



■ When, at the wise old age of fifteen, I declared that the Lord was calling me to the ministry, my pastor told me, gently but firmly, “Before you say that for sure, you need to know what you are getting yourself into.”

In my denomination, a person must receive a call to a particular ministry before he can be approved to serve. Furthermore, the specific terms of that call must be submitted to the governing body of our church. That is the first test of one’s call—is one willing to submit to other brethren?

Wesley Benefield understands that test in Clyde Edgerton’s novel *Killer Diller*. When Miss Mattie encourages him to become a preacher, he says, “I don’t know. I’d have to get ordained. I’m not sure I’d like the ordainers.”¹ No one can accept a call until he understands what he is getting himself into and is willing to submit to it as to the Lord. So that is the question—*what is the ministry?*—that must be addressed before we answer what a *call* to the ministry is.

SERVICE

In a word, the ministry is *service*. A pastor’s wife recently asked her ninety-eight-year-old husband, a man whom I greatly admire, why he had accepted a call to a new pastorate. “Why can’t we just sit in

the pew now?” she asked him. The old warrior answered, “Because I came not to be served, but to serve!” (Matt. 20:28).

He had it right. There is only one Head and King of the church, Jesus Christ, who is King over all reality (1 Cor. 15:25; Col. 3:1). Therefore, every minister’s authority is only “ministerial” and declarative.² A minister labors under the authority of Jesus Christ, who authorizes him to administer the Word to his people through his person and voice. A minister who “lords” over his flock is oxymoronic theologically as well as semantically (1 Peter 5:3). Even the Lord Christ does not wield his authority over the church in a despotic manner. When they are thinking rightly, his subjects submit with joy because they realize the Son of God was humiliated to become their Head (Gal. 4:1–5).

To be a minister of Christ is to be his vicar, to represent him to others, especially through humiliation, trials, and suffering. However, such representation is not mere imitation. To minister vicariously for Christ is to be in union with him. While every Christian is saved only by being united to Christ (Col. 3:3), Paul indicates that there is a peculiar union with Christ in the pastoral ministry. Thus, a minister is an “apostle” (*sent one*) and “priest” only because he is united to Christ (Heb. 3:1). By God’s mercy, the gospel minister is privileged to have his life follow the pattern of the Lord’s, being physically and emotionally expended on behalf of the people he serves, in order that they might live (2 Cor. 4:1, 11–12). When a pastor asks the Lord for a pattern of ministry, Jesus hands him a towel and a bowl of water and says, “Wash their feet” (John 13:4–14) or a shepherd’s crook and says, “Tend my sheep” (John 21:16). When a preacher inquires of Christ how to be promoted in the church, Jesus hands him a cup of suffering (Matt. 20:22).

In turn, the minister’s life must become an example of Christ and his redeeming work for the sake of the flock (Phil. 3:17). In her memoir *Leaving Church*, Barbara Brown Taylor put it this way, “Being ordained is not about serving God perfectly but

about serving God visibly, allowing other people to learn whatever they can from watching you rise and fall.”³ Even thorny suffering is an act of service to others because through it Christ proves that his “grace is sufficient” to keep the hard-pressed from being “crushed” (2 Cor. 4:7–18; 11:23–30; 12:9).

However, there is a difference in Scripture between being “crushed” (spiritually annihilated) and “bruised” (ministerially prepared) (Isa. 42:3; Matt. 12:20). Bruising is necessary for all Christians to remind them that they are not sufficient without Christ, and the minister especially must be bruised if he will lead his people convincingly to the gospel. Richard Sibbes famously insisted: “No sound whole soul shall ever enter into heaven.” Why? Because, as he explained, bruising “makes us more thankful, and, from thankfulness, more fruitful in our lives; for what makes many so cold and barren, but that bruising for sin never endeared God’s grace to them?”⁴

The greatest pastors in history were made so by bruising. George Whitefield, not generally known for his pastoral sensitivity, recognized it in Gilbert Tennent, his fellow awakener:

I never before heard such a searching sermon. He [Gilbert Tennent] convinced me more and more that we can preach the Gospel of Christ no further than we have experienced the power of it in our own hearts. Being deeply convicted of sin, by God’s Holy Spirit, at his first conversion, he has learned experimentally to dissect the heart of a natural man. Hypocrites must either soon be converted or enraged at his preaching. He is a son of thunder, and does not fear the faces of men.⁵

Andrew Bonar made a similar observation of Robert Murray M’Cheyne: “This soul was prepared for the awful work of the ministry by much prayer and much study of the word of God, by inward

trials, by experience of the depth of corruption in his own heart, and by discoveries of the Savior's fullness of grace."⁶

SERVICE IN PREACHING

But the ministry is not generic service; it is the ministry of the gospel, the specific terms of which are written down in Scripture. Those terms may be gathered up in two big baskets: preaching and pastoring.

Preaching is the minister's most important duty. In fact, it is arguably the most important task in the world, because the lost cannot (ordinarily) hear the message of salvation without "someone preaching to them" (Rom. 10:14–15). This also clarifies that the pastor must not make an artificial distinction between "personal evangelism" and "pulpit preaching." This seems to be the apostle's point when Paul bookends his charge to his young student in 2 Timothy 4:1–5 with the commands to "preach the word" at the beginning and "do the work of an evangelist" at the end.

Reinforcing the eternal significance attached to preaching, the Westminster Shorter Catechism answers question 89, "How is the Word made effectual to salvation?", in this way: "The Spirit of God maketh the reading, *but especially the preaching*, of the Word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation." If preaching is so important, and much more than merely reading the text, then what is it? Preaching requires a minister who has sufficiently studied God's Word (Ezra 7:10) so that he can explain its meaning and apply it to people's lives (Neh. 8:8, 12) in a way that leads them to Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of all Scripture (Luke 24:25–27; 2 Tim. 4:5).

As a gift from the Spirit, true preaching reinforces the fact that God's grace is accentuated by the weakness of the minister. Paul told his Corinthian critics that God proved his power and wisdom

through the “foolishness” of preaching to save (1 Cor. 1:21). Perhaps it is because preaching seems to be such an unlikely force for advancing the kingdom that God identifies it as among the “greater gifts” to be desired (1 Cor. 12:31; cf. Eph. 4:11–16). While every elder of the church is to be “able to teach” (2 Tim. 2:24), those who are especially marked out for “double honor” (is that triple honor?) are those whose “work is preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17).

While preaching is not as impressive as speaking in an unknown tongue, which Paul was apparently able to do as well, he preferred to preach a few “intelligible words” than many more words that wowed. Why? Because the first requirement for preaching is to study the Word *in order* to instruct (1 Cor. 14:19). This also explains Paul’s strong charge to his spiritual son, Timothy. Paul told this young pastor in Ephesus to “preach the Word . . . in season and out of season” in such a clear way that faithful ones who heard him could in turn “teach others” (2 Tim. 4:2 and 2:2).

Therefore, preaching first requires a prepared man who is able to explain the Scriptures to those who listen. The apostles’ peculiar power to teach and preach gave evidence that they were “unschooled, ordinary men who had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:2, 13). That is, they had been prepared by him to explain the Scriptures. Even the greater apostle Paul, though selectively schooled by Greek and Jewish scholars, had to go to Jesus’ seminary for three years before he was ready to preach the gospel (Gal. 1:17–18).

While there may be many ways to get prepared, preparation in knowledge and experience is essential to preaching. The brilliant and powerful Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte said of preparation for preaching: “If I were choosing a minister for myself and could not have both the book-knowledge and the experience of the Christian life in one and the same man . . . I would say that, much as I like an able and learned sermon from an able and learned man, I would rather have less learning and more experience.”⁷

The second requirement for preaching is to apply the Scriptures in such a way that those who hear look to Jesus as their pattern and power for doing what God calls them to be and do. After hearing Ezra preach, the people responded appropriately—repenting, rejoicing, reconciling, restoring. The apostles’ preaching “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). By that expression, critics meant that the application of the Scriptures changed cultural norms, worship patterns, and family dynamics. However, the laws and regulations were not new. They had been around in Israel since Mt. Sinai and even since the foundation of the world. These old laws became newly transformative because the reason for them was clearly proclaimed, namely, the grace of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The apostles turned the world upside down by preaching from the same Bible Jesus had, the only Bible at the time, the Old Testament Scriptures that had also been the Bible of Ezra (Acts 17:3).

Paul laconically summarized preaching with these words: “Him we proclaim” (Col. 1:28). If there is no preaching without a prepared man explaining the Scriptures, then there is no Christian preaching without demonstrating how Christ motivates and enables us to obey every command of Scripture.

Some congregations prefer legalism because it can provide a false sense of security that leads to pride. Jonathan Parsons was a pastor in Lyme, Connecticut, when the First Great Awakening occurred. After his own conversion, he began preaching Christ—to the great consternation of his proud congregation. The criticism so wore on him that he confessed, “I was awfully deserted of God, and got into a very dull, legal frame myself; and then some were better pleased.” Eventually the gospel gained ascendancy in his life again, and he returned to preaching Christ as the end of all the Scriptures and the one who enables us to obey all its instructions.⁸

Only Christ-centered preaching can reform behavior in a way that produces a long, grateful, genuine, and joyful obedience. Richard Sibbes was a typical Puritan who knew how to apply the