

Faith Pulpit

The Call to the Ministry

Does God call people to the ministry, or is it one of several career paths a Christian can choose? Pastors and church leaders need to be clear about this vital issue. In this article Dr. Douglas Brown of Faith Baptist Theological Seminary addresses this important question with Biblical answers.

The gospel ministry is a high and noble calling. In 2 Corinthians 3:7–11 Paul proclaimed that the ministry is glorious. In 1 Timothy 3:1 Paul declared that pastoral ministry is a "good", or honorable, work (*kalou ergou*). Throughout the New Testament the ministry is upheld as a divine stewardship entrusted to those who take on its responsibility (1 Cor. 4:1, 2; 2 Cor. 5:18–20; 1 Thess. 2:4; 2 Tim. 4:1–5; 1 Pet. 5:1–4). Despite this lofty description, the call to gospel ministry seems to have fallen on hard times. The disturbing reality is that fewer people are committing themselves to vocational Christian ministry. Why is this the case? I believe part of the problem rests in a fundamental misunderstanding concerning the call of God. This article will define what the call of God is and then articulate Biblical criteria in identifying the call in one's life.

Defining the Call to Ministry

Simply put, the call to ministry is God's sovereign selection of individuals for full-time, vocational service. In one sense, God calls all believers. Every believer is called to salvation (Rom. 8:30; Eph. 4:1) and to service (Rom. 12:1–8; Gal. 5:13; 1 Thess. 1:9, 10). The call to ministry, however, is distinct from the believer's general duties. The call to ministry is an appointment to vocational ministry. Ideally, the call is a lifetime appointment in which one devotes himself to the ministry and makes it his livelihood (cf. 1 Cor. 9:14; Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17, 18). Of course, vocational ministry does not preclude tent-making situations, where the minister must sustain himself with outside employment, nor does this definition rule out the concept of retirement.[1](#)

Biblical Background to the Call

Throughout redemptive history, God has called individuals into His service to fulfill His purposes. In the Old Testament God called individuals to vocational offices. He called judges such as Gideon (Judg. 6:11–27) and Samson (Judg. 13:1–25). He called prophets such as Moses (Exod. 3:1–13), Samuel (1 Sam. 3:1–21), Elisha (1 Kings 19:16, 19–21), and Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4–10). God strictly reserved the right to appoint Levitical priests (Exod. 28:1; Heb. 5:1–4), and He sovereignly chose Israel's kings such as Saul (1 Sam. 10:1–27) and David (1 Sam. 16:1–13).

In the New Testament Jesus called the twelve disciples (Matt. 4:18–20; 9:9–13; Mark 1:16–20; 3:13–18; Luke 5:1–11; John 1:35–51). Eleven of the disciples were then called as apostles (Matt. 16:16–20; John 20:20–23). God also sovereignly selected Paul as an apostle (Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:1, 15–17; Eph. 3:1–13; 1 Tim. 1:12–17). Ephesians 4:11 sets out clear offices that God established to lead the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Paul explained that God gave these leaders for the equipping of the saints (4:11, 12). While apostles and prophets were foundational and therefore are no longer in operation (cf. Eph. 2:20), evangelists, pastors, and teachers continue today. The implication is clear: God calls individuals to fulfill these leadership roles in the church today.

This pattern was also found in the early church. God used Paul to appoint elders in newly planted churches on his first missionary journey (Acts 14:23). Paul exhorted both Timothy and Titus to establish qualified elders in Ephesus (1 Tim. 3:1–7; 5:17–22) and Crete (Titus 1:5–9). When God has a task to accomplish, His normal pattern is to call individuals to do it.

Modern Misconceptions about the Call to Ministry

Great confusion currently surrounds the call to ministry. There are two extreme positions that need to be refuted. The first misconception is what I call mystical subjectivism. According to this view, one must have a “lightning-bolt experience”, similar to Paul's on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–19). If one never experiences such a crisis encounter with God, the assumption is that God has not called him into the ministry. Conversely, a believer who is not called to the ministry might have some experience that he misinterprets as a divine call. Advocates of this view make two errors: they misunderstand that God no longer gives direct revelation apart from the Scriptures, and they place too much emphasis on experience.

The second misconception is rational objectivism. Advocates of this position actually argue that God no longer calls people into vocational ministry.² This position is partly a reaction against the perceived “mysticism” in the so-called traditional view of the call to ministry. The main premise behind this view is that God does not have an individual will for each believer. It is argued that as long as believers obey God's moral will, they can choose whatever path in life they want. As a result, vocational ministry is not a divine call to be obeyed but merely a career option. The fundamental problem with this approach

is its denial of God's individual will for the believer (cf. Rom. 12:1, 2). While God no longer gives special revelation, He still leads and guides His children through providence and the Spirit's leading (e.g., Gal. 5:18).

Criteria for Determining the Call to the Ministry

Since God no longer communicates through direct revelation, how does a person determine God's call? I believe a Biblical solution is possible in determining what criteria constitute a divine call for ministry. There are both objective and subjective elements to the Biblical call. The objective elements are apparent to all because the church body can evaluate and test them. The subjective elements are only privately discerned.

Objective Elements of the Call

1. **Biblical Qualifications.** Scripture makes it clear that only qualified believers should be considered for the ministry (1 Tim. 3:1–7, Titus 1:6–9). Both the church and the candidate should consider whether he meets these high qualifications. Essentially the qualifications focus on godly character (e.g., "blameless"), spiritual maturity (e.g., "not a novice"), and ministry abilities and giftedness (e.g., "apt to teach"). Regardless of a person's good intentions to enter vocational ministry, if he fails to meet the Biblical qualifications, he cannot fulfill a call to ministry. The great news is that most of the qualifications can be developed over time as the novice grows and matures in the Lord. This is also, however, a severe warning to those presently in the ministry: failure to meet these qualifications disqualifies one from his calling (cf. 1 Cor. 9:24–27).

2. **Church Confirmation.** While the church does not generate the call to ministry, the church should recognize it. Historically, Baptist churches have officially recognized the call of God through ordination. Paul typically appointed, or ordained, elders in new churches (Acts 14:23). In 1 Timothy 4:14 he mentioned the ordination of Timothy into the ministry. He warned Timothy to exercise great care and caution in ordaining an elder (1 Tim. 5:22, "laying on hands"). Titus was to oversee the appointment of qualified elders in every city of Crete (Titus 1:5–9).

We find a similar situation in the book of Acts. In Acts 6:1–6, the Hellenist Jews selected spiritually qualified men to serve tables, which the apostles then appointed (or approved) as deacons. In Acts 13:1–4 we read that the church at Antioch sent Barnabas and Paul as missionaries. Even though these men were established leaders, they still went under the authority of the local church. They also reported back to Antioch (Acts 14:26–28).

Here is the point: the local church should see the evidence of the call in a man's life. The great Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon, affirmed, "The will of the Lord concerning pastors is made known through the prayerful judgment of His church".³ It is interesting to note that the call to ministry will

often be evident to others even before the one called recognizes it himself.

3. Training. Closely related to qualifications is the element of Biblical training. Moses spent forty years in Midian. The prophets trained students in their schools. Elisha served Elijah. The disciples spent more than three years following the Lord. Paul spent time in Arabia and time with Barnabas. Timothy and Titus learned doctrine and ministry from their spiritual father, Paul.

The Biblical pattern is clear: the call to ministry can only be fulfilled with the proper training (2 Tim. 2:2). Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary exists for the purpose of training individuals for vocational ministry.

Subjective Elements of the Call

1. Desire. First Timothy 3:1 states, “This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work.” In this verse Paul used two different Greek words for “desires. The first occurrence of the word “desires” (oregetai) means “to seek to accomplish a specific goal, to aspire to, to strive for.”⁴ The second occurrence of the word “desires” (epithumei) means “to have a strong desire to do or secure something.”⁵ Spurgeon articulated that the first sign of a heavenly call is “an intense, all-absorbing desire for the work.”⁶ Where does this desire originate? Ultimately, the inward compulsion for ministry originates from God Himself. Two points of qualification are needed.

First, this desire is more than a passing feeling. It is a real satisfaction and joy that can only be found in doing the work of the ministry. It is a lifelong pursuit. Spurgeon rightly counseled his students, “Do not enter the ministry if you can help it.” He contended that if one can be satisfied with a secular career, he certainly is not called to ministry. He continued, “We must feel that woe is upon us if we preach not the gospel.”⁷ This thought echoes Paul’s heartbeat (1 Cor. 9:16–17).

Second, this desire is for the work of the ministry, not the position of the minister. As strange as it might seem, some might wrongly desire the apparent prestige of pastoring or the authority that comes with the pastorate (cf. 3 John 9). Paul, however, stated clearly that the overseer should instead strongly desire the work of the ministry.

2. Providential Leading. Providence relates to God’s sovereign care and guidance of all creation to accomplish His eternal purpose (Eph. 3:11). God uses circumstances and events to accomplish His will. In addition, Paul explained that the yielded believer can be led (Gal. 5:18) and filled (Eph. 5:18) by the Holy Spirit. This divine leading is not new revelation; instead, the Spirit uses the Word of God, His Sword, to prompt believers to obedience. This past summer I had the privilege of leading a youth missions trip to France. One of the highlights of the trip was hearing the testimonies of more than a dozen missionaries. They consistently affirmed that God led them to the mission field as they yielded themselves to His Word and will.

Importance of the Call

The call to ministry is indeed a high and noble calling. It is a sacred invitation to preach God's Word and shepherd God's flock. It compels men into the ministry and sustains them to fulfill it.

My final exhortation is threefold:

First, consider God's call to full-time, vocational ministry. I honestly believe God is calling some people into the ministry who refuse to answer. Both pastors and parents need to encourage an openness to consider God's call.

Second, godly leaders in the church need to mark individuals with ministry potential and encourage them to consider if God is calling them to the ministry.

Third, if God has called you, obey it. Too many students who at one time aspired to the ministry leave the hallowed halls of Bible college or seminary and fail to fulfill their call. Let's remember the exhortation Paul gave to Archippus: "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it" (Col. 4:17). May this be our hearts' desire.

Works Cited

1. Tent-making comes from Paul's practice of making tents to sustain himself financially at times in the ministry (Acts 18:3, cf. 20:34). While Paul had the right to receive remuneration for his services, he often refrained for the sake of the gospel (cf. 1 Cor. 9:15; 1 Thess. 2:9). Concerning retirement, apparently Old Testament priests were to retire from their duties at age fifty (Num. 8:23–26).
2. See Gary Friesen, *Decision Making and the Will of God* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Press, 2004).
3. C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 32.
4. Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000) (BDAG).
5. BDAG.
6. C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 26.
7. C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 26, 27.

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