

THE DIVINE CALL TO THE MINISTRY OF JESUS CHRIST

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This subject has led to a fruitful investigation that I never dreamed could be true. This has frequently been true in the order of my experience. And it is this fact that has led me to be alert to the suggestions of others as the signposts along the way pointing in the direction of personal blessing for my own life. It was therefore without hesitation that I willingly grasped this opportunity.

The apprehension of the significance of this investigation I was yet to learn. I am honest in admitting that in the course of my experience I have never really examined my own call to the ministry in the light of the Word of God. I have never doubted that I was called, and it has been this fact that has sustained me through many crucial experiences. But in the larger picture of the divine call as set forth in the Bible, I had never pinpointed that call.

The appointment to service for the Lord Jesus Christ has a variety of facets, each one lending force to that call and sealing it with finality. It is this larger perspective that helps the individual servant through the maze of difficulties he must inevitably encounter in the course of service and guarantees that he will fulfill his ministry with joy. It was this grand panorama of truth that brought the apostle Paul to that crucial moment when he was to depart and be with Christ, and which provided him with words of triumphant satisfaction: "For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith" (II Tim. 4:6-7).

The arrangement of specific points in this discussion does not necessarily follow a chronological order. With the call to the ministry as the central feature of this investigation, I have tried to cluster the other points about it in order to develop the picture of full perspective. Hence there are eight facets of truth to which I want to direct your attention. I will be using the word "ministry" in the course of this discussion, and I do so in its broadest sense, keeping in mind that at its highest level there is the preaching of the word, the pastoral oversight of the flock, the proclamation of the gospel on the mission fields of the world.

THE CALL TO THE MINISTRY IS ASSOCIATED WITH THE EFFICACIOUS CALL TO SALVATION

There is a "call" of God which invites all who hear to come for salvation. This is what Isaiah had in mind when he wrote the words: "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money: come ye, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money, and without price" (Isa. 55:1). This is what Jesus was doing when he cried out, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30). But as you well know, this call may be resisted, as Stephen asserted, "Ye stiffnecked, and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost; as your fathers did, so do ye" (Acts 7:51).

But there is a call of God to salvation which not only invites but actually brings sinners to salvation. It is this call to which the apostle Paul refers in writing to the Corinthian believers. "For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called" (I Cor. 1:26). There are not many who receive this call, but those who do actually come to Christ that it might be apparent in the final analysis "That no flesh should glory in his presence" (I Cor. 1:29), because it is ultimately a work of God in grace. That is the fuller import of Romans 8:28-30. "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his son that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover, whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified" (Rom. 8:28-30).

Associated with this efficacious call to salvation the call to service is intimately related. Chronologically this may be immediate, or it may be more remotely separated. But one thing is certain, that when God saves men, he saves them for something. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). Though it may be argued that this has reference to the moral quality of our works, Romans 12:1-2 points directly to that particular area of works that fulfill the will of God in position and service. Paul insists that "now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him" (I Cor. 12:18). And as for the distribution of gifts for service, "the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal" (I Cor. 12:7).

In the experience of some, the call to service is almost simultaneous with the efficacious call to salvation. This was true for the apostle Paul (Acts 9:3-6; Gal. 1:15-16). It was true for Isaiah (Isa. 6:6-8) and for Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4-7). But for others it is separated from the experience of salvation by a period of time: sometimes short and sometimes more lengthy. But in either case it is associated with that efficacious call to salvation. And "the gifts and calling of God are without repentance" (Rom. 11:29). In the same sense in which the efficacious call of God to salvation is sure and steadfast, so also is the effective call of God to service.

THE CALL TO THE MINISTRY IS IMPLEMENTED WITH SPIRITUAL EQUIPMENT FOR SERVICE

This includes equipment in terms of spiritual impartation. In the first epistle to the Corinthians the information on this point extends to the entire membership of the saved (I Cor. 12:7,18). This is also affirmed in the epistle to the Romans (12:3-6), and in the epistle to the Ephesians (Eph. 4:7-8). The same can also be said for the first epistle of Peter (I Pet. 4:10-11). In Corinthians, Romans, and Ephesians, the text goes right on to lay emphasis upon the gifts given those who serve in the eldership, evangelism, and diakonate. Paul's letters to Timothy seem to single out the place of ministry occupied by the pastor or elder (I Tim. 1:18). At the time he was set aside for the ministry a special gift for the task was imparted (I Tim. 4:14; II Tim. 1:6). It is this essential impartation that binds together all the spiritual, moral, and mental qualities that one may possess in common with many other Christians that enables him to perform the task of ministry.

I am sure this also includes equipment in terms of spiritual instruction. Nothing will take the place of information to guide one in the task he undertakes for the Lord. That is undoubtedly what the Lord had in mind when He called the disciples into service. He said, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19), or as stated in Mark's Gospel, "Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men" (Mk. 1:17). From that point on there followed three and one-half years of the most intensive theological training ever experienced by a servant of the Lord. Over and over again the record indicates that He taught them, and unlike others He taught them with authority (Matt. 7:29). This included not only theoretical presentation of the truth, but there was also an internship for the disciples in which they saw His teaching in relation to the actual realities of life. Out of this has grown the principle for schools that Paul passed on to Timothy. "And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also" (II Tim. 2:2).

It must also be added that this includes equipment in terms of spiritual improvement. The maturing process is a part of the method

of equipping for service. The impartation and the instruction must be subjected to exercise. That explains why Paul warned Timothy not to hold lightly the gift imparted to him (I Tim. 4:14), and to stir it up, renew it, set it on fire by actual exercise (II Tim. 1:6). By continuing in the knowledge of the word of God one is nourished up in the words of faith and good doctrine (I Tim. 4:6) and perfected for the work of ministry (II Tim. 3:14-17). The road of experience was traveled by the Lord Jesus to bring Him to maturity (Heb. 5:8-9), and it is no less needed by those who serve under him (Rom. 5:3-5). And the only way to get experience is to get it. This explains why Paul warned Timothy about avoiding the mistake of thrusting men into the ministry who are new converts (I Tim. 3:6). This tempering process is also a way of sifting out those who do not mean business for the Lord, as well as safeguarding the heritage of the Lord.

THE CALL TO THE MINISTRY IMPLIES THE CONFERMENT OF A GIFT UPON THE CHURCH

"And he gave some apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers." (Eph. 4:11). That is the way the Bible describes the gifted person in relation to the Church.

The impartation of spiritual gifts is intended to qualify for service. Christ gave gifts unto men (Eph. 4:7-8) but not for the sake of the gift itself, nor for the sake of the men upon whom the gift was conferred. This sovereign act of the risen Lord was to enable for service. This service was to be directed toward men: some within the church and some on the outside of the church. It was for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12).

The qualification for service exhibits itself in performance. It is for perfecting, ministering, building up. A gifted person who does not function is an anomaly. In the very nature of the case a person who is gifted must exercise that gift. Anything short of movement, maneuvering, motion in the exercise and discharge of a gift is unthinkable. It is performance that gives clear indication of the possession of a gift. Since it is a grace bestowed by the Spirit, then activity which is the essential nature of the Spirit must be present in the gifted person.

The performance in service results in the conferring of benefits on men. The manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man for the common good (I Cor. 12:7). It is that exercise of the gift in the behalf of men that makes one a minister. As Christ said of Himself, he came not to be ministered unto but to minister (Matt. 20:28). As a result of this ministration, there is the mending of the flaws in the fabric of the Church, the addition of new members to the Church, the maturing of the membership of the Church, and at last the full perfection of the Church (Eph. 4:12-16).

THE CALL TO THE MINISTRY MAKES A SUBJECTIVE
IMPRESSION ON THE MAN HIMSELF

The call to the ministry comes from an objective source. I am stating this first, because there are those who would like to confine the call to a mere subjective reaction on the part of the minister. Over and over again in the Old Testament it is declared that the word of the Lord came unto the prophet. Isaiah declared, "Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us" (Isa. 6:8). Jeremiah wrote, "Then the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee; and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations" (Jer. 1:4-5). No one would question the objectivity of the voice of Christ to Peter and Andrew, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19). But it was no less objective when the Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets at Antioch, "Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them" (Acts 13:2).

But the call to the ministry creates a subjective consciousness. This we may refer to as the mystical movement of the Spirit in the hearts of men. Though Jeremiah experienced every human indignity at the hands of his own people, and the very force of the persecution that fell upon him led him to say, "I will not make mention of him, nor speak anymore in his name," yet he had to confess that "his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay" (Jer. 20:9). The consciousness of God's call and the critical need for the message of the Lord among his own people drove him on. This same driving passion was felt by Paul. "For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16).

The call to the ministry combines the objective and subjective in the person. A singular movement in the narrative in the book of Acts brings this to view. Paul and Silas had reached Troas. There in the night a vision appeared to Paul. It was a man from Macedonia beckoning to them to come over into Macedonia and help them. Luke then draws the conclusion, "And after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavored to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them" (Acts 16:10). The words, "assuredly gathering" means combining, and in this case a combination of the objective and the subjective. Paul had a deep subjective experience growing out of the vision. Then perhaps the man of Macedonia appeared in the person of Luke and confirmed his experience. At this point in the book of Acts the "we" sections appear for the first time, suggesting that Luke joined the party at this stage of the journey. This may mean that Luke was the man from Macedonia.

THE CALL TO THE MINISTRY IS CONFIRMED BY OTHER
SPIRIT-LED MEN OF GOD

The place of sobriety in evaluating the call of God is urged upon believers. That is the point of Romans 12:3, "For I say through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith." I think Paul is saying that there is little doubt that the probabilities are that a man will be apt to think he is greater than he really is. Therefore, when seeking the will of God for his life, he is most apt to pick out the highest position as the one he is qualified to fill. It is therefore necessary to admonish believers to exercise sobriety. This means to see themselves as they really are. A drunk man never sees things in perspective. But a man who is drunk with self also has an impaired vision. So the believer must to the best of his ability, according to the measure of faith granted to him, try to evaluate his call. Perhaps it would be well for a man to insist that he has been called, but put the period right there and wait for more light as to the place and position to which he is called.

The proof of spirituality in evaluating the call of God is the willingness to submit to the evaluation of Spirit-led men. To members of the Church in Corinth, who were insisting on their call to speak in tongues Paul had to write, "What! came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only? If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord" (I Cor. 14:36-37). This is the way of saying that the Church is a fellowship where the things of God are shared in common. It is therefore possible for other men who are indwelt by the Spirit of God to examine and evaluate the movements of God in the calling of men to the ministry and the gifts they have been furnished with to discharge that ministry. This is the way God uses to measure the subjective consciousness of men and see that it squares with objective reality. It was this kind of man Paul chose to join him in the ministry: Timothy, a son in the faith, brought up in the words of Scripture, and endowed with a gift for ministry (Acts 16:1-2; I Tim. 4:14; II Tim. 1:6; 3:14-15).

The potentialities for service will parallel the call to ministry and satisfy spiritual men. It is my opinion that Peter had this in mind when he wrote his first epistle, "As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen" (I Pet. 4:10-11). Perhaps he was thinking of the parable of the talents. The particular task or treasure delivered into the hands of the servants was upon the basis of their ability (Matt. 25:14-15). It is probably correct

to assert that God never calls a man to a task for which he does not have the ability to discharge. If it is correct that Christ calls men into the ministry, then as of old, He is making them to be fishers of men. And this fact of ability will be sufficiently patent so that spiritual men recognize it.

THE CALL TO THE MINISTRY IS EXPERIENCED UNDER A VARIETY OF CIRCUMSTANCES

The divine person who calls a man into the ministry is a free spirit (Psa. 51:12). Even though we have developed systematic theologies for the purpose of arranging everything about God in a very fixed arrangement, it is still true that God is free. He works all things after the counsel of his own will (Eph. 1:11). "All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What does thou?" (Dan. 4:35). After we do our best to systematize His movements, it is only to learn that He will not be contained within the narrow limitations of our systems.

But the divine principle of operation usually follows a fixed course. It would appear that God calls men by His spirit through the written or spoken word. Before there was a written revelation God spoke directly to men in and through His prophets (Heb. 1:1). While New Testament revelation was being compiled he did the same thing. Since then it appears that God has chosen, at least as far as we know, to use the Bible directly or spoken through the mouths of men to call men into service. But even here we need to be careful that we do not erect a system which limits God. Yet on the other hand, we do need to follow the principle He uses so that there might be fruit for him. In any case, the mysteries of God are revealed to men by His spirit, for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea the deep things of God (1 Cor. 2:10).

However, the divine pattern of operation is almost as various as people. There are probably no two people who are called into service under the same set of circumstances. Abraham was called out of the Ur of the Chaldees. God spoke to Isaac in the midst of a famine. From a rocky pillow Jacob received his call. Moses met God in a flaming bush. Isaiah saw the glory of God in the temple. God called Jeremiah in those dark days at the dissolution of the Southern Kingdom. Christ met some of the disciples by the seaside. But he met Nathaniel under the fig tree. Paul was arrested on the way to Damascus when a great light shone from heaven.

Without a doubt there are as many variations to the call of God into service as there are people. And yet each person is convinced that he met God in a singular fashion, so that the result was a clear conviction that there had been a transaction with God. To me, that event

is as vivid as if it were yesterday. There was no fanfare, no public service, no emotional ecstasy; just the logic of the word of God put to me by a pastor in his home. I agreed to this fact, and from this fact I have never had reason to turn in now more than forty-one years.

THE CALL TO THE MINISTRY IS ENCOURAGED BY THE PROMISE OF COMPLETE SUCCESS

The call of God is guaranteed by the faithfulness of God. "Faithful is he that calleth you, who also will do it" (I Thess. 5:24). There is no reason why we cannot claim this verse for the work into which he has called us. For the call to salvation and the work to which we are called is bound up together. God called us for something. It therefore follows that He will perform His part so that we can likewise perform ours. This should therefore be sufficient reason to take heart, no matter how hard the going may be, for we shall succeed in ours. Christ said to his own, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you" (John 15:16).

The call of God provides for every contingency along the way. "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are the called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). This means that one must succeed. There is not a place, a person, a problem, or a peril that He cannot control in such a way, that pursuing the path He has appointed for us we shall not succeed. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31). In all the things that would ordinarily stand as insuperable barriers to success, we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us (Rom. 8:37). Once we have joined the army of the redeemed, there is only one direction to move and that is forward to perfection (Heb. 6:1). For we are not of those who shrink back (Heb. 10:39).

But that calls for God's definition of success. In Romans 8:28, all that is declared is that all things work together for good. But is not good also success? Have we not erected human standards of success to which we give such abject devotion that many have lost heart in the struggle and have therefore turned back in the way? Would Noah have been termed a success by our standards? Would Lot have had any place for remembrance? And where would Isaiah have been placed? God told him that he would not in the sense of numbers succeed (Isa. 6:10-12), and the words to Isaiah became the words to measure the ministry of the Lord Jesus (Matt. 13:14-15). The success of all these was not to be found in numbers or great achievement, but in faithfulness to the command the Lord gave them. In this there is great success, for at last when the judge of all weighs the exploits of His servants, His rule of measure will not be the standards of men. And He will say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant . . . enter thou into the joy of thy Lord" (Matt. 25:21).

THE CALL TO THE MINISTRY IS REALIZED THROUGH THE
FREE RESPONSE OF THE SERVANT

In that moment of embarkation upon the ministry, there is a flash of spiritual illumination that brings together in remarkable harmony the human and the divine elements and seals the combination with an air of finality. On the divine side, the person who is called grasps the fact that "the gifts and calling of God are without repentance" (Rom. 11: 29). On the human side there is determination to make his calling and election sure (II Pet. 1:10). This paves the way for the path of faith.

This is marked by presentation of the body by faith as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1). This is not an act performed under compulsion. It is a free act performed with gladness as an act of spiritual worship. It places the Lord in full control and direction from this point on.

The life is marked by persistence in the face of difficulty (Rom. 5:3-4). The minister must face the discouraging and disheartening things that belong to a world of sin and are felt especially by those who elect to engage in the fight of faith. But tribulation works persistence, not defeat. And amidst the self-control he must exercise there will also appear the flower of endurance.

There will be progression in method as a result of developing experience (Rom. 5:4). Persistence to move toward the goal in spite of the difficulties that crowd the way is bound to bring one into an ever expanding experience. The methods that failed to accomplish the desired ends will be abandoned in favor of better methods. In fact, failures will throw one on the Lord and send him back to the word for a more careful examination of the methods of the Spirit.

Perseverance to the end will mark the movement of the man of God truly called of Him. In some sense the apostle Paul gathered this entire idea up and expressed it as follows: "But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway" (I Cor. 9:27). Not even the united pressure of all his friends could turn him aside from the task that was so clear to him. "But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24).