

### Introduction

In 'Factotum' in the last issue of The Briefing (#191), Col Marshall urged us to think about moving one step further along in our commitment to doing Christian ministry. As we start to ponder our New Year's resolutions, Rob Smith looks at the how's and whys (and why nots) of making decisions about the kind of Christian service we undertake.

For some people it may never be right or wise to leave secular employment in order to seek full-time gospel employment. For others, however, it may be almost irresponsible not to make such a decision. But for all of us, there is a question that shouldn't go away: could I be doing more for the sake of the gospel?

This article provides a way of thinking through the issues for yourself. First, we present the case for all Christians seeing gospel ministry as a matter of top priority. Second, we explore the reasons why certain people ought to undertake Christian ministry full-time.

Last, we address reasons why some people don't, and others shouldn't, leave their secular employment for gospel work.

### Why Gospel Work is our Top Priority

#### Who should be considering full-time ministry?

It is clear that all Christians ought to regard gospel work as a matter of top priority. But when should Christians leave regular employment to channel their energies into the ministry of the gospel 'full-time'?<sup>1</sup> What factors would make this a wise and responsible decision, and what kinds of questions ought to be asked? There are four areas to be considered:

#### 1. Giftedness

Not all Christians are gifted to be teachers and leaders of God's people (cf. 1 Cor 12:27-30). According to Paul, elders need to be able to teach the truth and to refute error (1 Tim 3:2; 2 Tim 2:24-26; Tit 1:9). Likewise, they must be good managers (firstly, of their own families and then of the church). Whilst some of this has simply to do with wisdom and maturity, much of it has to do with gifts.

However, gifts are not static. They can be desired, prayed for and worked for. Just as we can grow in maturity, so we can grow and develop in giftedness. Therefore, it's not quite as simple as asking whether you have certain gifts. Time and opportunity to 'experiment' are often necessary and, at the end of the day, 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating'. For this reason, the decision to enter full-time gospel work should only be made with the encouragement and recommendation of friends and congregation members.

#### 2. Godliness

But giftedness is not enough, nor is it in fact of primary importance. This may come as a shock to many, but it ought to be abundantly clear from a careful reading of 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-

9. Godliness is the first and greatest requirement for those who are to teach and lead God's people. However, this ought not to be confused with some kind of sinless perfection. Leaders are to exemplify their progress in godliness (cf. 1 Tim 4:15-16), not their having arrived at sinlessness. In other words, modelling how to fail, repent and be forgiven may be just as important as modelling resistance and victory. Godliness is fundamentally about living under grace, rather than living as if you didn't need it.

Yet, there are times when failure clearly does matter and is serious enough to exclude a person from leadership (at least for some time) or occasion their standing down. This is clearly the case where there is serious public sin (e.g., sexual immorality, stealing, drunkenness, violence) which would undermine the credibility of both the leader and the gospel, or private sin which, if made public, would have the same effect.

### 3. Opportunity

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However, not all gifted, godly Christians can or should offer themselves for full-time gospel employment or for the necessary training involved. A number of other questions in the area of 'opportunity' need to be resolved first. For instance, there may be factors in a person's situation that would make it unwise for them to seek the responsibility of full-time gospel work. A man's wife may not be converted; or he may be an only child with chronically ill parents; or he may have a chronic illness himself. Likewise, he may be in serious debt, or simply may not have the necessary funds to pursue formal training. None of these things necessarily excludes anyone from pursuing full-time gospel work, and some are more easily solved than others. They may, however, make it unwise for some.

### 4. What about desire?

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Whilst it is possible to preach Christ from wrong motives (Phil 1:15-17), desiring the gifts and opportunities necessary for gospel work is clearly not in itself wrong (cf. 1 Tim 3:1; 1 Cor 12:31). Moreover, having the desire to serve God in this way is important, at least from a psychological point of view. It's hard to imagine why anyone would choose gospel work unwillingly. In fact, Peter cautions against such unwillingness (1 Pet 5:2).

However, given that desire is important and 'desirable', is it ultimately necessary? This may seem like a strange question to ask in the light of what has just been said. But desire may be mixed in with various fears and anxieties, which may prevent a glad embracing of such a prospect. Is it not also possible that at times we may need to urge and implore certain people to "leave their nets" and fish for men, even though at that point they may be reluctant to?

My belief is that desire will inevitably have to be present, at some level, for a person to choose to do full-time gospel work. Nevertheless, it may not be (and need not be) the primary motivating force.

## Why wouldn't you offer yourself for full-time ministry?

On the basis of my arguments in the previous section, I would conclude that in most Christian congregations there will be a considerable number of people who are ripe for full-time gospel ministry and ought to be seriously considering it. But there are reasons why some of these people wouldn't make such a decision. Some of these may be godly and legitimate reasons; others may

be quite ungodly and illegitimate; others may be matters of individual discernment.

## Ungodly reasons

### Careerism

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One of the great traps that ensnares many young Christians, particularly those who ought to be thinking about full-time ministry, is careerism. Careerism (as opposed to simply having a career) is a form of idolatry. It happens when a person's career, rather than being a means of service, becomes an end in itself. It thus becomes the master rather than the servant, promising status and security, provided the necessary sacrifices are made (all idols demand their sacrifices!). These sacrifices, which often include family, church and gospel priorities, tend to become self-perpetuating and ever-increasing, taking the young careerist down a one-way street into worldly enslavement. We ought not to be so naive as to think that there is no barb hidden underneath the seductive lures which the big businesses dangle in front of dedicated and capable Christian men and women. Careerism, in my experience, is one of the major reasons why many Christians abandon thoughts and plans about ministry.

### Materialism

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A second and related trap is that of materialism, with its alluring promise of the comfortable life. Materialism is the idolisation of 'things'. Needless to say, God's people are in constant danger from this idolatry, which feeds directly off our propensity to live by sight and not by faith, and for this world and not the world to come. For couples considering ministry options, the crunch often comes when they realise that full-time gospel work will in many cases mean that they will never own their own house, only have one car, not send their children to the 'best' schools, etc. This is the point at which many yield. Truly did Jesus say, "where your treasure is there will your heart be also" (Matt 6:21).

### Family pressure

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A third factor, which causes many Christians to shelve their thoughts of full-time ministry, is that of family pressure. The family pressure is usually eminently 'reasonable', pointing out the various deprivations and uncertainties (even dangers) which accompany service of Christ and his gospel, over and against the security, stability and that sense of 'keeping up with the Joneses' which accompanies careerism and materialism. For sons of 'successful' men, the pressure to live up to dad's agenda, or at the very least not to be a disappointment, can be incredibly powerful. The only real antidote is to take seriously Jesus' words about the dangers of making an idolatry of the family; placing our natural allegiances ahead of our allegiance to him. This is clearly the kind of thing he was attacking when he said: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:26). Nevertheless, family pressure continues to turn people away from gospel ministry.

## Possible Reasons

Having mentioned a number of illegitimate/ungodly reasons why people abandon ministry plans, let me now mention some (potentially) legitimate ones:

It ought to go without saying that most secular work is valuable for the simple reason that it helps to sustain human life in some way. Ecclesiastes has sometimes been misunderstood to suggest that secular work is inherently futile. This betrays a faulty understanding of God's providence, not to mention an inadequate doctrine of creation. Passages like Colossians 3:23-24 make it clear that, for the Christian, secular work (even that of slavery!) is a sphere of service to Christ.

Furthermore, secular work has enormous functional value, in that it provides income for the worker so that he can care for his family, share with those in need and give towards the work of the gospel. Secular work, therefore, is not unrelated to God's kingdom; it has to do with the sustenance of God's creation, whereas gospel work has to do with its redemption. Clearly, the latter is more important than the former, but the latter also needs the former (cf. 1 Timothy 2:1-4).

## Witness in the workplace

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This point is further underscored by the need and possibilities for Christian witness in the work environment. It goes without saying that if all Christians were in full-time ministry the progress of the gospel would be restricted on many fronts. Much of the gospel's spread happens through relational networks, many of them work-based. Christian workers learn how to commend the gospel through faithful dedication at work (cf. 1 Thess 4:11-12), and by taking up and creating opportunities to share the gospel with their colleagues. This call to be 'salt' and 'light', is part and parcel of the ministry given to every member of the body of Christ.

However, the value of a person's witness at work should not prevent them from considering full-time gospel work. In fact, the person who has learned to be an effective Christian witness in their secular workplace is exactly the kind of person who should consider fulltime ministry. Although the value of work and its potential for evangelistic opportunities may cause such a person to think carefully, these are not sufficient reasons for abandoning ministry plans.

## Marriage/family/financial/health concerns

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As we mentioned earlier, it is possible that someone who is in every other way suited to full-time ministry may have an unconverted spouse, or a chronically ill child, or be in significant debt. These factors ought to be carefully and responsibly evaluated and much wise counsel sought as to the degree of impact they would have on gospel ministry, and vice versa. Depending on a whole variety of factors, the abandoning of ministry plans may not be necessary, or at least not permanent. It is not unknown for our heavenly Father to answer prayers and to change circumstances.

## Good Reasons

There are, of course, a number of virtually unquestionable reasons why a person should not consider full-time gospel ministry. We shall deal briefly with three.

### 1) Deficient godliness

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By this I mean marked immaturity, sinful habits which have not been repented of and changed, involvement in public scandal, and similar problems. Clearly, such elements make a person

unsuitable to be a leader and teacher of God's people. However, if the sins or immaturity can be dealt with and growth does take place, such a person may not be permanently unsuitable for gospel ministry.

## 2) Deficient giftedness

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It would be irresponsible and cruel to encourage a person to take up full-time gospel work who did not have the gifts for it. However, as we have already mentioned, gifts can be prayerfully sought and gradually developed. Therefore, a person who is unsuitable for gospel ministry at one point in their life may at a later stage be far more suitable.

## 3) Discouragement by friends and leaders

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The same applies to those who may have a desire for gospel ministry but are being discouraged from pursuing it by friends and leader who know them well. Although such advice is not infallible, it would be the exception when it should be discarded. However, depending on the reasons for it, it is quite possible for the advice of friends and leaders to change with time, and discouragement turn to positive encouragement.

## Decision-making time

The purpose of this article is to persuade all of God's people that they should be committed to gospel ministry, and some of God's people that they should 'leave their nets' and given themselves full-time to gospel work. When it comes to decision making time, there are three final things to consider:

### 1) The hard words of Jesus

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Jesus spoke plenty of what are often called 'hard words'. Let me give you just two from Luke's Gospel:

He said to another man, "Follow me." But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good bye to my family." Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

(Luke 9:59-62)

That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

(Luke 12:47-48)

These verses are not talking specifically about full-time gospel work (the ministry of some Christians) but about full-time discipleship (the calling of every Christian). However, for

those who have the gifts, godliness, etc. for gospel work, such an application is not at all illegitimate, for “from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Luke 12:48).

## 2) A matter of freedom

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But isn't the choice to take up full-time gospel work a matter of freedom? Yes. And shouldn't such a choice be motivated by the love of Christ, and not sheer duty? Indeed, yes. God loves a cheerful giver and longs for pastors who will willingly shepherd his flock (1Pet 5:2). Therefore, people need not and ought not to be cajoled to make decisions about ministry. Likewise, no one should seek to bind another's conscience in this regard, for the word of God does not legislate on this point. Like the life of celibacy, which “not everyone can accept” (Matt 19:11), full-time gospel ministry is only for those who are cut out for it by God. None of this should be in doubt.

However, the big question is: how do you know whether you've been cut out for gospel ministry? Like the call to singleness, it is worked out in the course of life, on the basis of the gifts and opportunities that God gives, and through making prayerful decisions (taking into account the advice of wise and discerning friends). With singleness, at the end of the day, the issue is simple: as long as you're single, then it is to singleness that you've been called.

If at some point the possibility of marriage arises, then you are free to consider it. It is similar with full-time ministry; if it is possible and advisable, then you are free to do it. Likewise, if freedom means anything, you must also be free not to do it.

## 3) Are we choosing the soft option?

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If choosing full-time ministry is truly a matter of freedom, why have we spent so long getting to this point? The answer is because true freedom is all about joyfully participating in the purposes of God, giving our lives and talents in thoughtful, humble, self-sacrificial service.

Thus the final question that always needs to be asked in areas of freedom is this: am I using my freedom to choose the soft option, rather than using it to give the maximum I can in the fulfilment of the purposes of God? This is not a light question, for it is one that is bound to figure largely at the judgement seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10; cf. Matt 25:14-30).

It is high time for Christians to realise afresh that the call of gospel is a call to come and die – but that, so that we might gain a “better resurrection” (Heb 11:35). Surely if you have the gifts, godliness, opportunity and encouragement of others to serve the gospel full-time, then at the very least it would be irresponsible not to carefully and prayerfully consider it. May God give us such grace that the Master might say to each of us, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”