



## Preaching – A divine calling

Not all evangelical Christians would agree with what you are doing here this afternoon in separating this man apart for the preaching ministry of this church. There is much debate and not a little division in some of our churches today over what is sometimes disparagingly called '*the one-man ministry*'. So I want to give you a biblical justification for what you are doing.

With this in mind I direct you to words of the great apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:16:

*'For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of; for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!'*

These are the words of a man wholly given over to the preaching of the gospel.

When you read through the Bible and consider the men who were called by God to preach his Word you will discover that they had a number of characteristics in common. They are implicit in these words of Paul.

One characteristic of biblical preachers was a natural reluctance to engage in the task. *They all had a sense of inadequacy and awe when faced with the commission and call to preach.* This was true of that great prophet Moses, who exclaimed,

*'Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?'*

(Exodus 3:11)

He expostulated and protested that he was ill-equipped for such a calling. He pleaded that he was not naturally eloquent, and '*slow of speech, and of a slow tongue*' (Exodus 4:10). Scripture does not require us to accept Moses' own estimate of his natural gifts. God deemed them adequate. Nonetheless, so great was Moses' sense of inadequacy that the Lord finally appointed Aaron his brother as his mouthpiece, though Moses remained the chosen instrument and prophet.

We discover the same reluctance in Isaiah when first called of God. He felt 'undone'; and not until he had the assurance of God's cleansing to fit him for such a holy calling did he respond positively to the call of God, and say, '*Here am I; send me*' (Isaiah 6:8). Jeremiah also, like Moses, protested, '*Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child*' (Jeremiah 1:61). Only when the Lord had reassured him and said, '*Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee*', was Jeremiah able to face all that was involved in delivering the Word of the Lord to the people.

I know that the man you are inducting here today has a similar sense of inadequacy as he faces God's call to him to be a preacher of the gospel. One gets the impression of all men truly called to be preachers by God that naturally they shrink from the task and would prefer humanly to do anything else rather than preach. I am always amazed at the man who goes into a pulpit when he does not have to. The biblical preachers were not eager to assume the position. They recoiled from it, and they did so because they knew how awesome was the task to which they were being called. Paul's argument here is that he had no occasion to glory in preaching the gospel because '*necessity is laid upon me*'. That was the human and natural side of things; but having been

divinely called, preaching was the one thing he had to do and wanted to do above everything else. But the desire to preach arose from this divine constraint laid upon him.

There are some Christians today who think that preaching is something anyone can do. They imagine it is just a matter of studying a few Scriptures, looking up a commentary or two, and being able to speak in public. Such a view of preaching is totally misconceived.

Preaching is an impossible task. It is not like selling insurance and persuading people to take out a policy. Nor is it like lecturing or teaching where the objective is secured merely by an educative process. The preacher is in a position where he actually has to represent God before men. If any man speak; declares Peter, *'let him speak as the oracles of God'* (1 Peter 4:11). Elsewhere Paul puts it in this way: *'Now then we are ambassadors for Christ as though **God** did beseech you by us'* (2 Corinthians 5:20). *'As though God did beseech you'*! What an awesome responsibility! Any man who thinks he can do that should never be in a pulpit. You will remember how Paul revealed to the Corinthians that he was with them *'in weakness and in fear and in much trembling'* (1 Corinthians 2:3). This is how the great apostle Paul felt; but in view of what was involved, it was not surprising.

One mark of a truly called preacher is that he fears the pulpit. He does not enter it with a hop, a skip and a jump, thinking that he is well-fitted to be there. The great Methodist preacher, William Bramwell, once confided, *'I die a death every time I preach; I wonder I have lived as long as I have'*. This was a man who had great preaching gifts and had preached with much power. And in his secret diary, that outstanding Puritan preacher of New England, Thomas Shepard, acknowledged that every sermon he preached cost him both sweat and tears. No man is naturally competent for *this* task. Here today you are asking a man to do the impossible. *He* knows it, even if you (the hearers) don't. You may say, why does he agree to do it then?

This brings me to the second characteristic of biblical preachers. *They were all under a sense of divine compulsion*. They preached not because of themselves, but despite themselves. Paul expresses this in the phrase, *'necessity is laid upon me'* (1 Corinthians 9:16). What he is saying is that he was under a divine constraint. He could do no other.

I think the man you have called as minister of this church would have given up preaching long ago if he could have done. The fact that he is here this afternoon is evidence of an irresistible call of God in his life. You will have gathered by now that I believe preaching requires a special divine call. No man should preach if he can possibly help it. No man should go into the Christian ministry if he can avoid doing so. All the biblical preachers were men under authority. They had an overwhelming sense of call. They were sent by God (Romans 10:15; Ephesians 4:11). They were under a divine constraint.

Sometimes they were called away from doing other things. One thinks of Amos the herdsman of Judah called north to preach repentance in the kingdom of Israel. Peter was a master-fisherman before he became a preacher. I have just finished reading the life of Charles Richardson, another great Methodist preacher. He spent half his life as a thresher in Lincolnshire before God thrust him out as a preacher. But whoever they were, and whatever they had been, this sense of divine compulsion has always marked out the man called of God. Peter spoke on behalf of all the apostles when he declared, *'For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard'* (Acts 4:18-20). He was not only saying that God must be obeyed rather than men, but also that preachers in particular are under a divine compulsion to preach the gospel.

Jeremiah faced so much antagonism that he once determined to preach no more. The incident is recorded in Jeremiah 20:7-9.

*'O Lord, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived: thou art stronger than I, and hast prevailed: I am in derision daily, every one mocketh me. For since I spake, I cried out, I cried violence and spoil; because the word of the Lord was made a reproach unto me, and a derision, daily. Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing and I could not stay'.*

The word of God was like a fire within his bones; he *had* to preach, whatever the cost. That is one sure evidence of this divine calling, a holy compulsion that cannot be denied. The true preacher *must* preach, he even does it when he is not in a pulpit. He is always exhorting, urging and pressing the claims of God upon men.

In the light of all this, what do we say of occasional preachers, 'local preachers' as they are sometimes called? Many have done excellent work. They have kept open places of worship which otherwise would have closed. They step in at times of emergency when the regular preacher is ill; and they act as a relief for him when he takes necessary holidays. But having said this, we surely need to emphasise the word 'occasional', and give full weight to the unique position of the regular ministry, to those men expressly and specifically called of God. Whether willingly or unwillingly they preach because they say with Paul, '*a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me*' (1 Corinthians 9:17).

Another characteristic of biblical preachers was that *they were consumed by their message*. Their calling was so total, that they became their message. John the Baptist was his message in every fibre of his being. The way he dressed, what he ate, where he lived: it was all part of his message of repentance. For Jeremiah, the message was a fire within his bones. Ezekiel was actually commanded to eat the scroll on which the message was written (Ezekiel 3) to symbolise the oneness of the preacher and his message. It had to be absorbed into his very being. The man and his message had to be one. This is a phenomenon unique to preachers. Again, it is evidence of this special call. Jonathan Edwards has a phrase for it: '*the energy of the soul*'. There is communicated to the preacher a peculiar spiritual energy which derives from his message.

Sometimes one listens to a preacher who has obvious speaking ability, intellectual powers, an interesting style, much doctrinal truth and practical application within his sermon, and yet senses that something essential is missing, something without which all those other qualities become of no avail. For some reason there is no impact, no real moral and spiritual effect upon the people as the result of the preaching. What is wrong? There is no 'energy of the soul'. The man is not his message. John Fletcher of Madely put it like this: '*It is the unction that makes the preacher*'.

I believe in preaching. I believe in that sort of preaching which consumes the preacher. I believe in a full-time ministry, if at all possible. In 1 Corinthians 9:1-14, Paul advances six arguments advocating the full-time support by the church of the called preacher. I believe in ministers or preachers as distinct from all other church officers. The preacher is not just another elder. This notion has done, and is doing, great harm to our churches. The idea that the preaching can be shared out among the more able men of the church, irrespective of whether or, not a man is separated unto the gospel and has a special call of God to preach, reflects a low view of preaching and ultimately a low view of the gospel itself. It not only flies in the face of the biblical evidence and of specific New Testament teaching, but is false to the history of the church.

Churches are established by preaching. The past twenty-five years in the East Midlands is proof of that. The regular preaching ministry needs no defence. Its record is its best defence. Whoever would have heard of Holywell Free Church in Loughborough apart from this man and his preaching? When groups of Christians are thinking about starting a new work they ought always to begin with a preacher. Sometimes the emphasis is upon a building, and then the group ends up with a building and not much else.

It pleases God to use preaching to build the living church (Romans 10:14-15). We must never lose confidence in preaching and the power of the preached Word of God. And we must never lose confidence in the office of the preacher.

Whenever possible, the preacher should give himself wholly to his calling. The nature of true preaching demands this; but common sense itself supplies an argument for it. Let me tell you the story of a mythical friend of mine by the name of John Brown. John Brown went to stay with a friend for a week's holiday. During the holiday he developed a severe toothache. His friend made arrangements for him to see a dentist. What John Brown could not understand was why his appointment was at eight in the evening, and why he was driven out of the town into the country to

keep the appointment. However, he arrived at a large house and was shown into a homely sort of living-room; and then he was ushered into a smaller room which appeared to be the surgery. He sat in a slightly dilapidated dental chair and while the bronzed-faced dentist in the white coat was busy arranging his instruments, John Brown ventured to ask him a question. 'Excuse my asking, but I cannot quite understand why my appointment is so late in the evening'. 'Oh, I don't do this job full-time, you know', replied the man in the white coat. John Brown's jaw fell open with an involuntary response. 'But surely, you have had proper training', enquired John Brown nervously. 'Oh no!' replied the white-coated man, 'I think college training ruins a man. My regular job is a farmer, and I just do a bit of dentistry in my spare time. I believe in giving it straight from the shoulder, if you know what I mean'. The last I heard of John Brown was that he was seen running across ploughed fields calling for help! We all readily sympathise with poor John Brown.

But how is it that when some Christians think of preaching they do not consider that this supremely important task requires a man's best hours and energies? Surely, preaching ought never to be a side-line in a man's life. He needs to be wholly given to it. That is Paul's argument here in 1 Corinthians 9. There are times when the circumstances of a situation may involve the preacher in a little *'tent-making'*, but that is never ideal. Finally, there is one other characteristic of biblical preachers we must note. *Their message had priority over everything else.*

*'For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel.'*

That last phrase, *'woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel'*, brings out this priority which the gospel had in Paul's thinking and ministry. For him it was the primary thing. Nothing else compared with it.

I assume that you share the apostle's conviction, and that this is why you have called this man to be your minister in this church. Your main concern is that he preaches the gospel in this place. Churches are brought into being by the gospel. Believers are kept and sustained by it. *So what is the gospel?* It is not an unimportant question these days. We hold conferences on the gospel but strangely omit to say what the gospel is. First and foremost, it is God's Word to man. This is what Paul means by the phrase *'a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me'* (1 Corinthians 9:17). God had dispensed truth. God has spoken. And what is this message that has come from God? It concerns Jesus Christ. In verse 18 Paul refers to the gospel as *'the gospel of Christ'*. The spiritual and moral condition of the human race is so dire that God had to send his eternal Son into the world to save us. He came to destroy the works of the devil. God sent his Son to do for us what no man can do for himself: to fit us for God, to make us righteous before God.

He did it by becoming a man and keeping God's holy law on our behalf. Then he gave himself as a sacrifice to atone for our sin: *'the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God'* (1 Peter 3:18). He has broken the power of Satan. He has broken the power of sin. Sin's power is its ability to place us under condemnation and designate us guilty before God. The power of Jesus Christ is his ability to remove that condemnation and present us to God as righteous by his merit and sacrifice. This is why there is life and liberty for sinners in the Lord Jesus Christ. He has the power to make a *'new man'*. Nothing else has: education cannot do it, the social services are powerless to do it, man's self-effort is of no avail. The Gospel alone can do it; and it is this fact that causes Paul to exclaim *'woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!'* This is why Paul declares in Romans 1:16,

*'For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth...'*

The preaching of the gospel, therefore, is the one thing needful.

But sadly there is *a loss of confidence in the gospel* within our churches. This is why many Christians no longer believe in preaching. Some think that the churches should be engaging in social work and political activities as though that were the way to save men. Others spend their time lamenting the spiritual decline of our nation, and wringing their hands at the loss of Christian traditions in our society, and organising various petitions and protests. They think that what matters is our national Constitution and its formal commitment to the Protestant Faith. They put their faith in

acts of Parliament to stem the tide of wickedness. But you cannot legislate the sinner into the kingdom of God. It is a misreading of our history. Christian conventions and legislation which reflects an awareness of God's holy laws have always been the *effects* of gospel power and not the instruments of it. We evangelicals today are in danger of being merely defensive in outlook, of adopting a siege mentality, and of spending our time stressing negatives.

We must recapture a new sense of the power of the gospel, and the vital importance of gospel preaching. We must not be diverted from our primary commission by getting preoccupied with secondary issues and falling out between ourselves over trivial differences. God has given us a gospel of power. All we have to do is to let it loose. And you have called this man to do it. Pray God's blessing down upon him. And pray that the gospel may come to men not only in word, but also *'in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance'* (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

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I have nothing to glory of for necessity is laid upon me;  
yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel.'*

(1 Corinthians 9:16)

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