (emphasis in the original).
- ⁹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Zondervan, 1972), p. 103. This work is highly recommended. It quickly and cuttingly goes to the heart and speaks of what the ministry is and how it's been perverted in recent history.
- ¹⁰ *Institutes* (Beveridge translation), IV, iii, 11
- ¹¹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1997), Vol. 3, p. 215.
- ¹² John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* (The Baptist Standard Bearer, 1995 reprint of the 1839 edition), p. 866.
- ¹³ E.g., William Ames, William Perkins, Robert L. Dabney, Louis Berkof, and others.
- ¹⁴ Howard F. Sugden and Warren W. Wiersbe, *When Pastors Wonder How* (Moody, 1973), p. 9.
- ¹⁵ John MacArthur, *New Testament Commentary: I Timothy* (3:1).
- ¹⁶ James M. George, chapter 6, "The Call to the Ministry," in John MacArthur, Richard Mayhue, and Robert Thomas (editors), *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry* (W Publishing Group, 1995), p. 102.

