

A CALL TO RECALL “THE CALL”

The people of God are confused and perplexed by some recent trends in the Church. One of the most notable of these is the growing spirit of defeatism surrounding the office of the pastor. Like a school of piranha attacking its prey, problems unheard of in years past seem to target the preacher! Burnout, guilt, fear, marital discord, defeat, despair, discouragement, and other symptoms characterize the mass resignations and departures from the pastorate.

I recall standing before 7,000 Christian leaders and conducting an unscientific survey of the crowd. By a show of hands, I determined that those individuals in the audience knew over 10,000 Bible preachers who have, at some point, left the gospel ministry for one reason or another.

To the uninformed, the problem may seem too complex to unravel. One of the causes, perhaps heretofore overlooked, is the problem of “the call” to the pastorate. Some have lost the edge of their special commission; others have never received one to begin with.

Jeremiah describes a fearful indictment of self-appointed pastors of the past. Their sins include adultery, profaneness, lying, preaching personal dreams and visions, and generally misrepresenting their God. The result of this sinfulness is a ravaging destruction of God’s people: *“Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the Lord.”* (Jeremiah 23:1). What reason does God give for such horrors? *“I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied . . . I sent them not, nor commanded them: therefore they shall not profit this people at all, saith the Lord.”* (Jeremiah 23:21, 32). God’s Word is clear that personal sinfulness and corporate destruction were the fruit of unsent, “free-agent” pastors following their own agendas. The result of such actions has been a blight upon the church!

The damage is not only upon the church, but is also upon pastors themselves. I have counseled several pastors who were confused or uncertain about their call to the pastorate. One pastor of ten years once asked me bluntly, “Did I call myself into the ministry?” Another veteran pastor who was experiencing chronic depression and headaches exposed his feelings for the first time. “I can’t say that I was ever called to preach.” Needless to say, these men had little joy in their labors and their congregations reaped the consequences.

I am convinced that these men represent a much larger and more pervasive problem in the church than we have been willing to admit, our ranks are infiltrated with the “unsent.” Perhaps the high attrition rate in the pastorate is traceable to this problem. Maybe some have gone out from us because they were “not of us.”

Incidentally, this is not a new problem. Spurgeon is clear when he writes, “That hundreds have missed their way, and stumbled against a pulpit is sorrowfully evident from the fruitless ministries and decaying churches which surround us. It is a fearful calamity to a man to miss his calling, and to the church upon whom he imposes himself, his mistake involves an affliction of the most grievous kind. It would be a curious and painful subject for reflection – the frequency with which men in the possession of reason mistake the end of their existence, and aim at objects which they were never intended to pursue.”¹

Indeed, the problem was so bad that Spurgeon deliberately began to discourage overly-enthusiastic candidates to the pulpit. Lloyd-Jones followed suit in his era saying, "I have always felt when someone has come to me and told me that he has been called to be a preacher that my main business is to put every conceivable obstacle that I can think of in his way."² Even the great D.L. Moody practiced this policy of obstructionism. When asked by someone what he considered to be the greatest thing he had done in his life, "He thought for a while and finally said, 'I talked ten thousand laymen out of entering the ministry.'"³

Many of the problems of the ministry can be traced to vacillation about the "call." "*For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?*" (1 Corinthians 14:8). Discouragement, a hireling mentality, fear of man, failure, and even immorality find their beginnings in the absence of a God-given assurance that the preacher is indeed "sent."

Why is this problem so pervasive? What has brought the church to such a state? The cause, in part, is confusion – confusion around the direction or goal of ministry and the source of the call itself.

In fundamental ranks, there has been for some time an inordinate emphasis upon the pastorate as the service of choice. Dr. Louis McBurney, a Christian psychiatrist who has counseled hundreds of pastors, says it clearly, "Within many denominations, unfortunately, the only way to serve God has been perceived as being through the ordained ministry."⁴ He gives the example of a young man who was channeled into the pastorate by the church and who later experienced "a deep-seated resentment toward the system which 'inducted' him in the ministry by interpreting his call for him. He bitterly dismissed the whole business as a dreadful mistake, no, worse than a mistake, a sneaky trick pulled off against him by a provincial community."⁵

One pastor I know confessed to similar feelings. Bombarded from the pulpit regarding the supremacy and necessity of pastoral volunteers, he saw no option for ministry other than the pastorate. When he made his decision to serve God, he assumed that this meant as a pastor. Why? Because he was never given an opportunity to give thought to another field of service. There was no mention of a surrender to the mission field, Christian education, counseling, youth work, camp ministries, children's or teens' ministries, or working as an assistant pastor. No one challenged him to study writing, rescue mission work, or ministering to the elderly. Fields of endeavor such as evangelism, literature distribution, medical missions, media outreach, and military chaplaincy work were never discussed. None of these were deprecated; they were simply ignored. The conclusion was obvious – to serve God he must be a pastor. Although he considered counseling ministries years before he became a pastor, such thoughts were precluded under the domination of a persuasive preacher bent on making him into his image. As a result, he struggled in the pastorate, always feeling somehow that he didn't fit. It took him years to discover that God's purpose for him lay in another field of ministry. How was he called? As a teenager he admired pastors and desired to please them. While in an emotional meeting, he began to cry. The evangelist pointed to him and said, "Brother Frank, don't you have something you want to say to the church?" In the heat of emotion, he blurted out, "God has called me to preach!" When he realized his mistake, he was afraid to let his pastor and church down. He carried these feelings hidden in his heart through his schooling and eight years of a frustrating pastorate. I wonder how many young men were forced into similar

“choices” when faced with a decision to serve God full time. One deeply committed Christian young man saw himself as a Christian first and an electrician second. His pastor interpreted his zeal as evidence of a call to “the ministry.” He sold his house, quit his job, moved his family, and entered seminary, but ultimately stopped short in his service to God. Dr. McBurney summarizes, “The pastor’s narrow notion of sacred and secular failed to affirm the important ministry he had as a Christian tradesman.”⁶

I credit some of the confusion about direction of service to the overused and misapplied term of “the ministry” as the exclusive title of the pastorate. No other ministry seems to be graced with this patrician label. A missionary is never said to be in “the ministry,” nor is a Christian school teacher, or chaplain in a hospital or prison. Therefore, “the ministry” and “the pastorate” have become synonymous, and the pastorate has laid exclusive claim to supreme service. This has led to some grievous errors!

One mistake is that many pastors have claimed, as the author whose book is now open before me, “There is no higher calling than the call to preach the Word?” Is this true? Is God’s will and purpose for one person ever inferior to that of another? If so, one must conclude that God thinks more of pastors than missionaries and certainly more than mere laymen in the pew. Years ago, I was blessed with a godly deacon who was also a gifted engineer. He witnessed faithfully in his company and brought his co-workers to church. A quiet man, he approached me after one of my emotional appeals for young men to surrender to the “highest calling of God . . . the ministry.” “Pastor Binney,” he said thoughtfully, “I am feeling like a second-class Christian.” “Why is that?” I asked. “You keep referring to the pastorate as the highest form of Christian service. That means that my job as an engineer, which I have always viewed as my special calling and ministry, is not as important to God. My son also wants to be an engineer, and he feels patronized and slighted in the youth group because of his aspirations.” He continued, “Pastor, I know that I am in the center of God’s will. I believe that I am in the perfect will of God for my life. I also believe that you are in the perfect will of God for your life. But, Pastor,” he asked, “how can the perfect will of God for you be higher than the perfect will of God for me?” How indeed? God convicted my heart deeply. I sought forgiveness from my friend and began to teach my church members that the measure of a call was one’s proximity to the perfect will of God, not their proximity to a certain level in the hierarchy of religious titles.

This has led to a view of “pastoral supremacy,” a tendency toward “*measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves.*” (2 Corinthians 10:12). Paul also says, “*For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of. . .*” (1 Corinthians 9:16). One logical outcome of such errors is envious aspirations for the top rung of the ministerial ladder. After all, anything less would be incomplete devotion. As Bratcher observes: “At the present time, a number of men . . . unsuited for the . . . ministry enter seminaries because they believe the only way to become fully committed Christians is to go into a church-related vocation.”⁷ One pastor told me his reason for entering the pastorate was, “I desired to serve God in the best way possible.” It follows then that such views also appeal to the fleshly inclinations of both the pulpit and the pew. “Many clergymen are infatuated with their position and authority. Often they are threatened by the

thought of equally sharing their authority with the laity. The laity, in turn, are sometimes slow to accept the responsibilities inherent in equality.”⁸

One of the most insidious and damaging consequences of a belief in ministerial royalty is the crippling guilt and fear which seizes a man who contemplates a change of ministries. Many are those who do this; some opt for evangelism, some missionary work. A friend of mine is now a full-time fund raiser for world missions. I heard of a recent pastors’ fellowship where the speaker described an acquaintance of mine who had left the pastorate for another field of Christian service. His description left no one in doubt as to who it was, but then he screamed with a paralyzing effect, “That is the spirit of antichrist!” Does one have to guess about the feelings of his audience should they ever consider such a course? The man in question is a personal friend, and I know intimately the details of his decision. Over two years of prayer, thought, and counsel preceded his decision.

Besides a misdirected goal, another reason for confusion surrounding the “call” is its source. The Apostle Paul emphatically claimed to be “...an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father...)” (Galatians 1:1). Although the Scriptures and church history are replete with stories of pastors, prophets, and others who were influenced by other men to enter God’s service, it must be remembered that these other men were only instruments in the hand of God. Some modern-day preachers have lost sight of that. In the absence of tangible measurements of personal effectiveness and worth, some see decisions for full-time Christian work as the ultimate mark of success. As one somewhat embittered Christian said, “My pastor felt that he had carved another notch on his gun when he talked someone into becoming a minister.”⁹ Rather than pressing for safety barriers to dissuade young people from the pastorate as did Spurgeon, Lloyd-Jones, and Moody, we pressure them into decisions by using emotional appeals and psychological manipulation. “We too often *seduce* young people into the services of our churches rather than waiting for God to call them into His service.”¹⁰ Lloyd-Jones agrees: “Sometimes this mistake about a call has been made not so much by the man himself, as by some minister or elder who has taken it upon himself to suggest to the man that he should become a preacher, and indeed to urge him, and to put pressure on him to do so.”¹¹

If the source of the call is not God Himself, it may be an influential pastor, a zealous parent, or significant other person in the life, or it may even come from within the candidate himself. I have known of men to enter the pastorate to avoid sinful tendencies, to prove their worth as a Christian, or to gain respect and prestige. Sad to say, this was my initial motivation to enter church work. I thought I would be admired and revered as a pastor. That simplistic notion didn’t take long to be corrected! Of course, this base motivation was not permitted much time in my conscious mind. I crowded it out with much nobler-sounding thoughts as “for God’s glory” and “to win the world for Christ.” But the awful truth remains. Many men make life decisions about the pastorate for less than holy reasons, while insulating themselves from that nagging voice of self-serving ambition. Everett Barnard comments on a man who strangled his wife to death and said, “God told me to do it.” “Many calls are the creations of the unconscious mind, and these are automatically assumed to be the voice of God. So there are callings of false gods as well as of the true God, and they continue to bring men into the ministry.”¹²

If you find yourself mired in confusion and doubt about the source and direction of your call, join the ranks of thousands before you! “*There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to [other pastors].*” (1 Corinthians 10:13). Even the venerable John Newton writes, “I was long distressed, as you are, about what was or was not a proper call to the ministry.”¹³

What is the solution to this problem facing the church? What can be done? To be effective, any answer must be considered on three fronts: the individual, the church, and the Bible college or seminary.

On an **individual** level, the call must be defined and understood. That is basic to any pursuit or acquisition of a Biblical call. Lutzer’s definition is among the best I have seen. “God’s call is an inner conviction given by the Holy Spirit and confirmed by the Word of God and the Body of Christ.”¹⁴ First, it is a conviction, not a hunch! Not a feeling or impression born in the fervor of emotionalism, but a consistent conviction which passes the test of time. Second, it is confirmed by the Word of God. One must not pass the minimum standards of 1 Timothy 3 but must also possess other qualifications such as the fruit of the Spirit, a burden for the lost, and an aptitude for teaching. The call is also confirmed by the Body of Christ which is responsible for approving a man for the ministry.

Each individual needs to confirm and reaffirm his call. If you’ve lost the glow, “... *stir up the gift ... which is in [you]!*” (2 Timothy 1:6). If you’ve never been God-sent, take the honorable course of choosing another ministry or profession. The alternatives are unthinkable. “...*I sent them not...therefore THEY SHALL NOT PROFIT THIS PEOPLE AT ALL, saith the Lord.*” (Jeremiah 23:32). [Emphasis added]. Jeremiah goes beyond a mention of a profitless ministry; he accuses the unsent of causing God’s people to sin. (verses 13, 21-23).

If you are uncertain about God’s call upon you, if you earnestly hunger for clarification, it will be helpful to retrace your steps. Like Joseph and Mary, go back to the place where you left Christ’s presence, and reconsider your call. Begin anew and afresh! Like a new convert seeking the will of God, exhaust the steps to finding the perfect will of God. Once you’ve genuinely laid your hand to the gospel plow, don’t ever look back! No price is too great to pay for this, no inconvenience too weighty, no admission too humbling! There is too much at stake!

The **church** body also has a responsibility in the placement of a man in the pastorate. In the fulfillment of this holy obligation, it behooves her pastors to forsake the false theory of “preacher superiority” in the service of God. They must stop boxing-in the unsent pastors with loud vilifications and denunciations at fellowship meetings. They must cease their reliance on persuasion and “*Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest.*” (Matthew 9:38). The church must disciple through sound teaching, assist in discerning spiritual gifts, test the depth of one’s character and spirituality, help men discern the area of direction of ministry, and discourage the impulsive.

In general, there must be a careful and thorough screening of each volunteer for the work of Christ. When I was training to be a Hospital Corpsman (medic) in the U.S. Navy, we were marched into a stuffy room and shown hours of actual footage of gory, battlefield carnage. We were led to believe that this was to

demonstrate the proper care of the wounded, but I suspect the Navy had an ulterior motive behind this gruesome course work. I watched several, would-be-medical marvels run from the room with their hands over their mouths, never to return, and thankfully never to bandage the wounded.

The battlefield or hospital ward is no place to uncover such queasiness! Should the screening for the call of God be any less thorough? Bratcher extends this thought: “What hospital would admit as a candidate for surgery residency a person who fainted at the sight of blood, didn’t like to study anatomy, and hated to perform operations? Yet men . . . with no gift for ministry are admitted to many seminaries because they insist they have been called of God...”¹⁵

Time is required to avoid “laying hands suddenly” on novice youth (perhaps there is good reason for the biblical qualification of thirty years of living before entering the priesthood). The candidate’s faithfulness, maturity, character, and spirituality must be scrutinized in detail. His motives, his knowledge, and even his marriage must pass the tests of pressure and persecution. His expectations must be accurately aligned with reality. As Spurgeon warns, “We must try whether we can endure brow-beating, weariness, slander, jeering, and hardship; and whether we can be made the off-scouring of all things, and be treated as nothing for Christ’s sake.”¹⁶ The crowning honor of the ordination must be granted with only the holiest of motivation, the most thorough of prayer, and the toughest of examination. To fail in this is to minimize the sense of calling. One pastor, who was given his ordination papers without a question being asked, said to me, “I feel like I sneaked into the church through the back door!” Some church-sponsored Bible colleges automatically grant ordination papers upon graduation as a matter of course, apparently with the assumption that since the prospective pastor has completed the “program,” he is prepared.

It is essential that the sending church bear the brunt of screening the candidate. Granted, the church has erred in rejecting some good men. The Methodist Church of England rejected the gifted G. Campbell Morgan! But as Lloyd-Jones points out; “The more common occurrence is that men feel called who are not called; and it is the business of the Church to see to this and handle the situation.”¹⁷ He tells the story of a young man who told Spurgeon that the Spirit had told him he was to speak in Spurgeon’s church on Thursday night. “Well, it is a very curious thing,” said Spurgeon, “that the Spirit has not told me that.”¹⁸ Needless to say, the young man did not preach for Spurgeon on Thursday night! If the Spirit has indeed spoken to the young man, He would have informed Spurgeon, and if the Spirit has indeed called a young man to preach today, He will also speak to the church. The question is whether or not the church is listening!

The sending church as well as the calling church have the responsibility for screening the candidate. That should begin with a priority of personal holiness over platform performance.

What of the **Bible colleges and seminaries**, which are the last stop for many en route to the pulpit? What can be done here? My exposure to Bible colleges and seminaries leads me to believe that for some of them, there are two primary emphases in training preachers; one is pragmatic and methodological, the other academic. There appears to be a vacuum in the area of personal, spiritual development of the inner man. One wonders at the proliferation of courses on knowledge and methods with the parallel void of formal courses on

prayer, fasting, the filling of the Holy Spirit, etc. In his provocative book, “Perils of Power: Immorality in the Ministry,” Richard Exley includes a fascinating chapter entitled, “Reshaping the Ministry.” He comments, “When we award credits for courses in church music, but not for the devotional life, we are making a statement about our values, about what we consider important preparation for the ministry. The message the ministerial student receives is that directing worship is more important to his effectiveness in ministry, than his spiritual life.”¹⁹

When a man has been shipped from his church to the college posthaste to prepare for the ministry, there is an emphasis on the academic courses over spiritual disciplines and little opportunity for his “call” to be reviewed, examined, or challenged. Among other courses on the spiritual disciplines, why not include one on “The Call?” Expose the candidate to the call of Bible characters and the principles at work in their biblical recruitment. Teach the spiritual gifts, qualifications of the pastor, and even the principles at work in their biblical recruitment. Teach the spiritual gifts, qualifications of the pastor, and even “how to discern the will of God.” At the conclusion of the course, have the student write an exhaustive paper on his specific call, including a tracing of the specific steps he followed to arrive there, direction or area of ministry, the timing of entry, and the steps required to arrive there. This would not only confirm God’s hand in his life but would also be invaluable toward reassuring future pulpit committees he will face.

The end result of such individual, church, and college screening and testing would be that fewer novices would be exposed to Satan’s snares. Stability would replace confusion in our churches. Paul’s admonition to “*Lay hands suddenly on no man...*” (1 Timothy 5:22), would be observed to the benefit of all, and fewer men would “...[take] *this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God.*” (Hebrews 5:4). I wonder, at times, if there is a conflict of interest in our ranks. It seems that sometimes the home church has one in that they push for young people to surrender to “the call” merely for the pastor’s bragging rights. The ordination council wants to avoid hurting the host pastor and rubber stamps his recommendation of the youth to be ordained. The training institution needs his tuition, the calling church is desperate for a pastor, and the pastor himself wants nothing more than to have a pulpit. At few times in his path is the ministry aspirant challenged or his call questioned. Unlike past spiritual leaders who put every barrier they could in the path of impulsive youth, the church today seems to kick them down!

The point of these ruminations is not to deprecate or minimize the high calling of the pastoral ministry – quite the opposite. I wish to clarify it, purify it, and thereby maximize it. My prayer is that the pastor who reads these words will get in or get out, get hot or get cold, but get on with the work of the ministry and stop limping on feet crippled by doubt and confusion and that young people considering the Gospel ministry would do so with their eyes opened. The consistent record of our Lord Jesus Christ, when confronting a would-be disciple, was to challenge him rather than welcome him. When a great crowd tried to follow Him, He challenged them to hate their family members, bear the cross, and forsake all they had, or he “*..cannot be my disciple.*” (Luke 14:25-33). When he sent His disciples, He did so with dire warnings that they would be “*...as sheep in the midst of wolves,*” that they would be taken to court, whipped, hated, and persecuted. (Matthew 10:16-25). In

the famous account of three volunteers for ministry in Luke 9:57-62, Christ told one who said, *"I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest,"* that *"...foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head."* To another who gushed, *"Lord, I will follow thee,"* but first wished to say good-bye to his family, Christ tersely replied, *"...No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."* It would seem that Christ's goal was not to prevent anyone from building a tower but rather to prompt them to count the cost first. If they failed in this, put their hand to the plow and looked back later, their effectiveness is suspect at best.

Have you counted the costs? Better to do it before you go any further. If you don't do it before entering ministry, you probably will during ministry. Far better to wait for clear leading in the beginning than to re-think your call after the fact.

If you have a call from God already, perhaps it needs to be affirmed. Ralph Turnbull, in his classic work, "A Minister's Obstacles," tells of a preacher who did this very thing. "It is reported of the late John Robertson of Glasgow, a preacher for forty years, that he was a backslider for a long time. The glow had gone. He decided to resign, and one morning prayed, 'O God, Thou didst commission me forty years ago, but I have blundered and failed and I want to resign this morning.' He broke down as he prayed, and in between his sobs he heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'John Robertson, 'tis true I commissioned you forty years ago; 'tis true you have blundered and failed; but, John Robertson, I am not here for you to resign your commission, but to *re-sign* your commission.' That re-signing was the beginning of greater and new things for the preacher."²⁰

Whether pre-thinking the call before enlisting or re-thinking the call during ministry, one thing is clear, there is a desperate need to recall "the call."

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Spurgeon, C.H., *“Lectures to my Students,”* (Grand Rapids: Assoc. Publishers, 1971), p. 2.
- ² Lloyd-Jones, D.M., *“Preaching and Preachers,”* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), p. 108.
- ³ Merrill, Dean, *“Clergy Couples in Crisis,”* (Waco: Word Books, 1985), p. 197.
- ⁴ McBurney, Louis, *“Every Pastor Needs A Pastor,”* (Marble Retreat: 139 Bannockburn, Marble, CO 81623), p. 19.
- ⁵ Ibid, p. 20.
- ⁶ McBurney, Louis, *“Counseling Christian Workers,”* (Waco: Word Books, 1986), p. 60.
- ⁷ Bratcher, Edward B., *“The Walk on Water Syndrome,”* (Waco: Word Books, 1984), p. 73.
- ⁸ Ibid, p. 72.
- ⁹ Ibid, p. 76.
- ¹⁰ McBurney, Marble, p. 22.
- ¹¹ Lloyd-Jones, P. 112.
- ¹² Bratcher, p. 77.
- ¹³ Spurgeon, p. 31.
- ¹⁴ Lutzer, Erwin W., *“Pastor to Pastor; Tackling Problems of the Pulpit,”* (Chicago: Moody Press), p. 11.
- ¹⁵ Bratcher, p. 77
- ¹⁶ Spurgeon, p. 38-39.
- ¹⁷ Lloyd-Jones, p. 107.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, p. 108.
- ¹⁹ Exley, Richard, *“Perils of Power: Immorality in the Ministry,”* (Tulsa: Honor Books, 1988), p. 135-136.
- ²⁰ Turnbull, Ralph G., *“A Minister’s Obstacles,”* (Westwood: Fleming H. Revell, 1956), p. 12