

The Call and Qualifications for the Ministry

by J.C. Philpot

A call to the ministry is a witness in the conscience and the hearts of God's people, accompanied by a backwardness to the work, strong leadings in providence, and sacrifice.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 32:2, Ephesians 6:19, Colossians 4:3, 1 Timothy 3:6, Titus 1:9

Topics: "Divine Calling", "Gospel Ministry"

Description

J.C. Philpot delves into the importance of a divine call and necessary qualifications for the Gospel ministry. He emphasizes that a true call to the ministry involves a deep inward witness from God, a great backwardness to the work, strong leadings in providence, and a willingness to endure suffering and sacrifice. Philpot also discusses the need for grace and gifts as qualifications for the ministry, highlighting the essential experience of the things of God, a clear understanding and defense of truth, and a continual flow of divine life to give power to one's gift.

Transcript

The CALL and QUALIFICATIONS for the Gospel Ministry

by J. C. Philpot

It is evident from observation and experience that a very wide and marked difference exists between ministers of truth, not only in the possession of grace and gifts--but in the amount of the blessing of God which rests on their ministry; and it being no less evident from the word of truth that unless expressly called and sent by God and furnished by him with needful qualifications for the work, they cannot profit his people--it can hardly be considered a serious or unfair digression from our subject if we here turn aside to consider two important points which not only much concern but must ever deeply interest every true servant of the Lord. These two points are closely connected with each other, and are--

1. What is meant or implied by a call to the ministry.
 2. What are the needful qualifications for its exercise to the glory of God and the good of his people.
1. What is meant or implied by a CALL to the ministry. This call need not be so signal and special as that of the Old Testament prophets; or, we may add, of the Apostles under the New Testament, who occupy, as such, a peculiar position.

It is a very difficult and delicate point clearly to lay down what is a sufficient call to the ministry, for many of God's own sent servants, who have been most fully received by the living family as his commissioned ambassadors, have been much tried to make their calling to the work plain and clear to their own satisfaction, while some, if not many, who have spoken great swelling words of their call, are not commended to the consciences of God's own people as sent by him to preach his word at all, and have either been obliged to give up their preaching through positive failure of hearers, or from the thorough wearing out of what little gift they ever had for the work. Thus, when the trembling, exercised servant of the Lord has waxed stronger and stronger, and been more and more established in the hearts and affections of the family of God, these pretenders have become more and more manifest as led by a false spirit, and if not willful deceivers, at least themselves willingly deceived.

When we say this, we wish it to be distinctly understood that we believe every sent servant of God will have, sooner or later, more or less, a witness in his own conscience that he is called to the work, for without some such inward testimony, he must soon faint under its burden, and always speak in fetters and shackles; but it may be some time before he is clearly established in his own mind. And besides this, he must have also a witness in the hearts and consciences of God's living people, who are often better judges of his call to the work than he himself can be, especially when he is under much trial and temptation.

What is thought to be a call to the ministry is more common than many people suppose. In saying this, we purposely set aside all those schemes of human contrivance by which religious young men are manufactured into ministers by the aggregate, and can be sent out to order, to suit any pulpit and any people; and we take as little account of those numerous instances where pride and ignorance, vanity and self-conceit, love of ease, and aversion to hard and daily work, combine, with some natural ability of mind and readiness of speech, to persuade an aspiring youth, that a pulpit is the proper place for him to adorn, and for it to adorn him. Such man-made ministers, and such self admiring beauties, have no place in the Church of Christ, and no place in the consciences of those who know and love truth in its power.

But take the case of one really called by grace in his youth, blessed with the love of God shed abroad in his heart, and possessed of a fair share of ability of mind, knowledge of the Scriptures, and utterance in prayer, private or public. Many if not most of such, in the warmth of their first love, in their liberty of access and freedom of utterance before the throne, in their zeal for the truth in its purity and power, in their strong affection to the family of God, and in their devotedness of heart and willingness to suffer for the Lord's sake, feel such impulses and movements on their spirit as make them long to testify to all who will hear what God has done for their soul, and to give themselves up to his service. But time and circumstances abundantly show them that this was not a call to the ministry, for as their first love declined, these movements towards the ministry declined with it, and they clearly saw that it was not the will of God that they should stand up in his name. It is not, therefore, any or every secret impulse or movement of the mind, even when honest and sincere, or any inward persuasion of the heart or desire for the work which will prove to be a call to the ministry, for many such blossoms drop off and are never matured into fruit. There must be, therefore, other things working together with the feelings and desires that we have named, to constitute a divine and sufficient call.

1. First, then, generally there is a great BACKWARDNESS to the work. We see this in Moses, Jeremiah, Jonah, Habakkuk, and if not expressly mentioned in the case of the other prophets, yet the words so often in their mouths, "The burden of the Lord," show the solemn weight with which the ministry pressed on their spirit. Those whom God calls to the work, he usually so strips and empties, so pulls down, humbles, and

abases, so shows them what the ministry is, and their own unfitness for it--that they shrink back from so arduous and important a work, and can scarcely be persuaded that they are called to it. We need hardly remark how different this is from the forward, pushing, bold, if not presuming spirit which so many manifest in their ambitious aim almost to force their way into the pulpit.

2. Usually, too, there are strong and marked leadings in PROVIDENCE. A train of circumstances has been long at work, which, however obscure at the time, becomes cleared up when the moment arrives for unfolding the secret purposes of God. Hindrances of various kinds, such as business engagements, occupation or employment in life, fixed habitation where there was no door open for the work, opposition of wife or relations, repeated disappointments when the prospect seemed a little clearer, inability to move forward until the pillar and the cloud moved--these and similar hindrances are gradually or suddenly removed, and what was yesterday a mountain--becomes today a plain. All the difficulties are taken out of the way in so marked a manner, and the hand of the Lord so clearly seen, that what once seemed almost impossible is now accomplished in a moment.

3. Usually, too, it entails not only suffering, but SACRIFICE. The laborer is worthy of his hire, and those who sow spiritual things may lawfully reap material wages; but to go into the ministry for a piece of bread, to attain a respectable position in life, to feed a secret thirst for popularity and applause, to occupy a somewhat higher place in the church than a private Christian--to exchange a wearisome, irksome employment for comparative idleness and ease, to have the pleasure of hearing himself talk, to shine as a light, and be a teacher and a preacher instead of being taught and preached to--all such base, unworthy motives stamp a man at once as a hireling. God may, after a season of suffering and sacrifice, honor his servants by giving them such a warm place in the hearts of his people, and such a high standing in the Church of Christ as shall elevate them above their original position.

Bunyan was raised from the tinker's barrow, and Huntington from the coal-barge, to an honored place in the Church of God; but we know through what sufferings, privations, and sacrifices these men of God passed in the first exercise of their ministry, and that though this honor followed, it was not their aim nor object in the first instance. Many, if not most of God's sent servants have had to come down before they went up, and to sacrifice good situations and employments, which, if not lucrative, were either likely to become so, or at any rate exceeded in value anything which they could expect from the ministry, especially in our connection, where the people are usually so poor, and the ministers so lowly paid.

4. Generally, too, where there is a call to the ministry, there will be some distinctive IMPRESSION fastened unexpectedly on the mind concerning it; or some secret, inward persuasion that it is the will of God he should stand up in his name; or some promise applied to the heart strongly looking that way; or some remarkable season experienced in prayer, when access was given to spread all his desires before the Lord, and there sprang up a humble petition to be made use of for his glory, which seemed to enter the ears of the Lord Almighty; or some intimation in hearing the word preached, or reading it in private, from the power which attended it, that a door would be opened to speak in the Lord's name; or some intense longing for the good of souls and earnest desire to be made useful to the Church of God, which seemed as if it would not fall to the ground unfulfilled.

These, and other similar impressions and intimations, are like the leaven in the meal which sets the whole mass to heave, ferment, and work. So through these peculiar impressions there will work almost day and night in the mind of one who has experienced them--exercises, desires, longings, cries, breathings, and petitions to the Lord; and mingled with them, there will be many fears of being deceived by false

impressions, being deluded by Satan as an angel of light, or being impelled to so great and arduous a work by pride, ambition, lust of praise, and distinction, a name among men, or other equally base and carnal motives. But as these fears work, and the cry comes forth, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me," the soul is thus made increasingly honest and sincere, and willing to go or stay, speak or be silent, take up the burden of the Lord or leave it untouched, draw the sword in the vanguard or still tarry among the stuff in the rear.

It may be some years, perhaps, before the way is made sufficiently plain--years of anxious waiting and watching, years of delayed hope until the heart is made sick, years of disappointment and vexation, but all working to a determined end, and gradually preparing the man to become an able minister of the New Testament, and not enter the pulpit as a raw recruit, but as one who can endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ, and contend earnestly for the faith once delivered onto the saints. The Church, alas! is overrun with youths and novices who attempt to teach when they need to be taught; and if ever they learn anything or are ever of any use, learn their business as an ill-taught medical student learns at last a little of his profession--by experimenting on men's souls as he on their bodies, and making a hundred mistakes for one right or successful treatment.

5. There will also generally be, where the Lord has called a man to the work, an impression on the minds of the discerning part of God's people--we say "discerning," for we take no account of the undiscerning and inexperienced who so abound in most churches--that he will one day stand up in his name. This arises sometimes from hearing his experience when he joins the church, sometimes from his peculiar gift in prayer, or his knowledge of and light upon the Scriptures, or his spirituality of mind in conversation, or his firmness in the truth, or his warmth and zeal in defending the cause of God, or his circumspect walk, his separation from the world and general devotedness of life; and all joined with that measure of mental ability which seems indispensable for a man who has to preach the word of God, to instruct the ignorant, edify the Church of Christ, and convince the gainsayer.

Perhaps none of the things which we have mentioned would be sufficient of itself, to be a call to the ministry--but the concurrence of some or many of them, like the flowing of many little rivulets to form one brook, make, by their combination, the purpose of God more plain and clear. Not that all who are truly called to the work can trace out with equal distinctness the marks and proofs of their call, but they can usually record some of those landmarks which have directed their path, and by which they have been led and encouraged to believe that it was by the hand of the Lord.

But we fully believe that, besides these peculiar leadings, every true servant of God will have two witnesses to his call, without which he can never arrive at any real satisfaction that the Lord has himself appointed him to the work. These two witnesses are--

1. The witness in his own bosom.

2. The witness in the consciences of the people of God--with the blessing of God resting upon his ministry.

1. The witness in his own bosom. We lay this down, then, as necessary to a man's being fully persuaded that God has called him to the work, that he will have, at times, the witness to it in his own bosom. The Lord will, at times, so enlarge his heart, and so open his mouth; he will find, at favored seasons, such a pouring in of gracious thoughts and feelings, and such a door of utterance to pour them out in words so suitable and so expressive, as if they were not his own, but were given him at the moment; such a power resting on his spirit to testify of what he has tasted, felt, and handled of the word of life; such a boldness to

take forth the precious from the vile, that he may be as God's mouth; such holy warmth in declaring all the counsel of God, and yet no strange fire in his censer, but coals from the brazen altar; such a firm, solemn, believing realization of the sacred truths which he is preaching, and such a sacred determination that, come what will, please or offend whom he may, he would sooner part with his life than part with the truth of God, as bring with them a sweet satisfaction that the Lord has called him to the work of the ministry.

As these seasons are repeated, with greater or less power, and are contrasted by him with those, perhaps, more frequent times of darkness, when he is so shut up in his soul and the door of utterance so closed that he has scarcely a gracious thought, heavenly feeling, or suitable word--he gathers up an inward testimony that the Lord has, notwithstanding all his weakness and unworthiness, doubts and fears, called him to the work; and the very difference between himself and himself--between himself in the stocks and himself on the tower--himself shut up and himself able to come forth--himself hacking and stammering and himself enlarged with the sweetest freedom of speech--himself full of bondage and misery and himself full of light, life, liberty, and love--this very contrast, which he so plainly feels, shows him only more clearly and distinctly when the Lord is with him and when he is not. And thus, by these very changes in his soul, these goings and comings of the Lord's presence and power on his spirit, he becomes satisfied that he is not warring at his own charges, but has been chosen to be a soldier to fight the Lord's battles.

The way also in which texts are brought to his mind, opened up to his understanding, or applied to his heart; the light cast upon a passage when speaking from it, the suitable Scriptures which are brought to his memory to confirm his views upon it, and the sweet enjoyment which he has himself in or after the time of speaking from it; the secret prayer and meditation on the word which he has before he goes into the pulpit, and the holy savor which often rests on his spirit after the labors of the day; the sense which he has of the blessedness of the work, and his willingness to spend and be spent, labor and suffer, live and die in the Lord's service--these and similar experiences confirm him in the persuasion that the Lord has called him to the work, and is with him in it.

He is brought to see and feel that his very sermons are not his own, and that he cannot preach them again with that life, power, and utterance which were given him with his text; that though he may take the same passage, he cannot handle it in the same way again; that he cannot open it, or enlarge upon it, or enforce it as before; and that he cannot recover even the light which then shone through it, still less the savor which rested on his spirit in setting it forth. But we must not further enlarge on this point, though we could say much on both sides of the question, from our own long and diversified experience of it.

2. But, he must also have the witness in the hearts and consciences of the family of God. Without this testimony from others, his own will be of little avail, for "not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends." "In the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established." (2 Cor. 13:1.) The testimony in his own bosom is the one witness; the testimony in the consciences of others is the other; and the third, we may add, is the blessing of God resting upon his ministry.

This, therefore, we may next bring forward, as stamping a broad seal on his call to the work. Where a man is really called by God to the work of the ministry, his blessing will rest, more or less, manifestly upon the word; power will attend it to the heart of sinner and saint, and the Lord will not allow it to fall to the ground as the mere word of man. There will be, at various times, marked instances of some being called out of darkness into light, of others delivered from bondage into the liberty of the gospel, of others being brought out of temptation and soul distress into a wealthy place--of others specially favored when much cast down with trials and afflictions--and of others being encouraged and strengthened to persevere courageously in

their conflict with unbelief, sin, and Satan.

Besides these special testimonies there will be also a general power and savor attending his word, which will gather and keep together a living people, few, perhaps, in number, but much united to him and his ministry, who highly esteem him in love and cleave to him for his work's sake. We do not speak here of partisans and flatterers--really a man's worst and most dangerous enemies, who cry him up as much as they cry all others down; nor of those weak and silly old women, of all ages and both sexes, who have no experience, judgment, or discernment in the things of God, and can receive almost everything in the shape of a sermon, and everybody in the shape of a minister; nor of those young people, and especially the female part of them, who admire the charms of the man, almost as much as they admire the minister.

But we mean the solid, well-taught, sober-minded, tried, experienced children of God, who know what they hear, and whom they hear, and can tell the difference between chaff and wheat--letter and spirit--word and power--the noxious stench of the creature and the sweet savor of Christ. We will not, indeed, say that every called servant of God will at first, perhaps, obtain this clear witness in the consciences of the Lord's people, or to the extent which we have traced out, for, knowing what man is, and how easy the best may be deceived, they are slow to receive any minister. But, sooner or later, the Lord will establish his testimony to the call of his servant by commending it to feeling hearts, discerning spirits, and living consciences.

2. And now for a few words on the QUALIFICATIONS for the work of the ministry. All must admit that if God calls a man to the work, he will fit him for it; and if he has no such qualifications, there is no reason to believe that God has sent him. But what do we understand by qualifications for the ministry of the word? We may cast them under two simple heads--

1. Grace.

2. Gifts.

1. And first, GRACE. Nothing is more evident than that a man without the grace of God in his heart has neither part nor lot in this matter. A man dead in sin, or dead in a profession, to stand up in the name of the living God to preach to a living people--what daring presumption, what a dreadful contradiction! And yet what troops of men there are, on every side and of every sect, party, and denomination, utterly destitute of the life of God, who call themselves ministers of Christ, and would resent, with the bitterest enmity, the slightest imputation or even suspicion that they are hypocrites or impostors! But all these, whoever they be, Churchmen or Dissenters, or whatever they be, high or low, we must at once set aside as only awful intruders into a work to which they were never called, and for which they were never qualified.

But a man may have the grace of God in his soul--and yet have but little divine, spiritual knowledge of the truth--and little experience of its power. Now no one, who knows what the work of the ministry is, can say that such a 'beginner' is qualified to be a minister of the gospel, and go in and out before the exercised family of God, as a leader and a teacher. We cannot, indeed, say what use God might make of him to beginners, like himself; but one would think that he had better tarry at Jericho until his beard is grown, than go up to Jerusalem with only a little fluff on his chin. "A novice" ("one newly comes to the faith," margin) is expressly excluded from the work of the ministry. As "newly come to the faith," it is assumed that he has faith; but he is not old enough yet in the way to escape being lifted up with pride, or falling into the condemnation of the devil. (1 Tim. 3:6.) And yet what beardless boys are now thrusting themselves

everywhere into the ministry, and presume to teach mature grey-haired saints the way of salvation, who knew the Lord for themselves when these youths were in their newborn clothes; and, what seems worse, are hammered into shape and squared to pattern by a few lectures in Greek and grammar, or run into a mold by a course of what is termed theology, until they are stiffened into pride, and hardened in self-conceit, under what is called a preparation for the ministry. Alas! for any people when "children are their princes, and babes rule over them!" (Isa. 3:4.)

What is needed as a gracious qualification for the ministry is, an experience of the things of God--a spiritual, saving knowledge of law and gospel, sin and salvation, self and Christ, affliction and consolation, bondage and liberty, temptation and deliverance, misery and mercy, the awful depths of the fall, the wondrous height of the recovery. How can a man preach Christ who knows nothing experimentally of his Person, work, blood, righteousness, death, and resurrection? of his beauty, blessedness, suitability, grace, and glory? of his love, and some measure of its breadth, and length, and depth, and height, and of the riches of his free, sovereign, and superabounding grace?

And how can he enter into and experimentally describe the trials, afflictions, temptations, sufferings, and sorrows of the poor afflicted family of God, who is himself at ease in Zion, and knows only what he knows in mere theory, notion, and opinion? A minister attempting to preach without some good experience of the things of God, would be like a pilot taking charge of a ship coming up the Channel, who does not know one headland, lighthouse, buoy, or shoal from another; or like an engine-driver who should presume to drive an express train without knowing what handle to lift of his engine, or how to read aright the instruments. But enough of this. Let us pass on to consider what qualifications are needful in the way of gifts.

2. We consider, then, that wherever God calls a man to the work of the ministry, he will qualify him for it by furnishing him with a suitable and sufficient GIFT. We do not mean mere learning, or education, or great mental ability--though when these are sanctified to the service of the sanctuary they have their place in the work, and are not to be rejected or despised. But what we want is a door of utterance, such as Paul prayed for. (Eph. 6:19, Col. 4:3.) By this is meant not a mere flow of words, which is often but empty chatter, or that readiness and volubility of tongue which weary alike ear and heart--but that sober, solid, grave, sound speech which cannot be condemned, and by which "he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort, and to convince the gainsayers." (Titus 1:9; 2:7, 8.)

A minister should be "apt to teach," (1 Tim. 3:2,) and, therefore, must have some teaching ability in him. But this requires at least such a clearness of thought and speech as shall preserve him and his hearers from being lost in a fog of confusion. The plainest, simplest language is the best; and that a man may have this in the highest degree and yet possess neither education nor learning, we have for witnesses Bunyan and Huntington--those masters of the English tongue in all its native simplicity, beauty, and strength.

But he must also be well established in the truth, and he able to open it up; and, when occasion demands, defend it. Error abounds on every side; and though we do not advocate a controversial spirit in or out of the pulpit, yet a minister should be able to defend truth and expose error. And he should be able to do this in a way simple and yet forcible, so as not to weaken the force of truth, or even, as some do, make it contemptible by handling it in so confused and bungling a manner as to grieve its friends and gladden its foes. It is surprising what force and power there sometimes are in a few simple words, or even in the apt quotation of a text with but little comment upon it. What light will often shine to a hearer through it on the truth, and how before it error will fall as Dagon before the ark.

He should also have a good knowledge of the word, not only as dwelling in his memory--but in his heart and conscience, and be able to open it consistently and experimentally, that he may feed the souls of God's people with milk and honey, meat and marrow, and give them to drink of the pure wine of the grape.

There should be also some order and variety in his ministry, which is best obtained by keeping close to his text, and seeking to open it through its breadth and length, which will much preserve him from unconnected rambling or dropping into the same round of experience, which, however good or sound in itself, becomes after a time wearisome from its very sameness and repetition.

But, above all things, there should be that flow of divine life into his soul, and that continual renewing and reviving of the power and presence of God in his heart which alone can give life to his gift, and make the wellspring of wisdom in him to be a flowing brook, watering, so to speak, both his soul and his ministry from that river of God which is full of water, the streams whereof make glad the city of God. Without this water in him springing up into everlasting life, his gift would soon wither and decay. In his ministry there would be nothing new, nothing fresh, nothing sweet, savory, or acceptable to the family of God.

He may thump his Bible or the pulpit, and try by noise and bluster to make way for his word to the hearts of the people. But he can only give the head-ache, not the heart-ache--stun, weary, and confuse; but his doctrine will not drop as the rain, nor his speech distill as the dew, unless the precious things of heaven, and the goodwill of Him who dwelt in the bush comes as a blessing upon his soul. (Deut. 32:2; 33:13, 16.)

A small gift fed with the life and power of God will not only live and last when a great gift unfed with heavenly oil will wither and decay--but will thrive and grow by exercise and use, by prayer, reading, and meditation--until it shines brighter and brighter, and gives a wider and increasing light.

But our limits warn us to stay our pen. The due qualifications for the ministry is a subject which has much and long exercised our thoughts, and on which we have formed in our own mind some definite conclusions; but we would need some large space to lay them before our readers, even if we should ever venture upon a field so difficult and so delicate. Let, then, these few feeble hints for the present suffice; and sorry indeed would we be if anything which we have dropped on the subject should discourage the feeblest of the sent servants of God, or add the least weight to that "burden of the Lord," which, as his ministers, it is their highest privilege, though often their heaviest trial, to bear for his name's sake.

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