

What does 'A Call to Ministry' look like?

Matt 9:36-38

When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

The outworking of Jesus' compassion for the lost, those 'harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' is his call for prayer that more workers to be sent into the harvest field. As Jesus continues to have compassion for those he has made, and as the Lord continues to be the Lord of the harvest, so this need for workers to go into the harvest field continues to be an essential need for every generation. The task of caring for the harassed and helpless and pointing them to the good shepherd, Jesus Christ, is an ongoing task, carried out in his strength, until Jesus returns to bring his people home.

To be involved in the work of ministry is a task for all God's people (Eph 4:12). As such the language of being 'called to the ministry' can be unhelpful as every Christian is effectually called and to be engaged in 'the work of ministry.' However, as this terminology is well established it can still be helpful in this discussion if we define it carefully as those who God wishes to set apart for the more formal role and vocation of ordained pastoral ministry and leadership within God's church. Through their word-centered ministry these pastor-teachers are the ones who equip the saints for the work of ministry in its widest range of forms. The need for these under-shepherds who are given pastoral responsibility for God's people remains paramount, as the church seeks to care for its members, and reach out to the lost with the message of Jesus Christ.

So who are those called to ordained ministry, and what does that 'call' entail? It's essential to be able to answer these questions correctly to ensure that not only are workers sent out into the harvest field, but that that right people are encouraged toward the right roles to make best use of the gifts that God has given them for the building up of his church.

When considering what the criteria are for those to be set apart for pastoral ministry it is easy to normalise the accounts of those who went before us, or our spiritual heroes, or even great figures from the bible such as Moses or Paul. While these experiences can be helpful to learn from, the Bible's primary material for discerning who is right for ministry is not the burning bush, nor the Damascus road, but rather the Pastoral epistles written to Timothy and Titus. These short but invaluable letters written by the Apostle Paul show us the shape of pastoral ministry, and the requirements for those who God would place in this role. These requirements are for all elders within the church, and it is worth remembering that those engaged in 'full-time ministry' are not set above their fellow elders, but rather are called to serve alongside them.

A study of these Pastoral epistles presents three general criteria which make up the Biblical components of a call to ministry. These are an internal desire on the part of the individual, the biblical qualifications which are necessary to carry out the task, and the external validation which involves the combined wisdom of the wider church.

Internal Desire

In the apostle Paul's first letter to Timothy, chapter 3 lays out a list of criteria or qualifications required by those who would be involved in leadership. However before getting into those qualities, Paul introduces this section with a more personal issue; that of *desire*. 'The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task' (1 Tim 3:1). The biblical pattern is not that individuals are dragged into ministry against their will, but rather that having considered the cost, this is a role they aspire to and accept willingly (1 Peter 5:2).

However, we must weigh this internal desire or aspiration for leadership carefully. It is possible to desire leadership for the wrong reasons; the temptation to elevate ourselves above others, to build our own kingdoms, or enhance our reputations for our own glory. However, if these lie at the root of desire, then the whole nature of pastoral ministry, which is cross-shaped, following in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd Jesus Christ has been misunderstood. The aspiration to a position of authority in Jesus' church must be rooted in the knowledge that gospel leadership is shaped by the pattern of Jesus, who came not be served, but to serve (Mk 10:45).

The internal desire which makes up part of a call to gospel ministry is well summarised in the questions before ordination of Free Church probationers: 'Are not zeal for the honour of God, love to Jesus Christ, and desire of saving souls, your great motives and chief inducements to enter into the function of the holy ministry, and not worldly designs and interests?' It is the desire which issues from a love for the Lord, for his church, and for the lost, and which seeks to humbly use its gifts in their service, which forms the internal part of a call to ministry.

It is worthwhile noting here that as a more subjective experience the nature and magnitude of this desire may vary from person to person, and even over time within the same individual. Scripture itself does not prescribe how this desire manifests itself, and it is important to take seriously that God has created different people with different temperaments and personalities. One individual may feel a deep-seated certainty that ordained ministry is the only possibility they can consider, while for another there may be more wrestling required for them to conclude that this is the best way they can serve Christ's church. Neither of these are more valid than the other, and it is vital that both be tested according to the biblical qualifications and external validation laid out below. However for both, considering the nature and motivations of their internal desire is an important aspect which often, although not necessarily, marks the first sign of their call to ministry.

Biblical Qualifications

Following on from the internal desire which potential overseers will possess, the apostle Paul then outlines the objective qualifications or characteristics which must mark the leaders of God's church (1 Tim 3:2-7). An exhaustive exploration of these criteria are beyond the scope of this article, but it is worth highlighting what has been highlighted many times before: the Bible's primary emphasis for ministers is on character. It is not acumen for the world of business nor adeptness in the art of entertainment which demonstrates suitability for pastoral ministry, but rather a whole life marked by submission and faithfulness to God's word. Because the task of leadership in Jesus' church is a noble task, it requires those whose lives will reflect that, and have done so over a period of time as a faithful believer (1 Tim 3:6).

The character of those who are called to pastoral ministry must be marked by consistency across both public and private life. Paul brackets the list given in 1 Timothy 3:2-7 by insisting those who would shepherd

God's flock are 'above reproach' (v2) and 'well thought of by outsiders' (v7). However this public reputation cannot be a spiritual veneer, but must continue behind closed doors as '[h]e must manage his own household well' (v4). Leadership in the home (particularly for those who have responsibility for a family, but in all cases managing well one's personal faith) is an essential element to demonstrate suitability for leadership within God's household of the church (v5).

The place where this private and public life is merged is in the requirement for minister to be hospitable. This brings outsiders in, enabling them to see how the faith publicly proclaimed from the pulpit is put into practice in the everyday elements of life. As Paul commends hospitality he invites ministers and would-be ministers to follow his model of ministry, of which he can say 'we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us' (1 Thess 2:8). The biblical qualifications for ministry emphasise first of all not the academic skills that are put to work in the study, but rather that character which is displayed in lovingly sharing life with those placed under their care.

Paul's weight of emphasis on the character of a potential minister, however, means that any 'hard skills' he requires are especially noticeable. Unlike a modern job description giving a list of 'desirable competencies' from which a successful candidate may demonstrate some but not others, Paul highlights only one, non-negotiable skill: that of being able to teach (1 Tim 3:2, Titus 1:9). As it is God's flock whom the minister shepherds, it must be God's word which they are fed.

Paul reminds Timothy in his second letter how in the midst of challenging times and unbelief, in a culture which doesn't value or wish to listen to what God has to say, one task remains constant for the gospel minister: preach the word (2 Tim 4:2). It is this word which brings salvation through faith in Christ Jesus and which continues direct and equip God's people - therefore preaching and teaching it well must stand at the heart of gospel ministry.

In writing to Titus, Paul emphasises that it is the content of this preaching which is of critical importance, not primarily its eloquence or flair. That the 'sound doctrine' of what the bible truly says which must be passed on and if necessary defended (Tit 1:9). In the specific context of the Free Church of Scotland this is shown by an understanding of and adherence to the Westminster Confession of Faith as a systematic outline of this sound doctrine.

The ability to teach is a spiritual gift given by God for the good of his church (Rom 12:7). However, Paul is also clear to his protegee Timothy this doesn't mean that any potential minister will already be the finished article. Instead, Timothy is to '[p]ractice these things, immerse [himself] in them, so that all may see [his] progress' (1 Tim 4:15). This means for those considering ministry, there should be evidence of this ability to preach in nascent form, but also a humble understanding that growth in this area is a lifelong task.

To recognise this spark which is to be fanned into flame, a potential minister must have the opportunity to test this gift in a range of safe environments. This is where the local church must play its role. Is the church leadership pro-actively looking out for those who might show these gifts? What settings are there in which this teaching gift might first be tested? Are congregations willing to listen with a joyful rather than critical spirit to the less experienced preacher who's creases still need a lot of ironing? Is there honest feedback available to truly assess and communicate if this ability to teach is present, and to help direct future improvement so that progress may be seen by all? While remaining intimately involved, are churches will to reach out for help to those particularly experienced in helping bible teachers?

The ability to teach is an essential aspect of a call to ministry. This area, as well as the growth in Godly character required for the role, is one which takes place within, and through the help of the local church and its leadership.

External Validation

Rightly including the local church in the process of an individual's call to ministry leads to the final element of the call to ministry, that of external validation. The general pattern of the New Testament is that it is *churches* who approve and send out workers into the harvest field. Again, this is seen in Timothy who has been set apart for ministry by the laying on of hands of the 'council of elders' (1 Tim 4:14). Whatever else may be happening here, it is clear that the leadership of the church as a whole have affirmed the gifting Timothy has been granted. The church sending out these validated workers (rather than individuals appointing themselves for this task) is also repeated through the book of Acts (see e.g. 11:22, 13:2-3).

This external validation is a key part of a call to ministry as it brings to bear the wider input and wisdom of the body of Christ. In the Free Church this process includes the local church leadership, the presbytery, and the Board of Ministry in order to engage every level of the denomination. But it is in the local church that this process is grounded, as those who know their congregations best seek to recognise those who may have the character and gifts required, even in embryonic form, to be considering full time ministry. It is also local eldership who are best suited to give guidance to those who may feel an inner desire toward full time ministry as together they hold that personal feeling up the light of the biblical qualifications prescribed.

If an individual isn't willing to listen to the Godly counsel of others within the church it raises serious questions about whether they yet possess the humility required to be ordained into the service of God's church. On the other hand, if elders within a church are not able or willing to prayerfully give wise guidance as to whether someone is suited for ministry or not, it raises the question as to how well they know their congregation, as well as their understanding of their role of supporting and building the wider church.

The ideal picture of this external validation is not that of a driving test where someone works through all that's been discussed above before presenting themselves to the church leadership for a pass or fail. Instead it is a journey to be taken together at every step to discern together how someone might best use their own unique gifts to serve God. The church, especially elders within the church, recognising gifting within individuals, and helping those with the desire to lead to explore their motivations and the biblical qualifications laid out. The church disciplining in areas of weakness and encouraging humility in areas of strength. The church providing opportunity and input for people testing their teaching gifts, while also benefitting from their ministry. The church ultimately, through the time spent walking alongside them through this process, able to wholeheartedly affirm an individual as, although not the finished article, called to the vocation of ordained pastoral ministry.

It is as churches produce church leaders, who lead churches that produce church leaders, that workers are continued to be sent out into the harvest field. It's the external validation of the local church and its eldership, as well as the involvement of the higher courts of the church, that helps ensure that those set apart for the role of ordained gospel ministers are the right people as defined by the biblical criteria, in order to do ministry based on the biblical pattern. That is, to reach out to the lost and to build up God's people by both declaring and modelling the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

The need for workers to be sent into the harvest field remains great. This includes those set apart for full time, ordained ministry. Those 'called' to this particular area of service will experience some form of desire toward that role, but this desire alone is not sufficient. Instead the bible, particularly in the pastoral epistles, gives clear criteria for those who would become overseers; and God places his people in a local church whose wisdom is able to help discern if this is how an individual can best serve Christ's church.

The work of ministry is always done in God's strength and for his glory. As such, out of compassion for a lost world, may we continue to pray as Jesus commands us for workers to be sent out into the harvest field. May individuals prayerfully consider whether this might be God's calling on their life. May churches prayerfully recognise, encourage, and guide those with the gifts and abilities the bible requires. And may we pray with urgency but also great confidence, knowing that God will raise up those he has equipped for his work, for his glory, and to fulfil his purposes.