

## Introduction

Selecting and recruiting people into gospel ministry is a critical role, for those whom we select and groom will be preachers of Christ. Calvin records, 'therefore in order that noisy and troublesome men should not rashly take upon themselves to teach or to rule...especial care was taken that no one should assume public office in the church without being called.'<sup>26</sup>

So who calls the minister? There is no dispute that God sovereignly sends out His agents to preach the Word and pastor the flock. But how do we know whom God has so 'called'? How does God tell us? What is the role of the church? What is the role of those in ministry? Will we feel called? What are the implications for selecting people for training?

## All Christians are the 'called ones'.

Part of the problem we face is confusion about the language of 'calling' ('καλεω' word group) in the New Testament. The vast majority of uses relate to God's call of the elect which is mediated through the message of the gospel. All Christians are thus 'called ones' (κλητοι), not just those in the ministry (for example, Jude 1; 1 Cor 1:23-24; Rom 8:28; 1 Thess 2:14).<sup>27</sup> The only possible reference to calling as vocation in this world is in 1 Cor 7:20.

## God does 'call' the minister.

It is clear that God makes the decision that some should be teachers of the Word and lead His flock.

### The direct calling of Old Testament servants

Throughout the Old Testament God commissions and sends His servants. This usually comes through a direct word from God. Moses resisted God's call but he was to tell the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers--the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob - has sent me to you.'

(Exodus 3:15). Eli finally realised it was the Lord calling Samuel (1 Sam 3:8). Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And he responded, 'Here am I. Send me!' (Isaiah 6:8-9). Jeremiah was appointed by God in the language of a commission, 'you must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. (Jeremiah 1:7) and so Jeremiah was forever burdened. 'His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot. (Jeremiah 20:9). Ezekiel was to so digest his commission and word to Israel that God said to him, 'Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel' (Ezekiel 3:1).

### The direct calling of the apostles

On some occasions in the New Testament the language of 'calling' into ministry is used. Jesus called the first disciples to leave their nets, follow him and fish for men (Mt 4:21; Mk 1:20). The Holy Spirit reveals the divine call of Barnabas and Saul, which is confirmed by the church's commissioning (Acts 13:2). There is a call to a specific ministry in Macedonia, which Paul receives via a vision (Acts 16:10). On two occasions Paul attributes the origin of his apostleship to the divine calling (Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1)

The apostles are the 'sent ones' (John 20:21). Paul especially, claims a direct appointment by God in

<sup>26</sup> J. Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion (ed. J.T. McNeill; tr. F. L. Battles. LCC XX & XXI; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 1062

<sup>27</sup> J. Woodhouse, 'Consider Your Calling', The Briefing 40 (1990), 3-6

language that is not used of all ministers. These were the first human agents to be entrusted with the deposit of the faith and so required this immediate command from God (2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:1; Tim 1:1; 2 Tim 1:1 passim). For Paul his conversion and commissioning were inseparable (1 Tim 1:11-14; Tit 1:3). To establish his authority he denies any involvement of those who were apostles before him (Gal 1:15-16).

### The calling of all ministers by God

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Ephesians 4:11-13 is explicit in establishing the divine call of every minister. The risen ascended Lord Jesus gives His ministers to the church so that it will be built in truth, unity and love.

Some of the language of Paul's appointment to ministry is used for all ministers. God appointed (τιθημι) Paul to the ministry (1 Tim 1:12; 2:7) and similarly God appoints (τιθημι) apostles, prophets, teachers, etc (1 Cor 12:28).

In the case of Timothy, Paul makes it plain that his ministry and appointment originate with God. This reality is meant to strengthen Timothy. On three occasions, the solemn charge to Timothy from Paul is given 'in the sight' of God and Christ Jesus (εἰνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ – 1 Tim 5:21; 6:13-14; 2 Tim 4:1). Paul reminds Timothy of the prophecies made about him (1 Tim 1:18; 4:14) and that the laying on of Paul's hands recognised the gift from God, which appears to be Timothy's ministry (2 Tim 1:6).

### God works through His ministers to 'call' others into the ministry

God effects his calling and sending of the minister through those in the ministry. The divine will is exercised through human agents.

Paul commands Timothy to guard (φυλασσω) the deposit (παρατιθημι) of the gospel (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:14). He is committed (παραθηκη) with charge to fight the fight of faith in the face of opponents (1 Tim 1:18). Timothy is, in turn, to commit (παραθηκη) this ministry to reliable men who are able teachers (2 Tim 2:2). Titus is responsible to appoint overseers as God's stewards (οικονομοσ) (Tit 1:7). The pattern in the early church expansion was for the apostles to appoint elders in the context of calling upon God in prayer and fasting.

(Acts 14:23). Recognition of those who are Christ's ministers was often accompanied by the laying on of hands (Acts 6:6; 8:18; 13:3; 1 Tim 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tim 1:6). It is beyond the scope of this discussion to trace the origin of this tradition and how it might relate to what the church has called 'ordination'. However, in each case it was one or a group of ministers who performed this function.

### The church recognises the 'calling' of a minister?

Semantics are important here as there are two possible senses of the church 'calling' a minister, almost two stages. Firstly there is the decision to select and train someone for the ministry. This seems to be the responsibility of the pastors already in ministry as seen above. Secondly, there is the decision to appoint someone to a particular church or role. Clearly each church will have a process of deciding who will be their minister.

Broughton Knox<sup>28</sup> points out that in the early development of the Christian ministry some suitably gifted converts, such as the household of Stephanas and others, appointed (τασσω) themselves to the ministry of the saints and the church was called upon to recognise (επιγινωσκω) them (1 Cor 16:15-18). He takes this as a pattern of public recognition by the congregation of the minister, which should be the first of a twofold recognition in any ordination. The second recognition is of the existing ministers.

Believers have two ongoing responsibilities in relation to their ministers. They should test the faithfulness of the ministry being exercised. (1 Cor 14:37; 2 Cor 3:1-18; 10:1-11:15; 1 Thess 5:19-21;

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<sup>28</sup> B. Knox, Sent by Jesus: Some Aspects of Christian Ministry Today (Banner of Truth: Edinburgh, 1992), 13-15

1 John 4:1-3). And just as importantly, the church is called upon to submit to its teachers who lead them by the Word of God (1 Thess 5:12; Heb 13:7,17).

## The criteria for selecting someone into the ministry

From the Pastoral Epistles the fundamental criteria for appointing Timothy, Titus, overseers and deacons are:

- Blameless reputation and example of godliness
- Commitment to the Word of God
- Ability to teach others
- Proven leadership, for example, in the family

## Is this apostolic succession re-visited?

By elevating the role of the minister in calling the minister, does this take us back to a priestly view of ministry and entrenchment of ecclesiastical power?

David Wells' statement is helpful at this point. 'To be a believer, then as later, meant believing what the apostles taught. It is in this sense that apostolic succession is a New Testament truth. Believers succeed the apostles as they accept what the apostles taught. It is a succession not ecclesiastical power as the Church of Rome teaches but of doctrine.'<sup>29</sup>

Further, Knox summarises the issue, 'It is not a succession of tactile ordination through the laying on of hands, as it was distorted in the centuries after the apostles, but a succession of receiving and teaching the apostolic message on which our faith and hope and eternal life are based. Timothy was in this apostolic succession, as are all true ministers of the Word of life today.'<sup>30</sup>

Through the ministers of one generation appointing the next generation of faithful ministers, the sound doctrine of the apostles is handed down to the church.

## Should the minister feel called?

The Bible does not speak in terms of an inner call to the ministry. The call comes from God through His ministers and by the recognition of the congregation. However there are some passages which touch on the personal response. The desire for the ministry of oversight is commended because it is a good work (1 Tim 3:1). The elder as overseer is to shepherd the flock willingly, eager to serve. This is often taken as a basis for choosing to enter the ministry – if I am not willing then I should not. However the point is quite the opposite. If you are a shepherd, you must do it willingly.

Michael Bennett helpfully concludes that, "statements like 'I feel God is calling me' or 'I think God is calling me' are totally absent from the New Testament."<sup>31</sup>

Calvin's answer is in terms of the outer call of the church, which we have dealt with above, and the inner call of the individual. This inner or secret call he describes simply as 'a sincere fear of God and desire to build up the church.'<sup>32</sup>

## Is ministry a choice or a duty?

Ministry in the Bible is a duty to be fulfilled, a charge or commission to be obeyed, a trust to be faithfully executed. It is not a career option to be tried. The Twelve, Paul, Timothy, and others had no choice other than obedience or disobedience. So Peter could say, 'we must obey God rather than

<sup>29</sup> D. Wells, No Place for Truth (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1993), 102-3

<sup>30</sup> Knox, 17

<sup>31</sup> M. Bennett, 'Biblical terms evangelicals consistently misuse: The Call', The Briefing 268 (2001), 6-10

<sup>32</sup> Calvin, 1063

men' (Acts 5:29).

The ministry question is not, 'what is my ministry?' but 'what is my duty?' or 'what charge and obligation is God laying upon me?'

It is interesting to compare ministers of different generations. Ask them why they are in the ministry. We have drifted from a sense of calling and duty to notions of career choice and self-fulfilment. Fulfilling duties is not the spirit of our age. But we need a generation of ministers who know they are called and commissioned by Christ. They will know this by the call of the gospel itself and through the confirmation of ministers and the church.

All of this begs the question as to whether a minister should leave the ministry and, if so, under what circumstances.

### Some implications for ministry trainers.

1. Since God calls his ministers, we should be prayerful in any activity of recruiting, training and appointing for the ministry. We should be confident in Christ's sovereign purpose to build His church.
2. It is the responsibility of each minister to ensure that the ministry of the Word continues by entrusting it to faithful and able teachers. 'It must be remembered that it is the duty of the ministers in the congregation to care for the spiritual welfare of that congregation and one of the primary areas of care is the continuance of the ministry of God's Word within the congregation.'<sup>33</sup>
3. Since the minister calls the minister, we should take an active rather than a passive approach to ministry recruitment. We are not waiting for some to 'feel called' but we should charge those who have integrity of life and doctrine and gifts of teaching with their ministry to fulfil.

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<sup>33</sup> Knox, 14