

CALLED TO PREACH?

PONDERING GOD'S COMMISSION FOR YOUR LIFE

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Introduction

THIS ESSAY IS aimed at men who aspire to the gospel ministry, especially those who wrestle with whether or not they are called to preach. Such wrestling can be an agonizing experience: it can cause emotional torment; it can become an occasion for one's closest friends (who know him only too well as a sinner) to doubt his sanity or question his integrity; and it can make his wife or fiancée think twice about what she has gotten herself into.

How does a man know if he is called? It is a tough question. I remember well a spiritual mentor trying to convince me *not* to enter the pre-seminary program in college, believing that if he could dissuade me, I would not be truly "called." I also know of many others who have been encouraged, nudged, or even pushed into the ministry against their wishes. An acquaintance was told by family members since his earliest remembrance that he was destined for great things in the ministry, following as he would in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, both well-known preachers and authors. The poor fellow was trapped. He left the ministry a broken man only a couple of years after seminary, unable to handle the pressures in large part because he was overwhelmed by doubts about his calling.

If a fellow contemplating the ministry is a bit intimidated by it all, he is in good company. Who wouldn't be, with all that has been happening in the ministry lately? Whenever a group of

preachers gets together, it seems that the main topics of conversation are lamentations about burnout, pressure, workload, critical church members, and the like. Yet when I listen to people in the pew, I hear another side to the story: the observation that far too many pastors lack the “minimum daily requirements” of professional competence. Add to that all the unreal expectations placed upon the local pastor, being compared as he is to the glamorous and successful media ministry stars, and we have a recipe for inadequacy among those already in the ministry and for a sense of foreboding among anyone contemplating the call to preach.

While it is not easy to remedy the problems of pastors already in the ministry, some simple “preventive reflection” may help those pondering entrance into the ministry. This essay is for anyone asking questions like these:

- What does it mean to be “called,” and how do I know if I am?
- Why should I consider the ordained ministry? Can’t I serve my Lord and Savior effectively as a layman?
- I get nervous praying at men’s Bible study; I get the cold sweats making a five-minute “speech to inform.” I don’t know if I could ever preach a sermon.
- I’m thinking about just being an ordinary pastor. I don’t want to be a professor of theology. Why do I need to attend three or four years of seminary, and study Greek and Hebrew?

Obviously, not all of the possible questions are covered in this list, but the idea is clear. I hope to help the aspiring preacher sort through the pitfalls and keep a clear focus on the important issues he must face as he considers whether God has called him to the gospel ministry.

I shall consider four areas: the priority of preaching, the meaning of ordination, “calling” to the ministry, and the whys and wherefores of seminary training. In each case, as we examine the issues, Scripture will serve as the guide to our understanding and the norm for our practice.

Preaching: What's the Big Deal?

The aspiring preacher may wonder why such a heavy emphasis is placed on preaching in preparation for the ministry. This is especially true if he belongs to a church whose worship is long on liturgy and short on the sermon, or if he hears preaching that is just plain long (but short on biblical quality!), or if in his experience, preaching is pleasant religious talk—nice, but not necessary. As a Reformed pastor, I view preaching as the throbbing pulse of the ministry. Unless a minister preaches, he is not doing his job, in my estimation, and he is probably not doing much worth writing home about, period. If he preaches, he'd better do it well; otherwise he is quenching the Spirit and shriveling the faith of God's people. The aspiring preacher must catch such a vision, for I believe the Bible teaches that there is no task assigned to the New Testament church and to her pastors that is more compelling than preaching the gospel. Miss this and one loses sight of the character of the church, the key to evangelism, and ultimately the means to salvation itself!

Let's examine how Scripture views preaching.

Old Testament Foundations

Preaching, as we know it in the New Testament church, had its roots in the work of the prophets of the Old Covenant. A preacher ought to feel goose bumps at the exalting cry of Isaiah 52:7: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'"

The prophet certainly isn't talking about pretty feet, feet lacking corns, bunions, calluses, and stubbed and bleeding toes. He is talking about preaching, about the wonderful messenger-feet that carry the Word of the Lord to God's people.

That is how the Old Testament portrays the prophets: heralds of the Word of the Lord, official messengers of the King Almighty. The Word they bear brings life to all who receive it in

faith but judgment and curse to all who reject it. Listen to what God says in Deuteronomy 18:18-19: “I will raise up for them a prophet like you [Moses] from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account.”

This description of the prophet as the bearer of God’s life-or-death Word is personified nowhere more clearly than in the ministry of Elisha. In 2 Kings 2:19-25, after narrating the transfer of the mantle (symbolic of commission to prophetic office) from Elijah to Elisha, the inspired writer describes the first two episodes in the ministry of Elisha. The first, healing the water of Jericho, certifies Elisha as the bearer of covenant life. The second, cursing the boys of Bethel, authenticates him as the bearer of covenant curse. So closely does God identify his life-giving Word with his prophet that Elisha’s dry bones renew the life of a corpse hastily thrown into his tomb (2 Kings 3:20-21)!

The same point is made strikingly in the book of Jonah. Here we meet a prophet who will not go down in history for his enthusiasm, but who understood full well the power of the prophetic Word to bring life. Commanded by the Lord to go to Nineveh (the capital city of Israel’s dreaded foe) and “preach against it,” Jonah turns tail. After Nineveh repents, Jonah explains why he had been loath to preach in the first place: “O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love...” (Jonah 4:2). Jonah knew that God’s Word can bring life even to man’s enemies. Trouble was, he didn’t want Israel’s enemies to live!

One more example. In Ezekiel 37, we read that the Spirit of the Lord transports the prophet Ezekiel to a valley of dry bones. There, God assigns a surreal task: “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!’...So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them, and they came to life...” (Ezek. 37:4, 10). The point? The preaching of the Word is the breath of life!

To summarize: in the Old Testament, preaching was called prophecy. It was a life or death matter—when heard and obeyed, life and blessing followed; when rejected, alienation and death resulted. And make no mistake about it, God’s Word never fails. As the rain and snow make the earth bud and flourish, so the word that goes forth from God’s mouth: “It shall not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire, and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:11).

Preaching and the Ministry of Jesus

When we turn to the Gospels, preaching looms even larger. Picking up where the Old Testament left off, Jesus believes preaching is so pivotal to his ministry that Matthew 4:17 declares simply: “Jesus began to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.’” Later, when explaining the parable of the sower, as key to understanding the *modus operandi* of his kingdom, Jesus asserts: “The farmer sows the word” (Mark 4:14). Again, *preaching*.

Even more forceful is Jesus’ summary of his commission: “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come” (Mark 1:38). The people were electrified—and not because they were daunted by religious leaders. Daily the streets were full of scribes, Pharisees, and teachers of the law who were so conspicuous in Israel’s life routines. But never had they heard such preaching and teaching! “The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, ‘What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him’” (Mark 1:27).

The people knew that Jesus was presenting himself as the prophet who had been promised in Deuteronomy 18. That hit hard. And just as conclusively as in the Old Testament, his Word demonstrated its momentous power. Throughout the Gospels we read that Jesus cast out demons, healed the sick, even raised the dead. All by the power of his Word alone, all to announce the arrival of his kingdom, all to declare that the “Hallelujah Chorus” must now be sung: “The kingdom of the world has become the

kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 11:15b).

Preaching and the Apostles

The life and death urgency of preaching doesn't end with Jesus' earthly ministry, but lies at the heart of his commission to those who are to carry his Word to the world after his ascension. He prepared them for that mission while they traveled with him on earth. In Luke 9:1-2, we read of Jesus giving the twelve “power and authority ... and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.” And, as in a series of concentric waves spreading across a pond when a stone plunks into the water, yet another “wave” of messengers is commissioned in Luke 10. Here, the Seventy-two are sent to every town and place with the stirring reminder: “He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me” (Luke 10:16). The Cornerstone has made his splash in the fullness of time; wave after wave of preaching now rolls to cover the earth with the gospel.

Nowhere is this focus of the apostles' mission more clear than at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. After his resurrection, and immediately before his ascension and the subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, Jesus explains his redemption blueprint: “This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:46-48).

Did you catch that? Here is the plan of God's strategic offensive in a thumbnail sketch: first, Christ suffered *humiliation*; next, Christ rose in *exaltation* victory; finally, Christ continues his work, through the church, by the *preaching* of repentance and forgiveness. That is why he calls his disciples “witnesses”: it is a word of commission, not of description. Empowered by the

Spirit, they are to preach, to bear witness to his name, and thus continue his redeeming agenda.

This, then, is the story of the book of Acts. The Lord Jesus advances the cause of his kingdom through the preaching of the Spirit-filled church. Preaching is the ongoing saving work of Christ. The apostles go “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,” preaching in all the languages of the peoples, bringing salvation to all who repent and believe (Acts 1:8).

And nothing shall stop the invasion of Christ’s Word into the realm of the kingdom of darkness. Paul even describes his imprisonment as triumphant, bidding us to remember Jesus Christ: “This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God’s word is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus...” (2 Tim. 2:9-10).

Paul spells out the paramount import of preaching in his letter to the Romans. Preaching is redemptive; the preaching of Christ may even be said to save! He writes of his desire to preach in Rome (1:16), and affirms vigorously: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes....” Later in the same letter, he fleshes out this saving function of the preaching of the Word as extensively as anywhere in Scripture: “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?...Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:14-15, 17). Is it any wonder that Paul sees his own ministry as a holy and divine commission? “Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me” (1 Cor. 9:16-17).

Preaching and the Church Today

The point of this trek through Scripture has been to understand the life-and-death redemptive importance of preaching. Christians often speak of “saving faith.” However, if we grasp what Scripture says about gospel proclamation, we must also learn to speak of “saving preaching.” Only then will the idea of a “call” to the preaching ministry make any sense to the aspiring preacher. Only then will he deal biblically with a sense of calling in his life.

I began the last section by comparing the preaching of Christ, the disciples, and the church to concentric waves created by the splash of a stone in a pond. I traced this redemptive program through the Gospels, Acts, and on into the inspired writings of the apostle Paul. Don’t overlook the next wave! It contains the apostolic commission to the pastors of the church of Christ in all the generations that followed.

When Paul writes to young pastor Timothy, he warns him of the wickedness of “the last days” and reminds him of the character and value of the inspired Scriptures to address God’s people in those days (2 Tim. 3:16). Close on the heels of those words he adds this command: “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus ... I give you this charge: Preach the Word...!” (2 Tim. 4:1-2).

Abundantly clear! And not limited to Timothy, either! It is a charge to preachers of every age. That this is so is evident from his description of the end times, a description that appropriately addresses every generation since Christ’s ascension, and will continue to do so until he returns. Such is the meaning of “eschaton” or “end times” (2 Tim. 3:1-5). It is equally evident from the close connection between preaching and the inspired Scriptures. Now as then, the *way* God will have his people equipped and preserved is the way of the Word of God, the preaching of the text of Scripture! That is as true of formal pulpit preaching as of more intimate Word-based instruction (cf. Acts 20:20, where Paul refers to preaching and teaching “publicly and from house to house”). Scripture proclaimed and applied is the

tool of God's grace. Sermons are to be tied to the text with strong cords.

Peter, like Paul, comprehends this power of preaching. He is bold to claim that regeneration—being “born again”—is a function of God's Word. And he too links that Word with preaching: “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God....And this is the word that was preached to you” (1 Peter 1:23, 25).

The ministers of the Lord dare not forget this compelling truth. Unless they remain faithful to the words of Scripture, preaching them as a matter of life and death in this godless age, both “publicly and from house to house,” they will endanger both the survival and the service of the people of God, and obstruct the salvation of the lost.

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This brief review of Scripture has had a single purpose: to convince the aspiring preacher that God thinks preaching is much more important than most people do. For God, it is not just verbal “filler” in a Sunday worship service. Neither is it the sharing of one's experiences designed to inspire and stimulate those of others. Nor is it a nicely organized talk, complete with *PowerPoint* slides, intending to inform people of “ten ways to become more spiritual.” (I never found a text in Scripture that contained ten practical ways to do anything!) Rather, the words of the preacher are to echo the words of his text, and, when faithful to that text of Scripture, his words contain “the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes.” As Paul writes elsewhere: “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.... For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:17-18).

The aspiring preacher will need to contend with that startling reality *whether or not* he is called to preach. If he is, he must tremble! What he will declare with his lips is the redeeming

energy of God himself. If he is not called to preach, assigned instead to join God's people as they hear faithful preaching and give it fleshly form in their obedience, then he must take that task seriously too. God's Word brings life or death. We ought to remember the sobering words of the apostle, admonishing preacher and hearer alike: "For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?" (2 Cor. 2:15-16).

Who indeed?

The Badge of Ordination

Reading about the redemptive purpose and importance of preaching, a person might be tempted to respond with a bit of indignation: "Hey, the common believer is important, too. One doesn't have to be a preacher to serve the Lord!"

No argument here! In fact, one of the most gratifying things we observe in the broader Christian community lately is a growing commitment to the idea of the "office of every believer." What is meant by that term is that each Christian is called to follow Christ by living his or her life in all its facets in the service of God. Many Christians who grew up believing that there was a wide gulf separating sacred from secular and clergy from laity now understand that all of God's people, not just a select few, are given spiritual gifts to be used in his service; that all of life, not just church, is the arena of service to the King of kings. Rich, meaningful, and to the point are the words of Question & Answer 32 of the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the most widely recognized and certainly the most pastoral of the creeds of the Reformation churches:

Q. But why are you called a Christian?

A. Because I am a member of Christ by faith, and thus a partaker of His anointing, that I may confess His Name,

present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him, and with a free and good conscience fight against sin and the devil in this life, and hereafter reign with Him eternally over all creatures.

But affirming the office of every believer does not prevent us from affirming at the same time the unique calling and mandate that God gives to the office of pastor or preacher in the New Testament church. In other words, the fact that all Christians are to serve God in all of life does not contradict serving by being ordained into the gospel ministry. Ephesians 4:11-12 makes the relationship between the ordained servants of God and the whole of the congregation clear: “It was he [Christ] who gave some to be ... pastors and teachers, *to prepare God’s people for works of service*, so that the body of Christ may be built up....”

An illustration will help make the point. Urban children who grew up before the 1990s remember well the neighborhood policeman—the “beat cop.” In those days one didn’t hear of police brutality or corruption; neither was society so mobile and dangerous that police needed squad cars—sheet-metal shields for the gladiators of today’s streets. Then they were visible, identified with the neighborhood, trusted friends. The kids gathered around the cop on the corner, hypnotized by the gun in its leather holster, impressed with the shining badge on his breast pocket.

Many of us especially enjoyed watching the policeman stand in the middle of a busy intersection to direct traffic. Seemingly impervious to the dangers of swerving cars or failing brakes, he stood his ground, conducting hands and arm in movements of absolute authority—Leonard Bernstein could not have had greater control of the New York Philharmonic! Seldom was that authority challenged; when it was, a steely glare put the fear of the law back into the driver’s heart.

As we grew older, however, the intrigue waned. We learned to drive, learned the rules of the road, and discovered that directing traffic at an intersection was not as complicated as, say, neurosurgery; not even so complicated as cooking a meal so that potatoes, carrots, and meat finish at the same time, not even so

complicated as a computer! There were times, frankly, when we all believed that any ordinary citizen could have done as good a job as the officer did.

Only one problem. He had the badge and we didn't. And that made all the difference in the world. That badge authorized him. It, and the commission it represented, gave him the duty and the right to enforce the law, to bring order amid the chaos of rush hour traffic. It was his seal of ordination to office.

It is the same idea that operates in Scripture concerning the office of preacher. Let us trace it to see what it involves.

Anointing to Special Service in the Old Testament

Already in the book of Exodus, at the beginning of Israel's life as a covenant nation, God set certain persons and things apart for special service to him. In Chapter 30, amid the instructions for making the Tabernacle utensils, God provides the recipe for "holy anointing oil," which was to be used. Then he says: "Use it to anoint the Tent of Meeting, the ark of the Testimony, the table and all its articles, the lampstand and its accessories.... You shall consecrate them so they will be most holy, and whatever touches them will be holy. Anoint Aaron and his sons and consecrate them so that they may serve me as priests" (Exod. 30:26-30).

Clearly, consecration to special service did not imply that only these utensils and individuals were special to God, nor that he expected less in the way of loving and obedient service from his people as a whole than from them. Quite the opposite was the case. They were "set apart" to remind, instruct, and enable the entire congregation that all of Israel was to "be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Lev. 19:2).

Later in Israel's history, anointing was extended to the other offices of *king* and *prophet* as well. In 1 Samuel 9:16 the Lord commanded Samuel to anoint Saul to be king; in 10:1 we read that he is to be "commander over his [God's] inheritance" (NKJV). A remarkable notion, indeed! But Saul failed in his task, so God instructed Samuel to anoint David. The words of 16:13

are noteworthy, for they not only reflect a “setting apart” to a special service but the divine connection between ordination and God’s empowering: “So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him [David] in the presence of his brothers and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power.”

Prophets too were consecrated to their office. God instructed Elijah to anoint his successor Elisha (1 Kings 19:16). Whether or not he used oil is not clear (I assume he did, but the text is silent); what is clear is that the prophetic mantle or cloak he wore was the sign of his special commission before God and the people. As a sign of consecration, he threw it around Elisha’s shoulders (1 Kings 19:19). When Elijah was taken to glory, the cloak fell into Elisha’s hands (2 Kings 2:13f.) and served as witness to the transfer of ordination responsibility and authority. Elisha now wore Elijah’s mantle and thus bore the Word of the Lord. Attended by the Spirit, he exercised prophetic authority. His task? To remind the people of the Lord that they were his special possession, called to live by his Word as before his face.

Ordination to special office in the Old Testament in no way negates the office of each believer, but is provided by God to equip and enable the faith and service of the believing community.

Anointing to Special Office in the New Testament

The coming of Jesus into human flesh cannot be fully appreciated apart from this notion of anointing or ordination to a special office. His baptism, for example, can only be understood in this connection: Jesus was set apart by his Father to “fulfill all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15), and in the very next chapter he struggles mightily against the devil in the wilderness as prophet, priest, and king. Such was his office. Only a few chapters later, Jesus marvels at the faith of the centurion at Capernaum (Matt. 8:10). What is so remarkable about his faith? It is that he understands Jesus’ special position as the authorized One of God, the One who possesses the conferred authority (Greek: *exousia*) of the Father, the One who has merely to “say the word,

and my servant will be healed.” Indeed, faith is just that: acknowledging that Jesus is “the Christ,” the One sent and anointed by God to fill the special office of Messiah (see 1 John 4:2-3). To receive and believe him is to enter fellowship with his Father!

Even as in the first chapter we traced Jesus’ commission to his disciples to preach the gospel, so now we see that the assignment to preach comes as a calling to special office, and that it comes with authority. In Matthew 10:1, as well as in other passages in the Gospels, we read that Jesus “gave them power.” The Greek word used here is *exousia*, which means, “conferred authority, power to rule in someone’s name.” The disciples are to exercise their God-given authority by casting out demons, healing the sick, raising the dead, and preaching that the kingdom has come, and doing so in Jesus’ name (Matt. 10:1, 7-8). No power on earth can stop them, not even demons or death, for they speak, as did Jesus, with the (conferred) authority of God himself. Such is the wondrous message of the great commission: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go...” (Matt. 28:18-19).

The apostle Paul, called and commissioned by God on the Damascus road, is highly conscious of his *exousia* in office. Although he does not want to “pull rank” on the Corinthian church, for example (2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10), he will not hesitate to do so if it is necessary to build them up in their faith. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, he defends his office by claiming to speak as one “approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel” (1 Thess. 2:4). He also commends them because “when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe” (1 Thess. 2:13).

Following Paul’s instructions, pastor Timothy is to work as one conscious of his ordination. In Paul’s letter to this young minister, he lists many urgent pastoral duties Timothy is to be sure to perform. All of these require an authority which timid Timothy seems hesitant to acknowledge. He is, for example, to “command and teach” (1 Tim. 4:11), to “rebuke” sinners publicly

(1 Tim. 5:20), to “warn” them (2 Tim. 2:14), to “preach ... convince, rebuke, exhort...” (2 Tim. 4:2). All of this is only possible because Paul had ordained Timothy to office (2 Tim. 1:6), laying his own hands on him. And Timothy is not to forget it (2 Tim. 1:7-8).

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In summary, then, Scripture speaks clearly of ordaining or anointing men to special service in and for the sake of the church of God. In both Old and New Testaments it is taught by example and command. In both, the sin of presuming to take the office apart from God’s calling is condemned (2 Chron. 26:16; Acts 8:19). And while it is true that God calls his church a “chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God,” such a glorious name and assignment given to *all* does not negate the special assignment given to *some*: to equip the body in its service to its Head. Such is the calling of the pastors and preachers of Christ’s church.

Are You Called to Preach?

“Okay,” says the man contemplating the call to the ministry, “I understand that preaching is more than just speaking about what God did once, that it is in fact the method God is now using to redeem his people. And I will even accept the fact that God calls some to special office in his church in order to equip and help believers live for Jesus. But how can I know if I am called to preach?”

That is a fair question and an important one. In this section we will examine the subject of “calling,” both the ways it has been understood in the past and present, and the way Scripture requires us to view it.

The Idea of “Calling”: Past and Present

In the history of the Christian church, several different notions of calling to the ministry have been popular. Let us look briefly at each.

The Roman Catholic notion grew out of the worldview of medieval Europe. The church believed herself to be the presence of the “sacred” in a “secular” world; her clergy were the priests that dispensed “grace” to people who lived in the realm of “nature.” This split-life view thought there was a difference in kind and quality between clergy and laity. The clergy possessed authority over the laity (usually spiritual authority, but sometimes very political—the Vatican is a sovereign state, for example—and throughout European history struggles between the Pope and kings over political authority were waged). Within this dualistic worldview, “calling” to such authoritative office in the church was seen as *external*; that is, one was appointed to an official position by the church, and authority was conferred by her through the hierarchical chain of command.

A second viewpoint developed in reaction to Rome. Influenced by modern democratic humanism with its emphasis on the individual, this view observes many categories of service within the church, only one of which is the preaching office. What distinguishes these kinds of service is not authority, as in Rome, but individual *gifts*. Office is *only* one kind of service, and ordination to office, if one can speak of such a thing, is simply public recognition of the individual’s gifts. Many who hold to this view do not believe in ordination at all.

Obviously, this modern view understands calling to office quite differently than Rome did. In the Roman belief system, you were called by the church: she trained you, she conferred authority, she placed you in your “position” over against the laity. In this new belief system, it is not the church but rather one’s individual gifts that constitute one’s calling. You must identify your gifts, receive confirmation from others that you are so gifted, and if those gifts fit in with what you think is necessary for the work of ministry, you may seek official recognition of them in the ceremony of ordination. I remember well an interview with a female seminarian during which she was asked about her calling

to the ministry. Her answer was typical: “All my life people told me that I had the gifts for ministry, so I figured I’d go for it. If this denomination doesn’t recognize my gifts, I’ll go elsewhere for that recognition.”

In contrast to those two views of calling to office is another, typical of contemporary American evangelical fundamentalism. In this view, *nothing external*—neither church nor gifts—plays a significant role in “calling.” What matters is one’s *internal* sense of call. If the Spirit leads you to preach, academic competence and even a seminary degree are irrelevant. (In fact, an anti-intellectualism arises; education itself is suspect because it is seen to “promote the wisdom of men and hinder the power of God.” I once watched a network news program that featured a young boy who was ridiculed by classmates and teachers alike because he “had the call” to preach. The boy spent most of his time screaming “sermons” at the top of his lungs, with the blessing of parents and pastor, while his father was in court trying to keep his son out of science class. Science class, you see, was “of the devil.”) In this view, “calling” is an experience not unlike conversion. Strictly internal and personal, it is an immediate (lit. “without mediation”) and direct communication of a revelation from God himself, without the use of human intermediaries (like the church) or objective criteria (like qualifying gifts).

What Does the Bible Say?

Each of the perspectives on calling to the gospel ministry described above has a point to make: the church does “lay hands” on a man, commissioning him to office. A man should reflect certain skills and gifts enabling him to preach and teach. And a man should be gripped by a Spirit-led passion to preach. At the same time, each misses the point. The church’s imprimatur alone doesn’t make a preacher. The gifts and ability to preach could just as easily be the skill-set to sell vacuum cleaners! And the “internal compulsion” might merely be love for the Lord’s church. What is lacking in each, as is so often the case, is a sense of biblical balance. I believe we will find that balance in

the nature of the God who calls men to his service. We must grasp the Scriptural revelation of just who he is.

A balanced understanding of calling is only assured when we see it as the work of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When the church confesses that God is Father, she confesses, among other things, his creative power. By that we mean that God the Father endows all of creation with life, calling it into being according to his sovereign will and plan. He creates all things, making man “in his image” (Gen. 1:26). Being made in God’s image, however, does not mean that all humans are carbon copies of one another. In fact, the diversity of many unique personalities together reflects the nature of God. He creates each with individual capabilities. Some of us have an inborn talent for musical composition, others for mathematical precision. Some are gifted with words, others with their hands. Some learn well in school, others learn better by experience. Some have tender hearts, others computer-like minds.

All of this has a direct bearing upon “calling.” Involved in it is first of all a matter of *personal and communal* reflection about one’s self. The aspiring preacher must look deeply and honestly at what Scripture asks of a pastor. He must read carefully the pastoral epistles in order to get a good sense of the requirements (as we will do in the next section). The aspiring preacher must then take an inventory:

- He must be honest about his *intellectual* abilities. If he cannot cut it in college or is unable to master biblical languages, he ought to think twice about the gospel ministry! Preachers must be able to discern the spirits of the age; they also must be able to “rightly divide the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). That requires analytical and linguistic skills, and the ability to communicate the findings of careful study in a clear manner.
- He must consider any *physical* limitation he may have. If he lost his voice because of throat cancer, he may have a special ministry signing for the deaf but ordinarily there is not much

need for preachers who cannot speak. He will likely serve the Lord in another field.

- He must take his *temperament* temperature, and measure it against the duty of a pastor to be “ready in season and out of season” (2 Tim. 4:2). On the one hand if he has a hard time with the difficult task of rebuking the wayward, he would probably fit right in with Timothy (and most preachers today): Paul has to crank up Timothy’s courage regularly. But if he gets an ulcer at the first sign of stress, perhaps he would better channel his obedient service to Christ into another area. Likewise, he’d better be a “people-person.” The ministry is a calling in which the preacher must get to know, and to love, God’s people. I once had a friend who told me, when he was contemplating leaving the ministry, “I really love the ministry. I just don’t like people!”
- And he must not neglect a *spiritual* inventory. Far too many men enter the pulpit as a form of therapy for their own doubts, or out of a desire to discover the truth about their own salvation, or to assuage their own sin-guilt, or because they believe that the ministry is a guaranteed ticket to glory. And, at the risk of sounding obvious, a man must stay out of the ministry if he is not convinced of the truth of the Bible himself! I am amazed at the preachers who ascend the pulpit and open a Bible whose infallibility and inspiration they openly doubt. A mentor of mine, when questioned by a young student about the one “absolute necessity” a preacher must take to the pulpit, once said perceptively: “Believe what you preach.” The student snickered for a brief moment until he realized he was serious. I think he is dead right. He who would preach has no business opening the Bible “for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16) if he does not truly believe God’s Word has the spiritual power to bring about those results in the hearts and lives of the people to whom he preaches.

We also confess the second Person of the Trinity: Jesus Christ Son of God and Lord of the Church. By that we mean that God not only offered his Son as the atonement for our sins, but he also takes us into the fellowship of his Son in the church. The Bride and the Bridegroom are inseparable. Our unity with the Head is a unity that takes concrete form in the church of Jesus Christ.

This too has a bearing on our understanding of office and calling. Since a man is called to the ministry of the Word by God, he ought first to be aware that God, as Father, has equipped him with the gifts necessary to perform the duties of office. But secondly, he will come to know his calling at least in part through the voice of the church, the Son's bride. The man contemplating the call to the ministry may think quite a bit of his abilities (maybe even "more highly" than he ought to think [Rom. 12:31]), but if the church of the living God does not confirm his self-evaluation with its own, he is not approved. In the Old Testament, the prophets (like Samuel) were told directly by the Lord whom to anoint to be king or prophet. In the New Testament, the church herself was involved in the process. In 1 Timothy 3, the qualifications for office are listed. The church is expected to test those men who are put forward.

If the one who aspires to preach does not receive a call from the Lord's church (Rom. 10:15; 2 Tim. 1:6), then he may not hold the preaching office (1 Thess. 2:4). This means that while the man who contemplates the ministry may and must serve the Lord as King, he may not do so as a preacher if he is not called. That ambassadorship is reserved for those whom God has called directly.

So the aspiring minister must pass a "church check":

- Is he an active member of a Bible-believing and Bible-preaching church, submitting willingly to the care of the elders of that church?
- Is that church through its elders encouraging him to pursue the preaching ministry?

- Does the body of believers believe that he has the requisite gifts, abilities, and devotion?

If so, he ought to pursue the course of training in a seminary that holds high the Word of the Lord, and will train him to preach it with vital urgency. While there, he ought to be actively involved in the local church so that assessment and accountability of the eldership will continue and develop. Such training and such assessment are both extensions of the church's "hands on" supervision in his call, and lead to the formal, final, and necessary step of a local church "calling" him to minister the Word of God in her midst.

But we also confess God the Holy Spirit. In addition to the Father who equips, and the Son who voices the call through his church, we confess that God the Holy Spirit awakens within a man's heart a sense of spiritual compulsion. Who can say it better than Paul did? "Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor. 9:16).

I believe with all my heart that unless a man is "compelled to preach," he may not! I mean that seriously. Unless he is under the compulsion of the Spirit who fills his heart with urgency and desire, he has no commission. The church of the Lord is full of preachers who may believe they are qualified but who do not feel this divine constraint. They have a "professional" view of the ministry rather than the "prophet's compulsion." They lack the fire in their belly, a fire kindled by the Spirit of the living God. That is one big reason why so many wash out of the ministry, "burned out" by the demands of the pastorate. But it also explains why so many churches cry that they are getting "stones for bread" from the pulpit. A man cannot truly preach the life-giving Word of the Lord unless the Holy Spirit gives him utterance. But if the Spirit has him in his grip, if the Spirit's fire is in his belly, he won't be a mere professional, and he won't burn out. That fire is inextinguishable!

So, “calling” is not such an amorphous, indefinite thing after all! The aspiring preacher can test himself. He may be confident he is called by God to preach if:

- He has been equipped by the Father with the requisite intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual gifts.
- The church of the Lord has confirmed his self-evaluation based on her knowledge and observation of his doctrine and life.
- He has experienced within his own heart the powerful moving of the Spirit of God, coercing him by divine influence so that he cannot live unless he preaches the gospel.

Perhaps there are some readers of this essay who are contemplating the ministry. I hope they will come to know themselves called of God to the preaching ministry. The gospel offensive can always use faithful laborers!

Perhaps too there are readers who, while reading these words, have become convinced that they are *not* called to preach. If so, they are better off, as is the Lord’s church. Wrestling with the “call” is sometimes an agonizing process. For a man to learn that God would rather use him in another kind of service truly gives his heart peace and spares the church the pain of having a “preacher” who really isn’t.

Finally, perhaps there are readers who are already preachers of the gospel or those who have never felt the call to the ministry. In either case may we together, called to preach or not, raise this prayer of the apostles to our God and Father: “Now, Lord ... enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness...” (Acts 4:29).

Seminary Training: Why and How?

Many men who love the Lord deeply, who believe they are called to the gospel ministry and want to offer themselves in his

service, are detoured in their active pursuit of the gospel ministry because they are intimidated by the thought of three or four years of seminary education. In my experience, and in that of many aspiring servants of God I have counseled, the first hurdle to be cleared is identifying one's calling to the ministry. Unfortunately, instead of looking to seminary training as the unfolding and confirming of that call, most view it as an added barrier, more imposing than the first, and one to be endured rather than enjoyed.

Let's acknowledge that seminary does add significant time and financial demands. Should seminary training be required? Is it necessary? Is it valuable? Why not apprentice a young man to a local pastor for his training? Why such an academic environment?

In this section I wish to argue for a well-trained ministry, and in this day and age, that means a seminary training. I argue this not only because of the biblical *example* of training for office (consider the "University of Cairo" education of Moses and the "Law School of Gamaliel" degree of the apostle Paul), but because of the Bible's *explicit stipulations*. At the same time, we must acknowledge that not all seminaries serve God's church equally well in their curricula, that not all equip their students according to the requirements of Scripture. In my view, some do more harm than good. Prior to enrollment in any seminary, a student must review that school's curriculum and method. Failure to do so would be unwise, in view of the large commitment of time and effort involved.

Let's take a brief look at the biblical evidence that compels seminary training for preachers. Besides the examples mentioned above, we will find no clearer explanation of what a pastor and preacher needs to know and to do than that given in Paul's letters to Timothy.

Throughout these letters, the apostle returns again and again to the two poles which form the axis around which the gospel ministry turns. They are the twin charges to *preserve the true doctrine* and to *preach and teach the Word of God*. They give us good insight

into what constitutes the skeletal requirements of a seminary curriculum.

In the first place, a pastor must be a servant who *preserves* the true doctrine of Christ, and teaches the church to do the same. One would have to wear a blindfold to miss that emphasis in these letters. The first three chapters of 1 Timothy are doctrinal utterances expressed clearly and forcefully, and given so that “you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). Catch that? Church and truth are inseparably connected: doctrine is at the heart of her life; she exists for the sake of its proclamation!

Beginning in 1 Timothy 4, Paul becomes specific in his instruction to the young pastor. He describes the apostasy and deceit that will characterize the “later times”—our times—and then says, in what appears to be repetition for emphasis: “If you point *these things* out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed” (1 Tim. 4:6). “Command and teach *these things*” (1 Tim. 4:11). “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:16). It is clear what the inspired writer is saying. The survival of God’s people in times of apostasy, now as then, when “some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits,” depends upon the church and her preachers and elders holding fast to the doctrines and truths that Timothy had been taught and must pass along.

That point must not be lost behind the doors of seminaries. A faithful minister of God does not serve God’s people by questioning biblical truths himself, nor by teaching others to follow his example of doubt. The church of God has enough trouble fighting the enemies of the world; it shouldn’t have to fight within its walls against those who would challenge the historical events narrated in the biblical text, deny the virgin birth or the resurrection, question the existence of heaven or hell, or oppose the teaching of sin and the call to repentance. It should not have to, but it does, and it must. Doctrine matters. Without

orthodoxy of doctrine, both vertical and horizontal relationships are established on shaky footings. Without sound doctrine, the living of the Christian life degenerates into godlessness. Doctrine provides the roots for the tree, the foundation for the building, the strength for the body.

The same note sounds in 2 Timothy. In 2 Timothy, Paul calls himself “a herald and an apostle and a teacher” of the gospel. It is this gospel that he charges Timothy to “keep as the pattern of sound teaching,” to guard as “the good deposit that was entrusted to you” (2 Tim. 1:13-14). Here the apostle uses a pair of instructive metaphors. On the one hand, Timothy is to keep and preserve the biblical doctrines because they provide the “model, example, prototype, in the sense of standard” by which all truth and life are to be tested. If one wishes to construct a building, he must use a blueprint. If the blueprint is unreliable, the building will be malformed. If, however, the blueprint is an accurate standard, and if it is followed properly, construction will succeed. On the other hand, Timothy is to “guard the deposit entrusted to him.” This metaphor suggests that the biblical faith and doctrine are a spiritual inheritance entrusted to the faithful church. It demands that Timothy then, and seminaries and pastors now, are accountable for the safekeeping of a sacred trust. Would that more seminary professors and ministers of the gospel were held to the same standards of responsibility for their handling of the truths of Scripture that legal trustees are for their handling of earthly trusts!

So, the first requirement for the training of faithful pastors, the first essential in a biblically obedient seminary curriculum, is faithfulness to biblical doctrine. Never has such a statement been more urgent than in our relativistic generation, an age in which truth and falsehood, right and wrong, are said to “depend upon your perspective,” an age in which it is considered arrogant to think that Scriptural truth is absolute truth, truth that applies to everybody else as well as yourself. A preacher who does not tell the truth of Scripture about sin and salvation is a false prophet. A seminary that declares itself to be “open-minded” about doctrine is not worth one’s time. But a seminary that holds itself and its

students to high standards of doctrinal knowledge and orthodoxy certainly starts off on the right foot.

In addition to preserving orthodox doctrine, a seminary must equip its students to *preach and teach the Word of God*. This is the other pole of the axis, the other requirement laid upon a biblical pastor. Not only must the doctrines of the gospel be held, preserved, kept, and guarded; they must be passed along, proclaimed, and applied to the faith and lives of the community of believers and to the world in every age.

Again, such a basic mandate as this one appears already in the first letter to Timothy. In 1 Timothy 4:13, Paul details for Timothy, youthful and apparently timid about performing his tasks, just how he is to communicate the gospel: “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.” Note carefully that on the one side this verse binds the text of Scripture to the *content* of the truth, and on the other side it binds the text of Scripture (what is read publicly) to the *practice* of preaching/teaching. Simply put, the kind of preaching and teaching that Paul expected Timothy to practice was the explaining and applying of the very words of the text of the Scriptures. Nothing else qualified.

That is why it is no surprise to find in the second letter to Timothy the characterization of a preacher as a “workman [laborer] ... who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). In the immediate context, Paul has referred to God’s church as a foundation. The metaphor pictures the preacher as a brick mason who builds on that foundation using the words of Scripture as his tools. When he handles them correctly, as he has been trained to do, he builds a wall that is plumb and therefore strong.

The point is made in different words a chapter later. Following a description of the last days as days of iniquity, Paul tells Timothy just how he is to confront ungodliness. He is to wield Scripture, which is a powerful weapon because it is “God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

The skillful use of Scripture as *the* hands-on tool of the ministry is the principle that explains *why* a man must attend seminary in order to be a faithful preacher/teacher. It is also the normative standard that tells a seminary *how* it ought to structure its curriculum.

- Paul commands Timothy to “teach” Scripture (2 Tim. 2:24; 3:16; see 2 Tim. 4:11). An aspiring preacher/teacher must master both the content of Scripture and the techniques of teaching it. He must be able, “with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Tim. 4:2), to set the course for God’s people in both doctrine and life. That means he must be trained in and become skilled at communicating the “what” and the “how” of faith and Christian living. A seminary must equip him to do that with courses that teach him how to teach.
- Paul commands Timothy to “correct, rebuke, and encourage,” reminding him that Scripture is profitable for just such things. Simply put, preachers must learn how to “counsel.” That does not mean modern humanistic psychology based on secular values; it means instead that they must learn how to apply Scripture to correct the erring, rebuke the sinner, and encourage the weak and faint-hearted. Such is the assignment in 2 Timothy 4:2. That is what seminaries must equip their students to do.
- Paul enjoins Timothy to “preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:2). As we saw above, this command lies at the heart of God’s redemptive strategy. Correspondingly, training men to preach ought to lie at the heart of a seminary curriculum, pulsing through the veins of every course. A biblical seminary dare not relegate such a decisive task to the addition of a few “practical” courses tacked on to the stuff of abstract theology. Preaching must be the core of the curriculum. Further, Paul specifies that Timothy is to preach *the Word*. Accordingly, seminaries should teach—and aspiring preachers should learn—preaching that is textually-governed and

thematically-organized. That is the kind of preaching that grips the heart and stirs the being to action. (You won't find this kind in the storytelling happy-speak so popular these days; the best that can be said about it is that it is eminently forgettable.) A student who cannot preach ought not to be let loose in the churches. A seminary that cannot train men to preach with textual vigor and practical urgency ought to be shut down so that "its place knows it no more."

- Paul warns Timothy to "be watchful in all things, endure afflictions" (2 Tim. 4:5). That means he is to be self-controlled, in charge of all his emotions and faculties, strong in faith. Every aspiring preacher must develop and evidence these spiritual qualities of maturity and perseverance. A seminary, accordingly, should be a spiritual greenhouse, nurturing personal spiritual growth, and wisdom in its students. That may sound obvious. It is, unfortunately, not always the case. Far too many students testify that a seminary career is a spiritual trial. I have heard complaints that in seminaries a devotional attitude is lacking, the Bible is treated merely as an academic resource, prayer life suffers, love for the Lord's church wanes. Such a spiritual atmosphere does not develop spiritual maturity. It withers the plant, root and branch. Before a student enters any seminary, he must ask current students about this facet of its life. If passionate love for the Lord and his Word does not characterize both the students and the faculty, let the man who aspires to the ministry avoid the place like the plague.

- Paul commissions Timothy to "do the work of an evangelist." That implies two related responsibilities. First, an aspiring preacher must work diligently for the saving of souls, possessing a passion for the lost. That being the case, the seminary must teach him to call people to repent and believe, not just invite them to go to church, and it must show him how to do that. Second, he must burn with the desire that Christ transform all of culture—the realm of powers,

institutions, and ideas—with the gospel. Correspondingly, the seminary curriculum must provide good training in apologetics, so that the preacher will know how to use God’s Word to “demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God” and to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5).

I think it is obvious that the curricula in many seminaries today are barriers rather than vehicles to an effective gospel-preaching ministry. Too many schools have chosen to be theological graduate schools instead of preacher-training schools that fit the instructions of Paul to Timothy. From what I have written above it should be clear that I am not opposed to the academic; on the contrary, academic ability is one of the criteria I suggested earlier as a benchmark by which a man can evaluate his calling. However, there is a parting of the ways between a school designed for theological post-graduate studies, and one designed to train and equip preachers. And among those few schools that aim to do the latter, there is a significant difference of opinion about what that training involves. The points I have stressed in this essay are intended to assist men who aspire to the ministry to discern the types, and among them, to identify the direction and focus of a particular institution.

This section has, I trust, made two things clear: first, that a seminary training is requisite for those who would preach, and second, that it ought to be training designed according to the patterns and emphases of the Pastoral Epistles. I hope that I have made a convincing case for the former, and defined the broad shape of the latter.

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We are in a war. Scripture testifies to that fact repeatedly (Gen. 3:15, Eph. 6:10f.). But those who are faithful to the Word of God—preachers and believers alike—are on the Victor’s side: “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of

the world. On the contrary, they have divine power...” (2 Cor. 10:3-4). The one who is called “Faithful and True” has as his name “the Word of God.” And he will rule the nations “with an iron scepter” (Rev. 19:12-15).