



## The Call to the Ministry

For the first year since our Seminary began we have no UK Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) students studying for the ministry. Thankfully we do not have many vacancies and there are young men in the process of making application. But the need both at home and abroad is immense and Christ has taught us to notice that the fields are white unto harvest but that the labourers are few and because of that we are to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send forth labourers into the harvest fields.

### Knox and Calvin

A natural question arises: What is the call to the ministry and who should apply? Last year at the School in Theology one speaker (Donald John Maclean) compared and contrasted Calvin and Knox. Both of them were strongly encouraged, indeed compelled, by others to enter the ministry. Calvin was passing through Geneva intending to pursue his desired life as a scholar when William Farel stopped him and indeed threatened him with terrible curses if he did not enter the ministry in Geneva. Terrified by the curses Calvin became the great Reformer. Similarly John Rough preached to the congregation in St Andrews castle on the call to the ministry and then in the middle of the sermon addressed a call to the ministry to Knox directly: *'Brother, in the name of God and of His Son Jesus Christ, and in the name of all those here present I call you by my mouth, I charge you that you refuse not this holy vocation'*. The preacher then turned to the congregation, *'Was not this your charge to me? And do you not approve this calling?'*

They replied with one voice, *'It was, and we approve it'*. Knox ran out of the meeting in tears, but within a few days he was in the pulpit and what a mighty preacher he became. The question was raised, does the church have a role in the calling?

### Different Views

C H Spurgeon's view was that no one should go into the ministry unless they are compelled by God and could not do anything else. R L Dabney held to the opposite extreme, that anyone who is converted, has the intellectual gifts and gifts of speech should go into the ministry unless they have a good reason for not doing so. Dabney argued that every one of us is to glorify God as much as we can in our work and surely a gifted and godly man can glorify God more as a minister than as a lawyer, doctor, or businessman. If one has an average ability and the church is needing ministers he should offer himself and leave it to the church to turn him down. It would appear best to choose a middle course between these two. A person can surely be disobedient by refusing to obey God's call. On the other hand there appears in Scripture a definite call which is more than the need and the church's appointment.

### God's Call

The Bible teaches the necessity for a call. Paul writes: *'How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!'* (Rom. 10:14-15). Obviously, from this, some are sent and others are not. Similarly he writes to the Corinthians: *'And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues'* (1 Cor. 12:28). It is God who appoints the teachers. This is

confirmed by Paul's words to the Ephesian elders, *'Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood'* (Acts 20:28). Paul speaks of ministers as ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20) and no ambassador is self-appointed.

## **Recognition of God's Call**

Some believe that an individual must receive a divine communication, e.g. a vision, a dream, a voice from heaven, or, more normally, a text of Scripture coming with power and conviction. But how are we to expect God to speak to us today? Gone are the 'diverse manners' by which He spoke to our fathers (Heb. 1:1). God communicates today through the word of Scripture, leading our thoughts in answer to prayer, guiding the church to encourage, receive or reject, and through His providence. Providence is however best read after the event. We look back and we see God opening or shutting the door. God may place trials and obstacles in the way to purify and strengthen. Carey had many obstacles to his going to India but surely it was the call of God.

## **What is the call?**

Generally it is recognised that there are two sides to the call — the internal and the external call. The internal is a burden or desire to be a minister. God is leading and laying this on the man's heart. One can of course be misled. One may be motivated by pride and the prestige of the job. One may be a bit of an actor and like to speak and parade in public. Some may see the ministry as a relatively easy way to earn a living. Also all should have a desire to serve God, to be used in the conversion of sinners and in teaching, edifying and encouraging Christians. It is interesting too to note that both Moses and Jeremiah who were evidently called of God to be prophets had no desire for the work but tried to escape. The external call comes through fellow-Christians and particularly the godly and mature encouraging one to study for the ministry. It also involves the leadership in the church, the elders, the presbytery and the Training of the Ministry Committee accepting the applicant. It is something of which the individual can only be confident when he is inducted as minister of a congregation. But even that is not infallible because we know that congregations can make mistakes just as individuals can. Many have been ordained who were never converted and who have been a curse rather than a blessing to the church of God.

## **Requirements for the Ministry**

There are certain qualifications required of elders and ministers. To some extent these must be found in the applicant, though no candidate is perfect. An elder and a bishop are two names for the same office and the pastor is a teaching elder who gives his time to labour in the Word and in doctrine (1 Tim. 5:17).

1. Obviously the minister must be converted. How can one labour for the conversion of others if one has no saving knowledge of Christ?
2. He must have some desire to serve in the ministry: *'If a man desire the office of a bishop he desireth a good work'* (1 Tim 3:1).
3. An aptitude to study, a grasp of the truth and a yearning to know more is essential.
4. An ability to speak clearly, interestingly and edifyingly is essential. He must be *'apt to teach'* (1 Tim. 3:2).
5. A love for men and women and a zeal for the salvation of souls is vital. Christ is the example and He came *'to seek and to save that which was lost'* (Lk. 19:10).
6. Prayerfulness is vital if a man is to give himself *'continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word'* (Acts 6:4).

7. An outwardly-blameless character, respected by the church and the world is vital: *'A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality ... Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil'* (1 Tim. 3:2, 7).
8. He must be one who exercises restraint and moderation: *'Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous'* (1 Tim. 3:3).
9. He must also rule his own house and family well (1 Tim. 3:4-5).
10. He must be humble, *'Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil'* (1 Tim. 3:6). Pride and seeking one's own glory keeps many blessings away.

### **Case study**

Though Isaiah was called to the extraordinary office of prophet (Is. 6) there are lessons to be learned for all ministers. The future prophet was first given a vision of the awesome glory of God. This produced in him a sense of his own sinfulness and inadequacy. A new appreciation of the altar and the shed blood of Christ strengthened his assurance of salvation. There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1). Now Isaiah was willing to go and God commissioned him. An experience of the greatness and holiness of God and of our own sinfulness is essential for a God-glorifying ministry. R C Sproul writes that all ministerial candidates should be asked of their experience of these things.

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