

Called to **PREACH?**

Pondering God's Commission for Your Life

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Introduction

I feel for young men who wrestle with whether or not they are called to the gospel ministry. Such wrestling can be an agonizing experience: it can cause emotional torment; it can become an occasion for your closest friends (who know you only too well as a sinner) to doubt your sanity or question your integrity; and it can make your wife or girlfriend think twice about what she's gotten herself into.

How do you know if you're called? It's a tough question. I remember well a spiritual mentor trying to convince me *not* to become a pastor, believing that if he could dissuade me, I would not be truly "called." I also know of others who have been encouraged, nudged, or even pushed into the ministry against their wishes. An acquaintance was told by family members since his earliest remembrance that he was destined for great things in the ministry, following as he would in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, both well-known preachers and authors. The poor fellow was trapped. He left the ministry a broken man only a couple of years after seminary, unable to handle the pressures in large part because he was overwhelmed by doubts about his calling.

While it is not easy to remedy the problems of pastors already in the ministry, some simple "preventive reflection" may help those pondering entrance into the gospel ministry. I've written this essay for anyone asking questions like these:

- What does it mean to be "called"?
- Why do I need to be ordained? I'm already serving effectively as a layman; isn't that service valid?
- I get nervous praying at men's Bible study; I get the cold sweats making a five-minute "speech to inform." I don't know if I could ever preach a sermon.
- I'm thinking about just being an ordinary pastor. I don't want to be a professor of theology. Why do I need to attend years of seminary and learn Greek and Hebrew?

Obviously, not all of the possible questions are covered in this list, but you get the idea. I hope to help you sort through the pitfalls and keep a clear focus on the important issues you must face as you consider whether God has called you to the gospel ministry.

I've divided this essay into four areas: the priority of preaching, the meaning of ordination, "calling" to the ministry, and the shape of seminary training. In each case, I'll walk you through the issues with Scripture as the guide to our understanding and as the norm for our practice.

Preaching: What's the Big Deal?

As you read this essay, you may begin to wonder about my emphasis on preaching as central to gospel ministry. After all, there are many dimensions to ministry, including youth ministry, educational ministry, and so forth. My stress on preaching will sound strange if you belong to a church whose worship is long on liturgy and short on the sermon, or if you hear preaching that is just plain long (but short on biblical quality), or if in your experience, preaching is pleasant religious talk—nice, but not necessary. You should know up front that I believe preaching to be the throbbing pulse of the ministry. I hope you catch such a vision as you read these pages, because I believe the Bible teaches that there is no task assigned to the New Testament church and to her pastors that is more compelling than preaching the gospel. Miss this and you lose sight of the character of the church, the key to evangelism, and ultimately the means to salvation itself!

Let's look together at how Scripture views preaching.

Preaching in the Old Testament

Preaching, as we know it in the New Testament church, had its roots in the work of the prophets of the Old Covenant. A preacher ought to feel goose bumps at the exalting cry of Isaiah 52:7:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"

The prophet certainly isn't talking about pedicured feet, lacking corns, bunions, calluses, or stubbed and bloody toes. He's talking about preaching, about the wonderful messenger-feet that carry the word of the Lord to God's people. In the Old Testament, preaching was formally likened to the sound of the *shofar* ram's

horn. It was an *announcement* that heralded the truth that God was on the move, that God is King. And, because he is king, he has the royal right to ask for the surrender of heart and life.

That's how the Old Testament portrays the prophets: heralds of the word of the Lord. Official messengers of the King Almighty, the word they bear brings life to all who receive it in faith, but judgment and curse to all who reject it. Listen to what God says in Deuteronomy 18:18-19:

I will raise up for them a prophet like you [Moses] from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account.

This description of the prophet as the bearer of God's life-or-death word is personified nowhere more clearly than in the ministry of Elisha. In 2 Kings 2:19-25, after narrating the transfer of the mantle (symbolic of commission to prophetic office) from Elijah to Elisha, the inspired writer describes the first two episodes in the ministry of Elisha. The first, healing the water of Jericho, certifies Elisha as the bearer of covenant life. The second, cursing the boys of Bethel, authenticates him as the bearer of covenant curse. So closely does God identify his life-giving word with his prophet that Elisha's dry bones renew the life of a corpse hastily thrown into his tomb (2 Kings 13:20-21)!

The same point is made in the book of Jonah. Here we meet a prophet who will not go down in history for his enthusiasm, but who understood full well the power of the prophetic word to bring life. Commanded by the Lord to go to Nineveh (the capital city of Israel's dreaded foe) and "preach against it," Jonah turns tail. After Nineveh repents, Jonah explains why he had been loath to preach in the first place:

O, Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love... (4:2).

Jonah knew that God's word can bring life even to man's enemies. Trouble was, he didn't want Israel's enemies to live!

One more example. In Ezekiel 37, we read that the Spirit of the Lord transports the prophet Ezekiel to a valley of dry bones. There, God assigns a surreal task:

Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, "Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!" ... So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them, and they came to life...(vv. 4, 10).

His point? The preaching of the word is the breath of life!

In sum: during the Old Testament, preaching was called prophecy. It was a life or death matter: when the word-bearing prophet was heard and obeyed, life and blessing followed; when he was rejected, alienation and death resulted. And make no mistake about it, God's word never fails. As the rain and snow make the earth bud and flourish, so the word that goes forth from God's mouth:

It shall not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire, and achieve the purpose for which I sent it (Isa. 55:11).

Preaching in Jesus' Ministry

When we turn to the Gospels, preaching looms even larger. Picking up where the Old Testament left off, preaching is so pivotal to Jesus' ministry that Matthew 4:17 describes that ministry by saying simply: "Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.'" Jesus referred to his commission similarly: "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come" (Mark 1:38). When Jesus preached, the people were electrified. It wasn't because they were daunted by another religious leader. Each day the streets were full of scribes, Pharisees, and teachers of the law; such were routine. No, this man was different; never had they heard such preaching and teaching!

The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him" (Mark 1:27).

The people knew that Jesus was presenting himself as the prophet who had been promised in Deuteronomy 18. That hit hard. And just as conclusively as in the Old Testament, his word demonstrated its momentous power: he cast out demons, healed the sick, raised the dead. All by the power of his word, all to announce the arrival of his kingdom, all to declare that:

The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever (Rev. 11:15b).

Preaching and the Apostles

The life and death urgency of preaching doesn't end with Jesus' earthly ministry, but mobilizes his church. In Luke 9:1-2 we read that Jesus gave the twelve "power and authority ... and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick." Next, in Luke 10, a broader group of seventy-two is sent to every town and place with the stirring reminder: "He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (v. 16). In the Spirit's power, preaching covers the earth with the gospel, like wave upon wave cross a lake after a stone splashes in its center.

After his resurrection, and immediately before his ascension and the subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, Jesus explains his redemptive blueprint:

This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things (Luke 24:46-48).

Catch that? Here is a thumbnail sketch of God's strategic offensive: first, Christ suffered *humiliation* as he died on Passover and was buried on Unleavened Bread; next, Christ rose in *exaltation* as the last Adam broke the dawn of a new world on First Fruits; finally, Christ expands his redemptive program through the

Spirit-empowered *preaching* of the church—celebrating the Feast of Trumpets, bringing the Day of Atonement to all who hear and believe, indwelling his people as the new Temple of the Spirit. He calls his disciples “witnesses” (Acts 1:8): it is a word of commission, not merely of description. Empowered by the Spirit, they preach, and in so doing, purposefully continue his redeeming agenda. Preaching, properly understood, is *how* God is fulfilling *the Mission* to set right all that sin has made wrong. Preaching the gospel is how God reconciles “all things” to himself through his Son (Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:20).

That is the story of the book of Acts. The apostles go to “Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,” preaching in all the languages of the peoples, bringing salvation to all who repent and believe (1:8).

Paul reflects on the role of preaching in God’s redemptive plan when he writes to the Romans. Preaching doesn’t only talk *about* Christ, but may even be said to *save!* “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes...” (1:16). Later in the same letter, he expands:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (Rom. 10:14-15,17 ESV).

Preaching and the Church Today

In the last section I likened the preaching of Christ, the disciples, and the church to concentric waves created by the splash of a stone in a pond. The first ripple was Christ’s own preaching, recorded in the Gospels. Acts describes the next wave in the ministry of the apostles. Each wave grew larger than the first as the church accomplished “greater things” than Jesus himself had done (per his promise in John 14:12).

You get a sense of the force of the gospel wave when you read Paul’s instruction to young pastor Timothy. He commands: “In the

presence of God and of Christ Jesus ... I give you this charge: Preach the word...!" (4:1-2). His charge exposes the tight connection between preaching and the Bible. Now as then, the way God will work in gospel redemption is the way of the word of God.

Peter, like Paul, grasps this mysterious power. He is bold to claim that regeneration—being “born again”—is a function of God’s word, again linked with preaching:

For you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.... And this is the word that was preached to you (1 Peter 1:23,25).

I should observe, before finishing this section, that preaching, understood biblically, is a much bigger thing than the formal “sermon” on Sunday morning. That, in some churches, has taken on the character of a theological lecture or a class in adult discipleship, and in others an inspirational talk. Preaching in the Bible has always had the character of “royal announcement,” something to be heralded publicly *because the King has come*. Such royal declarations certainly involve weekly worship gatherings, for the King does indeed claim a people as his own. Yet, preaching-as-royal-proclamation must also take place in some decidedly non-worship settings, as Paul’s preaching in Athens on the Areopagus illustrates (Acts 17:23).

This brief review of Scripture has had a single purpose: to convince you that God thinks preaching is much more important than most people do. For God, preaching is a big deal, bearing “the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes.” As Paul writes:

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.... For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Cor. 1:17-18).

If you conclude that you are called to preach, be thrilled! But tremble too! What you will preach is powerful.

For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are

being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? (2 Cor. 2:15-16).

Who indeed?

The Badge of Ordination

Reading about the redemptive purpose and importance of preaching, you might be tempted to respond with a bit of indignation: “Hey, the common believer is important, too. You don’t have to be a preacher to serve the Lord!”

No argument here. In fact, one of the most gratifying things we observe in the broader Christian community lately is a growing commitment to the notion of the “office of every believer.” What is meant by that term is that each Christian is called to follow Christ by living his or her life in all its facets in the service of God. Many Christians who grew up believing that there was a wide gulf separating sacred from secular and clergy from laity now understand that all of God’s people, not just a select few, are given spiritual gifts to be used in his service; that all of life, not just church, is the arena of service to the King of kings. Rich, meaningful, and to the point are the words of question and answer 32 of the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the most beloved of the creeds of the Reformation:

Q. But why are you called a Christian?

A. Because I am a member of Christ by faith, and thus a partaker of his anointing, that I may confess his Name, present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to him, and with a free and good conscience fight against sin and the devil in this life, and hereafter reign with him eternally over all creatures.

Affirming the office of every believer does not prevent us from affirming as well the calling and mandate that God gives to the work of pastor or preacher in the New Testament church. Ephesians 4:11-12 explains the relationship:

It was he [Christ] who gave some to be ... pastors and teachers, *to prepare God’s people for works of service*, so that the body of Christ may be built up....

An illustration will help make the point. People who grew up in the middle of the last century may remember the neighborhood policeman—the “beat cop.” In those days you didn’t hear much of police brutality or corruption (though it surely existed); neither was society so mobile and dangerous that police needed squad cars—sheet-metal shields for the gladiators of today’s streets. Then cops were visible, known well in the neighborhood they patrolled, trusted friends. The kids gathered around the cop on the corner, hypnotized by the gun in its leather holster, impressed with the shining badge on his breast pocket.

Many of us grew up watching the policeman stand in the middle of a busy intersection to direct traffic. Seemingly impervious to the dangers of swerving cars or failing brakes, he stood his ground, conducting with movements of absolute authority—Leonard Bernstein could not have done better with the Philharmonic! Seldom was his authority challenged; when it was, a steely glare put the fear of the law back into the driver’s heart.

As we grew older, however, the intrigue waned. We learned to drive, mastered the rules of the road, and discovered that directing traffic at an intersection was not as complicated as, say, neurosurgery. There were times, frankly, when we all believed that any ordinary citizen could have done as good a job as the officer did.

There was only one difference. He had the badge and we didn’t. And that made all the difference in the world. The badge authorized him. It, and the commission it represented, gave him the duty and the right to enforce the law, to bring order amid the chaos of the city. It was his seal of ordination.

The same idea operates in Scripture concerning the office of preacher.

Anointing in the Old Testament

Early in Israel’s life as a covenant nation, God set apart certain persons and things for special service to him. In Exodus 30, amid the instructions for crafting Tabernacle utensils, God provided a

recipe for “holy anointing oil.” Then he says:

Use it to anoint the Tent of Meeting, the ark of the Testimony, the table and all its articles, the lampstand and its accessories.... You shall consecrate them so they will be most holy, and whatever touches them will be holy. Anoint Aaron and his sons and consecrate them so that they may serve me as priests (Ex. 30:26-30).

Clearly, consecration to this special service did not imply that only these utensils and individuals mattered to God, nor that he expected less in the way of loving and obedient service from his people as a whole than from them. Quite the opposite was the case. These were “set apart” to remind, instruct, and enable the entire congregation that Israel as a whole was to “be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Lev. 19:2).

Later in Israel’s history, anointing was extended to the other offices of *king* and *prophet* as well. In 1 Samuel 9:16 the Lord commanded Samuel to anoint Saul as king; in 10:1 we read that he is to be “prince over his [God’s] heritage” (ESV). A remarkable notion, indeed! But Saul failed in his task, so God instructed Samuel to anoint David.

So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him [David] in the presence of his brothers and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power.

Prophets also were ordained to office. God instructed Elijah to anoint his successor Elisha (1 Kings 19:16). Whether or not he used oil is not clear (I assume he did, but the text is silent); what is clear is that the prophetic mantle or cloak he wore was the sign of a special commission before God and the people. As a sign of consecration, he threw it around Elisha’s shoulders (1 Kings 19:19). When Elijah was taken to glory, the cloak fell into Elisha’s hands (2 Kings 2:13f.) and served as witness to the transfer of ordination responsibility and authority. Elisha now wore Elijah’s mantle and thus bore the word of the Lord. Attended by the Spirit, he exercised prophetic authority. His task? To remind the people of the Lord that *they* were his special possession, called to live by his word as before his face.

Ordination to special office in the Old Testament in no way negated the office of each believer. The offices were given by God to equip and enable the faith and service of the whole believing community.

Anointing in the New Testament

Jesus' ministry cannot be understood apart from ordination. He frequently spoke of having been sent. His baptism was the seal of his commission: Jesus was set apart by his Father to "fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). Such was his office.

Only a few chapters later, Jesus marvels at the faith of the centurion at Capernaum (8:10)—a faith remarkable because the man understands ordination. Jesus held a special position as the authorized One of God, the One who possesses the conferred authority (Greek: *exousia*) of the Father, the One who has merely to "say the word, and my servant will be healed." Indeed, faith is just that: acknowledging that Jesus is "the Christ," the One sent and anointed by God to fill the special office of Messiah (see 1 John 4:2-3). To receive and believe him is to enter fellowship with his Father!

In the first chapter we traced Jesus' commission to his disciples to preach the gospel. Now we see that this assignment to preach involves *office*, a commission that comes cloaked with authority. In Matthew 10:1 we read that Jesus "gave them authority." Matthew had a choice of words to describe this authority. He used the word "*exousia*," referring to "conferred authority," the authorization to speak or act in someone's name. The disciples are to cast out demons, heal the sick, raise the dead, explaining that God's kingdom has come. They are to do this in Jesus' name (v 1, 7-8). No power on earth can stop them, not even demons or death, for they speak as Jesus did, with the authority of God himself. Such was the basis for the Great Commission: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go..." (Matt. 28:18-19).

The apostle Paul, himself called and commissioned by God on the Damascus road, is highly conscious of his ordination. Although he

does not want to “pull rank” on the Corinthian church, for example (2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10), he will not hesitate to do so if it is necessary to build them up in their faith. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, he defends his office by claiming to speak as one “approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel” (2:4). He also commends them because

when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe (2:13).

Following Paul’s instructions, pastor Timothy too must be conscious of his ordination. In Paul’s letter to this young man, he assigns many urgent pastoral duties. All of these require an authority which timid Timothy must remember. He is, for example, to “command and teach” (1 Tim. 4:11), to “rebuke” sinners publicly (1 Tim. 5:20), to “warn” them (2 Tim. 2:14), to “preach ... convince, rebuke, exhort...” (2 Tim. 4:2). All of this is only possible because Paul had ordained Timothy to office (2 Tim. 1:6), laying his own hands on him as a sign of the *exousia*.

* * * * *

In sum, God calls his church to be “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.” Such a calling—given to *all* members of Christ—does not negate the special assignment given to *some* to preach the word of God. Such is the calling of the pastors and preachers of Christ’s church. Such may well be yours.

Let’s look more closely at this matter of “calling.”

Are You Called to Preach?

“Okay,” you say, “I understand that preaching is more than just speaking about what God did once, that it is in truth the powerful but mysterious means God uses to redeem. And I’ll even accept the fact that God calls some to special office in his church in order to equip and help believers live for Jesus. But *how can I know if I am called to preach?*”

Fair question. In this chapter we’ll look at the subject of “calling,” examine ways it has been understood in the past and in the present, and the way Scripture would have us view it.

The Idea of “Calling”

In the history of the Christian church, several different notions of calling to the ministry have been popular.

The Roman Catholic notion grew out of the worldview of medieval Europe. The church hierarchy believed itself to be the presence of the “sacred” in a “secular” world; her clergy were the priests that dispensed “grace” to people who lived in the realm of “nature.” This split-life view saw a difference in kind and quality between clergy and laity. The clergy possessed authority over the laity (usually spiritual authority, but sometimes very political—the Vatican is a sovereign state, for example, and throughout European history struggles between the Pope and kings involved bloodshed over political authority). Within this dualistic worldview, “calling” to such authoritative office in the church was seen as something *external*; that is, one was called to a career by the church, and authority was conferred by her through the hierarchical chain of command.

A different understanding developed in reaction to Rome. Rightly cherishing the office of every believer, and carefully noting many variations of ministry within the church, this view links

calling merely to the requisite spiritual gifts for ministry.

A third view of calling, typical of modern fundamentalism, argues that nothing *external*—neither church nor gifts—plays a significant role in calling someone to gospel ministry. All that matters is one’s *internal* sense of call. If the Spirit moves you to preach, neither academic competence, seminary training, nor denominational approval are relevant.

What Does the Bible Say?

Each of the perspectives on calling to the gospel ministry described above has a point to make: the church does “lay hands” on a man, commissioning him to office. A man should reflect certain skills and gifts enabling him to preach and teach. And a man should be gripped by a Spirit-led passion to preach. But none of these stand alone. The church’s imprimatur alone doesn’t make a preacher. Gifts alone don’t qualify a preacher; some of the same gifts could just as easily enable one to sell vacuum cleaners. And the “internal” unction can be misread; it might merely be love for Christ, not a calling to office. What is needed for the fuller picture is biblical balance. We find that balance in the nature of the Triune God who calls men to his service.

God reveals himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When the church confesses that God is Father, she confesses, among other things, his creative power. By that we mean that God the Father endows all of creation with life, calling it into being according to his sovereign will and plan. He creates all things, making man “in his image” (Gen. 1:26). Being made in God’s image, however, does not mean that all humans are carbon copies of each other. He creates each with individual capabilities. Some of us have an inborn talent for musical composition, others for mathematical precision. Some are gifted with words, others with their hands. Some learn well in school, others learn better by experience. Some have tender hearts, some computer-like minds.

All of this has a direct bearing upon “calling” to gospel ministry. Those called are called by the Father, and that calling is reflected

in his granting the gifts required for ministry. Identifying those qualifications involves *personal and communal* reflection about yourself. You must look deeply and honestly at what Scripture asks of a pastor. Read carefully 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus to get a good sense of the requirements. Then, with the help of honest brothers and sisters in Christ, take an inventory:

- Be honest about your *intellectual* abilities. If you can't cut it in college, or are unable to master biblical languages, think twice about the gospel ministry! Preachers must be able to discern the spirits of the age, and must be able to "rightly divide the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). That requires analytical and linguistic skills, and the ability to communicate the findings of careful study in a clear manner.
- Examine your *personality and temperament*, and measure both over against the duty of a pastor to be "ready in season and out of season" (2 Tim. 4:2). The ministry is challenging; Paul observes Timothy's timidity and cranks up his courage regularly. The ministry is also a calling in which you must get to know, and to love, God's people. I once had a colleague tell me, when he was contemplating leaving the ministry, "I really love the ministry. I just don't like people!"
- And don't neglect a *spiritual* inventory: far too many of those who enter the pulpit do so as therapy for their own doubts, or out of a desire to discover the truth about their own salvation, or to assuage their own guilt, or because they believe that the ministry is a guaranteed ticket to glory. At the risk of sounding obvious, stay out of the ministry if you aren't convinced yourself of the truth of the gospel! I am amazed at the preachers who ascend the pulpit and open a Bible whose infallibility and inspiration they openly doubt. If you don't believe what you preach, don't preach!

We also confess in faith the second Person of the Trinity: Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Lord of the church. By that we mean that God not only offered his Son as the atonement for our sins, but he also receives us by grace into the fellowship of his Son's church. The Bride and the Bridegroom are inseparable. Our unity with the head is a unity that takes concrete form in the church of Jesus.

This too has a bearing on understanding calling. If God calls

you to the ministry of the word, you will hear his calling at least in part through the voice of the church, his Son's Bride. In the Old Testament, the prophets (like Samuel) were informed directly by the Lord whom to anoint as king or prophet. In the New Testament, the church is involved in the process. No matter your personal abilities, if the church of the living God does not confirm your self-evaluation with its own, you are not approved.

How? First, according to 1 Timothy 3, the church is expected to test men for elder or deacon, employing standards heavily weighted with *track record* and *character* requirements. Second, the church "calls" those it has tested and believes to be equipped.

This does not restrict anyone from Christian service. All believers are called to serve the King, living life "on the witness stand," bearing testimony to his gospel. Yet, only those who meet the requisite standards for office can be called and commissioned to be his heralds.

So you must pass a "church check":

- Are you a faithful member of a Bible-believing church, under the care of the elders of that church?
- Do the elders encourage you to pursue the gospel ministry?
- Do your fellow believers think you have the requisite gifts, abilities, and devotion to serve?

Third, we confess God the Holy Spirit. In addition to the Father who equips, and the Son who voices his call through his church, we believe that God the Holy Spirit awakens within a man's heart a sense of spiritual compulsion once referred to as "divine unction." Paul described it well:

... when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (1 Cor. 9:16).

I believe with all my heart that unless you are gripped with that divine unction, you must not preach. I mean that seriously. Unless you are under the compulsion of the Spirit who fills your heart with urgency and desire, you have no commission. The church of the Lord needs preachers who feel the prophet's compulsion, the fire

in the belly—kindled by the Spirit—that gives steely resolve for the hard days of the work of the gospel. A man can't preach the life-giving word of the Lord unless the Holy Spirit gives him utterance. But if the Spirit has him aflame, he will never burn out. Such fire is inextinguishable!

“Calling to preach” is not an amorphous, indefinite thing after all! You can be confident you are called by God if:

1. you have been equipped by the Father with the requisite intellectual and spiritual gifts, and
2. the Lord's church confirms your self-evaluation based on her knowledge and observation of your character, faith and life, and
3. you sense within your heart the moving of the Spirit of God, coercing you by divine influence so that you cannot live unless you follow his lead.

I hope that some of you who read this essay will come to know yourselves called of God to the preaching ministry. The gospel offensive can use men like you! May God provide for your every need and direct you to the calling of his choice.

I also expect that, while reading these words, others of you may become convinced that you are not called to preach. Wrestling with the “call” is sometimes an agonizing process; learning that God would rather use you in another valuable ministry will give your heart peace.

And for all of you, whether called to preach or not, I raise this prayer of the apostles to our God and Father: “Now, Lord ... enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness...” (Acts 4:29).

Seminary Training: Why and How?

Many men in North America who love the Lord deeply, who believe they are called to the gospel ministry, and who want to offer themselves in his service, are detoured in their active pursuit of the gospel ministry because they are intimidated by the thought of three or four years of seminary education after the rigors of college. You may be one of them.

When first I wrote this monograph, I wrote from the assumption that the North American graduate seminary was the norm for training pastors/preachers. Subsequent exposure to the broader kingdom has corrected that assumption. I've learned that over 90% of the pastors and preachers around the world have no training for gospel ministry beyond rudimentary discipleship. The church I currently serve actively supports ministries trying to develop delivery systems for pastor training. One of the most promising systems is transmitted via cell phone, ubiquitous around the globe. Surprised? You should not be; the kind of training offered in graduate seminaries in North America is beyond the wildest dream of most pastors in the world—and likely far beyond their ability.

For example, in China, where the house church movement grew from a persecuted few in 1976 to an estimated 125 million in the first decade of the 21st century, seminary training as I had known and experienced it does not exist. Learning this, I had to wrestle with the question of whether seminaries—as we define them—are, in fact, necessary.

I've concluded that seminary training—certainly in North America—is indeed a great blessing, one that we ought to cherish. But it is a training that must be honed; it must grow to serve the specific needs of the mission of God in our time. The culture into which we are called to minister the gospel is highly articulate, well educated, culturally influenced—and as pagan as the first and second-century world into which the early church was sent. Yet,

most churches in the West—and most of their seminaries—have focused seminary training to equip students to engage differing expressions of Christendom, but not so much to engage today’s neo-paganism. We’ve taught students why we dispute Roman Catholicism on the one hand, and Arminianism on the other. We’ve critiqued the Charismatic movement and Pentecostalism, and exposed the cults. But we’re stunned into silence with an entire generation of people who grew up in church, and have opted out.

Ministering the gospel into today’s post-Christian pagan culture is to aim at a different target, one that requires new Scriptural and theological skills. Allow me to give you an example: to engage a winsome dialogue with highly intelligent unbelievers, we can no longer presume a common “meta-narrative,” a base knowledge of the overarching plot of God’s redemptive history. We must argue for it, skillfully tell it, and become teachers and advocates of it. Teaching theology is still vitally important, but absent the Bible’s redemptive narrative framework, theology makes no sense. It sounds like church-speak, irrelevant religious jargon that non-religious people find offensive.

New pastoral skills are needed. Preaching God’s word into such a culture requires evangelistic and apologetic nuances not necessary even a few decades ago. Likewise, pastoral care of believers who live life in a non-covenantal, individualistic context requires shepherding strategies never before needed.

All of these factors have convinced me that seminary training is more urgent today than ever before. They have also convinced me that seminary training must be solidly grounded in the unchanging gospel, yet flexible enough to equip students to adapt strategy and ministry styles in order to advance the mission of God in such a time as this.

Let’s take a look at the biblical evidence that should shape such training. Paul’s letters to Timothy are the place to begin.

The apostle Paul argues that pastoral training flows from two closely related mandates. They are the twin charges to *preserve the true doctrine* and to *preach and teach the word of God*. These give us good insight into what constitutes the skeletal requirements of a seminary curriculum.

In the first place, a pastor must be a servant who *preserves* the true doctrine of Christ, and teaches the church to do the same. The first three chapters of 1 Timothy are doctrinal utterances expressed clearly and forcefully, and given so that “you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (3:15). Church and truth are inseparably connected: doctrine is at the heart of her life; she exists for the sake of its proclamation!

Then, in chapter 4, Paul becomes more pointed in his instructions to the young pastor. He describes the apostasy and deceit that will characterize the “later times”—our times—and then says, with repetition for emphasis:

If you point *these things* out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed (v. 6).

Command and teach *these things* (v. 11).

Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers (v. 16).

It should be clear what the apostle is saying. The survival of God’s people in times of great wickedness, when “some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits,” depends upon pastoral leaders holding fast to the doctrines and truths that they have been taught and must pass along.

Doctrine matters. Without orthodoxy (lit. *right doctrine*), life is built on shaky footings. Without sound doctrine, the living of the Christian life degenerates into godlessness. Doctrine provides the roots for the tree, the foundation for the building, the strength for the body.

The same note sounds in 2 Timothy. In chapter 1, Paul calls himself “a herald and an apostle and a teacher” of the gospel. It is this gospel that he charges Timothy to “keep as the pattern of sound teaching,” to guard as “the good deposit that was entrusted to you” (vv. 13-14). Here the apostle uses a pair of metaphors. On the one hand, Timothy is to keep and preserve the biblical doctrines because

they provide the model, the example, the standard by which all truth and life are to be tested. If you construct a building, you use a blueprint. If it's not reliable, your building will be malformed. If it is an accurate standard, and if it's followed properly, construction will succeed.

On the other hand, Timothy is to “guard the deposit entrusted to him.” This metaphor suggests that the biblical story (the meta-narrative that serves as the base component of a worldview) and biblical faith and doctrine are together the inheritance entrusted to the faithful. Timothy then, and churches and seminaries now, are accountable for the safekeeping of the sacred trust.

So, the core requirement for the training of faithful pastors, and the first essential in a biblically obedient seminary curriculum, is faithfulness to biblical teaching. Never has such a statement been more urgent than in our relativistic generation, an age in which true and false, right and wrong, are said to “depend upon your perspective,” an age in which it is considered arrogant to think that Scriptural truth is absolute truth, truth that applies to everybody else as well as yourself.

Yet in addition to preserving orthodox doctrine, a seminary must be a trade school, developing and sharpening skills that will equip students to do ministry. Not only must the doctrines of the gospel be held, preserved, kept, and guarded; they must be passed on, proclaimed effectively, and applied skillfully to the faith and life of the community of believers and to its world.

In 1 Timothy 4:12-16, Paul details for Timothy, youthful and likely timid about his calling, just how he is to communicate the gospel: “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.” This verse identifies Scripture with the *content* of the truth, and it links the text of Scripture (what is read publicly) to the *practice* of preaching/teaching the truth.

That's why it is no surprise to find, in Paul's second letter to Timothy, the characterization of a preacher as a “workman [laborer] ... who correctly handles the word of truth” (2:15). The metaphor pictures the preacher as a brick mason who builds on the foundation using the words of Scripture as his tools. When he handles them correctly, as he has been trained to do, he builds

God's disciples plumb and true.

Timothy is also to develop combat skills: he is to wield Scripture, a powerful weapon because it is "God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (3:16).

Such knowledge of and skillful use of Scripture is the standard for additional ways a seminary ought to structure its curriculum.

- Paul commands Timothy to "teach" Scripture (2 Tim. 2:24; 3:16; see 2 Tim. 4:11). An aspiring preacher/teacher must know how to teach. He must be able, "with great patience and careful instruction" (4:2), to set the course for God's people in both doctrine and life. That means he must be trained in and become skilled at communicating the "what" and the "how" of faith and Christian living.
- Paul commands Timothy to "correct, rebuke, and encourage," reminding him that Scripture is profitable for just such things. Simply put, preachers must learn how to "counsel." That doesn't mean modern humanistic psychology based on secular values; it means instead that they must learn how to apply Scripture to correct the erring, rebuke the sinner, and encourage the weak and faint-hearted.
- Paul enjoins Timothy to "preach the word" (4:2). As we saw above, this command lies at the heart of God's redemptive strategy. Correspondingly, training men to preach ought to lie at the heart of a seminary curriculum, pulsing through the veins of every course. Further, Paul specifies that Timothy is to preach *the word*. Accordingly, seminaries should teach—and aspiring preachers should learn—preaching that is textually-governed and thematically-organized. That's the kind of preaching that grips the heart and stirs the soul to action.
- Paul instructs Timothy to "be sober-minded, endure afflictions ... fulfill your ministry" (4:5 ESV). That requires spiritual self-control as fruit of a vibrant personal faith. He must believe the deep things of the Lord, following Paul in loving Christ and in fighting the good fight. Every aspiring preacher must develop and evidence these spiritual qualities of maturity and perseverance. Every one must live filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18), never attempting to do the work of the ministry in the strength of the flesh. A seminary, accordingly, should be a spiritual greenhouse,

nurturing personal spiritual vitality, prayer and wisdom in its students. That may sound obvious; yet far too many students testify that a seminary career is a difficult spiritual trial. I've heard of seminaries in which a devotional attitude is lacking, where the Bible is treated merely as an academic resource, where prayer life suffers, in which love for the Lord's church wanes. Such schools are a wilderness, not a greenhouse; they wither the plant of faith, from root to branch. Avoid such places like the plague.

- Paul commissions Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist.” That implies two related responsibilities. First, an aspiring preacher must work diligently for the saving of souls, driven by a passion for the lost. The seminary must teach him to call people to repent and believe, not just invite them to go to church, and train him thoroughly in how to do that. Second, he must burn with the desire that Christ transform all of culture—the realm of powers, institutions, and ideas—with the gospel. Accordingly, the curriculum must provide broader conceptual training, using God's word to frame a holistic worldview and, at the same time, “demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God” so that we can boldly “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5).

The curricula in some seminaries today are barriers rather than vehicles to an effective gospel-preaching ministry. Too many have chosen to be theological graduate schools instead of preacher-training schools that fit the instructions of Paul to Timothy. From what I've written above it should be clear that I'm not opposed to the academic; on the contrary, academic ability is one of the criteria I suggested earlier as a benchmark by which you can evaluate your calling. However, there is a parting of the ways between a school designed for theological post-graduate studies, and one designed to train and equip preachers to minister the gospel into this neo-pagan world. And among those schools that aim to do the latter, there is a difference of opinion about what that training involves. The points I've stressed in these pages should enable you to discern the types, and among them, to identify the direction and focus of a particular institution.

This final chapter has, I trust, made two things clear: first,

that seminary training is urgent for those who would preach the gospel, and second, that it ought to be training designed according to the patterns and emphases of the Pastoral Epistles. I hope I've convinced you of the former, and defined the broad shape of the latter.

May the Lord grant you clarity of mind and heart in your prayerful musings, and, if he has chosen you to preach his redeeming word, direct you to a school that equips you to be a faithful servant of God's great gospel.

