

“The Minister” – 1

XXIII. – XXIV. Texts that Transform

Jeremiah 20:7-10; Ezra 7:10

One bright summer morning as I was riding shotgun in a “Bekins Moving Van and Storage” truck, the driver asked me what I hoped to do with my education once I graduated. The drivers often were curious about us college boys, the summer help. We worked long hours together, often from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., hauling furniture *all day long*. It was brutal but profitable work. Anyway, we’d talk about most anything and everything. I answered, “I think I’m going to go to seminary.” That really peaked his interest. “You gonna be a preacher?” “Well, maybe,” I answered, at that time still tentative about what getting a theological education might mean. Long pause. Finally he said, “Yea.... I hear they make good money.” One thing I was sure of was that ministers, at least legitimate ones, did *not* make good money. I assumed that a call to the ministry meant a life lived on a shoestring. Besides, what kind of motivation was that? Certainly not one which God would bless. Why does a man enter into the ministry? Because one believes one is called. How do we recognize a call in ourselves and others?

It should be clear that the key to the health and fruitfulness of the church’s ministry is its ability to identify and place into leadership the “gifted men” of Ephesians 4:11 ff. It is vital that we find these gifted men upon which the ministry depends. What, then, are their marks? What do they look like?

Internal call

First, the ministers of the church are men with an inward sense of calling to the ministry. They have “heard,” they have *sensed*, they have *felt* the call of God to preach and pastor God’s people. They have an unshakable *burden* for the ministry. We have Old Testament examples of God’s call to Samuel (“Samuel! Samuel!” 1 Sam 3:1-14), to Isaiah (“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Isa 6:1-13), Jeremiah (“I appointed you a prophet to the nations,” Jer 1:1-2:1), Ezekiel (“Son of man, I send you...”, Ezek 2:1-3:27), Amos (“The Lord took me from following the flock... ‘Go, prophesy to my people’,” Am 7:14, 15), Jonah (“Arise, go to Ninevah...,” Jon 1:2, 3:2). The New Testament provides examples of the calls of the disciples (“Follow Me,” Mt 4:18-22; Mk 1:16-20; Lk 5:2-11; Jn 1:40-42), of Saul/Paul (“God of our Fathers appointed you to... be a witness for him,” Acts 22:14-15; 26:16-18; 9:1ff), and of Saul/Paul and Barnabas to the mission field (Acts 13:2, 3).

The call to be bearers of prophetic revelation does not correlate exactly with the call of ministers today. We don’t expect to hear an audible voice. Yet the result is the same: a certain conviction that one is called. When Jeremiah is overwhelmed with discouragement, he states his intention to speak no more.

*⁷ O LORD, you have deceived me,
and I was deceived;
you are stronger than I,
and you have prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all the day;
everyone mocks me.*

⁸ *For whenever I speak, I cry out,
I shout, "Violence and destruction!"
For the word of the LORD has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long. (Jer 20:7, 8)*

See the discouragements of preaching. One is made a "laughing stock," mocked, ridiculed, scorned. Because he proclaims God's word, he is reproached, criticized and derided. The Apostle Paul says much the same. "We are fools for Christ's sake," he says (1 Cor 4:10).

*We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.
(1 Cor 4:13b)*

Yet neither Jeremiah nor Paul can remain silent:

*If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," there is in my
heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding
it in, and I cannot. (Jer 20:9)*

Jeremiah describes an irresistible conviction forbidding him to abandon his prophetic call. It is as a "burning fire" that he feels right down into his bones. He cannot hold his tongue. He cannot hide God's word within. He cannot suppress it. He cannot smother the fire. His convictions overcome his temptation to silence. He cannot contain the burden. He must preach God's word.

Similarly, the Apostle Paul says, “Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Cor 9:16). There is an inward compulsion that propels a man into the ministry.

The first time I ever led a Bible study I was absolutely terrified. Our chapter of Beta Theta Pi fraternity concluded its monthly chapter meetings with a ritual in which we each were given an opportunity to say anything we wanted. Months and months went by before I found the courage to open my mouth. Even then it was only with considerable anxiety that I made the briefest and simplest statement.

My close friend Jeff Reinke was signed by the Detroit Tigers and assigned to a Midwestern farm team. Before leaving he came to me and said, “You have to take over my Bible study at the SAE (Sigma Alpha Epsilon) house,” a rival fraternity. There ensued a week of unrelenting anxiety. I prepared thoroughly. The time came and I walked the short distance to their house like a prisoner to the gallows. We met for about an hour. It went well. Very well. I left with the sensation of a hand going into a glove. I felt I had discovered what it seemed I was meant to do. It felt right. I could explain the Bible and felt some urgency about doing so. That was the beginning of my call to the ministry.

However, that sense didn’t prevent a crisis two years later. I finished my junior and senior years at college and late September journeyed to Trinity College, Bristol, England to study under J. I. Packer. My course of study required a 4-week internship in a local church. Arrangements were made to fulfill my obligation at the St. David’s Broomhouse Church of Scotland congregation in Edinburgh under the Rev. C. Peter White. It was a formative experience. However, the last

Sunday before my internship ended, Mr. White took ill. I would need to lead the service and preach both morning and evening. Just prior to the morning service, a group of 15 or so members would gather in a circle of chairs with the minister to pray for the services. Once we assembled the group stood up, turned around, and kneeled to pray. St. David's was primarily a working-class neighborhood with only a few college-educated members. Yet when they began to pray, I was overwhelmed. Their prayers were so reverent, so God-centered, so humble, so fervent that my superficial piety was exposed. I had never prayed as they had prayed. I was flooded with a sense of unworthiness. I had no business leading them in worship – they should be leading me. What did I think I was doing? I should be listening and learning, not leading.

I stumbled through the services, quite undone by the whole experience. I continued in crisis mode through the May-June quarter and returned to California in July. I said to my college pastor, "I am not willing to be involved in any teaching or leading this summer. I need to just listen and learn." He wisely said to me, "Terry, you will lead and teach whether you want to or not because people will come to you. They will seek from you guidance and leadership. You cannot escape it." That advice helped because it proved to be the case. As conversations took place, I found that I could not keep silent. I was inwardly compelled to lead and teach even on informal occasions. By the end of the summer the crisis largely had passed; I had learned about myself that I could not avoid the ministry. C. H. Spurgeon urges ministerial students that if they can do anything else, do it. If one can be content in any other vocation, then pursue that vocation. There must be "fire in our bones," he says: "a yearning, a pining, a famishing to proclaim the

Word.”¹ Don’t attempt to enter the ministry unless it is impossible to throw off the divine discontent, the divine restlessness that resisting the call creates.

External call

The internal call is alone inadequate. One’s inward sense must be accompanied by external confirmation from the church. The church must recognize a man’s call and then confirm it ultimately by ordination, officially recognizing that God’s hand is upon him.² We have at times had painful but necessary conversations when a man has had a strong sense of a call to the ministry, but upon testing, showed no aptitude for the duties of the ministry. What are the criteria of evaluation?

Appearances

First, we must recognize that those called to pastor and preach are *not distinguished by appearances*. We can’t say, “There is an impressive looking young man. He should go into the ministry.” The Apostle Paul, the greatest of all ministers and missionaries, was not impressive to look at. He preached, he says, “in weakness and in fear and much trembling” (1 Cor 2:3). His detractors said of him, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech is on no account,” or more pointedly in the NASB, “His speech is contemptible” (2 Cor 2:10). I doubt that he would pass a denominational church-planting assessment center though he was the greatest church planter in the history of the church. He contrasts “those who boast about *outward appearance*” and yet are not concerned “about what is in the heart” (2 Cor

¹Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (1875-94; Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2008), 25, 26.

² See pamphlet 11, “The Church’s Public Ministry.”

5:12). It is crucial that we not be swayed by appearances. Jesus warned, “Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment” (Jn 7:24).

The modern world is shifting from a typographic to a pictographic culture, from words to images. Newscasters used to look like Walter Cronkite. They were grandfatherly figures. Now they look like Megyn Kelly, like models. Politicians used to look like Abraham Lincoln, to whom an 11-year-old girl named Grace Bedell sent a letter urging that he grow a beard so he would “look a great deal better” because, as she explained, “your face is so thin.” Now our statesmen look like movie stars. Talk show hosts used to be serious, like William F. Buckley and David Frost. Now they are hip, cool, clever, and shallow. The visual, the image, the appearance, the politically correct dominate.

This outlook can affect the church. Samuel looked at Jesse’s son Eliab and thought, “Surely the Lord’s anointed is before him.” This brought the rebuke:

⁶When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the LORD’s anointed is before him.” ⁷“Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” (1 Sam 16:6, 7)

When looking for pastors and teachers, the gifted men who lead the church, what do we seek? We seek that which is more than skin deep. We must not be fooled by physical stature, good looks, charm, what has been called “presence,” or even impressive rhetorical ability. William

Still (1911-1997), over 50 years the pastor of the Gilcomston South Church of Aberdeen, Scotland, writes that the key to fruitful ministry is a minister who has died to self and committed to the ministry of the word. “There are other factors,” he concedes, citing the example of a “good education,” to which we might add, a pleasing personality, social skills, and oratorical gifts, but he adds tellingly, “These are far easier to come by than this.”³ Indeed. These factors are relatively superficial. Don’t judge by appearances.

Gifted

Second, we must look for preaching and teaching gifts. A man may be a nice guy. He may have a winsome personality. He may be earnest. He may have a pleasing pastoral touch. However, if he can’t preach, he should not take charge of a church. As for gifts, a minister must be “apt” (KJV) or “able to teach” (1 Tim 3:1).

He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

(Titus 1:9)

He must be able to “exhort” (*parakaleō*) and “refute” (*elegchō*, NASB of Titus 1:9). This means that he is able clearly to articulate what the Bible teaches positively and “refute” or even “convince” those who “contradict” “sound doctrine.” This is vital. He must be able to “fill the pulpit,” as we say, the foundation upon which all other ministry is built. Teaching and preaching are the primary tasks of the minister. He must be able to feed Christ’s sheep (Jn 21:15-17). He

³ Still, *Work of the Pastor*, 58.

must “preach the word... in season and out of season.” He must be capable of preaching with nuance, so as to “reprove, rebuke and exhort,” yet with “complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim 4:2). A pastor must be given to study. Like Ezra he must “*set his heart* to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel” (Ezra 7:10). He must be a careful student of God’s word. He must be committed to long hours in the study. He must be a reader, even bookish. Why? Because the approved and unashamed worker is one who is “rightly dividing” (KJV) or “rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). When asked what he would do differently if he could start over again, Billy Graham said he’d study three times as much as he had. “I’ve preached too much and studied too little,” he admitted. Donald Gray Barnhouse (1895-1960), the great preacher at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia in the middle of the 20th century said, “If I had only three years to serve the Lord, I would spend two of them studying and preparing.”⁴

The pastor must be a careful student of the world as well. He preaches into a context and that context includes history and current events. It includes political, literary, social, and artistic developments. He cannot meaningfully apply God’s word if he is unaware of the circumstances into which it is being applied. I once heard John Stott say ministers needed to preach with the Bible in one hand and *Time* magazine in the other. Otherwise, without an ability to address current social and cultural developments, his preaching will degenerate into unhelpful abstractions and platitudes.

⁴ Cited in John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 181.

When a pastor is not a serious student, it will soon enough be evident. His sermons will have no depth. Clichés will abound. The same words and phrases will be repeated over and over. Congregants will tire of his preaching and profit little from it. I’ve heard people complain, “It’s the same sermon every week,” and even, “I could preach his sermon. I know it by heart.” No matter how charming a man may be, no matter how pleasant or even pastoral he may be, if he is not a student, the sermon well eventually will run dry.

Moreover, it is the minister’s task to keep the church theologically on track and sound. If a minister is unsound, it will be very difficult for the elders to keep him from poisoning the church. Once the seminaries abandoned orthodoxy in the early 20th century, the destruction of the churches was only a matter of time. Why? Because the seminaries infected the subsequent generations of ministers whose influence in the churches inevitably would prevail. They might even encounter resistance initially, as many did. Yet eventually the ministers wore down the opposition and won the day. Consequently, we see the Apostle Paul urging Timothy,

O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. (1 Tim 6:20a)

There is a givenness and finality to Christian doctrine. It is a “deposit” which must be guarded from additions and subtractions. To deviate is to “contradict” and “swerve” (ESV) from the truth (1 Tim 6:21; cf 2 Tim 2:18). Again he urges Timothy,

Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴ By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. (2 Tim 1:13, 14)

The “pattern of sound words” is that taught by the Apostles and found in Scripture. It is the “good deposit,” a given body of truth that is normative and authoritative with which the church has been “entrusted” and must be “guarded.” The minister is leading the teaching ministry of the church. He must be a solid theologian.

The priority of the ministry of the word easily may be confirmed by the controversy in Acts 6. Serving the needs of poor widows is important. To this we could add any number of important causes that call for loving, sacrificial care. Yet there is a division of labor in the Christian church. Those with word gifts are not to become distracted by important but secondary needs. Consequently, the apostle made provision for the widows while declaring,

“It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.”
(Acts 6:2)

Spurgeon warns,

We shall never have great preachers till we have great divines. You cannot build a man-of-war out of a currant bush, nor can great soul-moving preachers be formed out of superficial students.⁵

The church, then, looks to confirm through its eternal call the presence of preaching and teaching gifts in those who sense an internal call, understanding that the public ministry of the word lies at the foundation of the whole ministry of the church.

⁵ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2008), 169.