



A CALL TO ORDAINED MINISTRY

The apostle Paul gave instructions to his young friend Timothy, to be “an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity [love], in spirit, in faith, *in purity*” (1 Tim. 4:12). That is a very high standard for young men to maintain (although not an unreasonable one) each day of the week, and each hour of the day. As Richard Baxter [1615–1691] states in his classic work, *The Reformed Pastor*, “he that delighteth not in holiness, hateth not iniquity, loveth not the unity and purity of the church . . . is not fit to be a pastor of a church.”¹

Many theological students start well in their training, but balk at the last minute when confronted with the prospect of being a minister of the gospel, and veer off in a different direction, for fear of the responsibility about to be thrust upon them is a sobering experience. Of course, on the other hand, confronted by the challenge they may have been honest before God and doubted their call, or, although acknowledging the call, believed themselves too unworthy of it.

Whatever the reason, these facts reveal what care has to be taken when a young man examines his credentials for such a task which, needless to say, suggests Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892) is “imperative”.²

SPURGEON: ‘ALL-ABSORBING’

In fact, the “prince of preachers” informed his students no one should enter the Christian ministry “until he has made solemn quest and trial of himself as to this point”³. He then provides us with a list of what he believes constitutes “a call”.

¹ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor: Shewing the Nature of the Pastoral Work* (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1860), 108.

² C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, new edition (London and Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan, & Scott, 1954), 26.

³ Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 26.

First evidence: The “all-absorbing” desire to enter the work, a “craving and raging thirst” for telling others what God has done for sinners.

Spurgeon points to the outstanding Alleine, quoting a contemporary of his who described him as being “infinitely and insatiably greedy for the conversion of souls”⁴. However, Spurgeon qualifies his position lest some might think zeal is all that is required, by underlining the maxim that his students should not enter the Christian ministry unless unable to help it!

Second evidence: A gift for instructing others.

Argues Spurgeon, “if the gift of utterance be not there in a measure at the first, it is not likely that it will ever be developed”⁵ Yet, young students being prone to think too highly of the talents God has given them, the great man continues, should be assessed by godly men and women. He confesses, though, that “as godly a Christian matron as ever breathed” once sought to dissuade him from preaching.⁶ Spurgeon was too much of a gentleman, and too wise, to mention her name, the poor woman would never have lived it down! But it goes to say that even the most godly can make erroneous or overly dogmatic assessments.

Third evidence: A measure of conversion-work.

Spurgeon’s third suggestion might cause alarm to the budding pastor, particularly in these days of “small things”. A sign of a calling to the ministry, he says, is that the candidate “must see a measure of conversion-work going on under his efforts”⁷. Should this not be the case, he warns, “he may conclude that he has made a mistake, and therefore, may go back by the best way he can.”

That having been stated, probably not wishing to be too discouraging, he appears to contradict himself, admitting that success should not necessarily be expected straight away. In fact, such a man believing himself to have been

⁴ Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 26.

⁵ Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 27.

⁶ Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 30.

⁷ Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 31.



called by God into the ministry may enter it for “a life trial of preaching”, but taught Spurgeon, “his commission is without seals until souls are won by his instrumentality to the knowledge of Jesus.”

Fourth evidence: The acceptability of the preaching and personality to the people of God.

Spurgeon means not that the candidate should go out of his way to please God’s people, but he must allow himself to be assessed by them. True, states Spurgeon, “churches are not all wise, neither do they all judge in the power of the Holy Ghost, but many of them judge after the flesh”⁸.

However, and every Christian will understand, Spurgeon admits to preferring the opinions of his brethren and sisters about his fitness to be a preacher of the gospel to anyone else’s, including his own. Spiritual discernment being a precious gift, the redeemed quickly recognize what he calls “living ministers” when they see and hear them: “The sheep will know the God-sent shepherd; the porter of the fold will open to you, and the flock will know your voice”⁹.

NEWTON: “A WARM AND EARNEST DESIRE”

Spurgeon introduces us at this point to a thought-provoking letter of John Newton (1725–1807) to a friend on this topic of the call.

Overlapping evidences.

Newton also places at the top of his list “a warm and earnest desire” to serve the Lord but examines the motivation behind it. For example, anticipating the relative “genteel poverty” a preacher is invariably obliged to experience [at least, in most countries!] does the candidate’s fervour exceed the enticing allure of “silver and gold”? Again, is his zeal for serving Christ as fervent during spiritually barren periods, as when in “most lively and spiritual frames”¹⁰? As every Christian knows only too well, there is sadly a possibility

that fervour for the Lord increases in direct ratio to the nearness of the “mountain peak”, yet conversely, the heart is likely to grow colder as the valley gets deeper.

Newton’s second thought corresponds likewise to Spurgeon’s second element. Yet, in explaining the evidence of giftedness he differs from Spurgeon. Of the two, surely the latter is correct. Both make the obvious remark that a minister must be endowed with the God-given gifts of “instruction and utterance”, but Newton suggests to his friend that because of his youth and therefore time being on his side (an unusual suggestion in the light of James 4:13-15!), providing he has the necessary fervour, discovering whether he has ministerial gifts can come later. Spurgeon though insists these should be evident from the start, and one surely must agree; in fact, as already observed, he goes further believing that if the student does not possess at least a “measure” of the gift of “utterance” at the beginning he will never have it.

Fifth evidence: The opening of providence.

While Newton does not include in his letter Spurgeon’s third and fourth elements, he reminds us of a fifth evidence: “a correspondent opening in providence, by a gradual train of circumstance”; that is, “the means, the time and the place of actually entering upon the work”¹¹. These, states Newton, slot into place in accordance to the divine will and purpose, and the candidate must be patient to wait until the actual moment arrives, and not clutch at the first straw that drifts by. He reminds us he waited five years before he took the major step of entering “so great a service”. In an extremely important statement, Newton puts the matter succinctly: “If you had the talents of an angel, you could do no good with them till his [God’s] hour is come, and till he leads you to the people whom he has determined to bless by your means”.

From these two remarkable men of God we ascertain that entering the Christian ministry is not to be undertaken lightly. It is an alarming thing to do—yes, alarming—because God himself is observing every move taken in the direction of ordained ministry.

⁸ Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 32.

⁹ Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 33.

¹⁰ Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 33.

¹¹ Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, 34.