

“IT’S YOUR CALL”

That theme is intentionally ambiguous. In the vernacular it means: “it’s your decision to make.” You make the call. In ecclesiastical circles it refers to your vocation. You are pastors. That’s your call. In this presentation, I intend to incorporate both significations. We’ll begin with a review of what your call entails. Then I will invite you to make the call with regard to how faithfully and zealously you are pursuing your vocation. The emphasis will be practical rather than doctrinal. To begin we will examine the attitude which a pastor with a divine call will want to display toward his life and his work, and along the way we will consider some of the relationships a pastor will want to establish with the people he serves.

Gospel Ministry, - Attitudes

To insure the propagation of the gospel, the Lord of the church instituted the ministry of the Word, commissioning his church to preach the gospel. “You will be my witnesses,” was the Lord’s statement of fact to his followers on the day of his ascension. (ἔσεσθε is a future indicative, not an imperative). We can read that as a promise. This ministry takes two forms which are related to each other as species to genus. They are the *personal* and the *public* ministry. Though not directly, Jesus was addressing us too when he said, “You will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). So was Peter when he said, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pt. 2:9). That is the *sedes* for the universal priesthood of the believer. It makes clear to us that every Christian has a part as a minister in the ongoing ministry of Christ’s church.

The other genus of the species is the public ministry. Public ministry is a representative ministry exercised only by those who have been specially called to preach and to teach in Christ’s name. Speaking of this ministry, Paul told Timothy, “If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task” (1 Tm 3:1). This public ministry is conferred by a call. “How can they preach unless they are sent?” Paul asks (Rm 10:15).

This call authorizes those who minister to speak out not only *to* the church, but also *for* the church, on its behalf, as its representative. In ordinary affairs, it would be presumptuous of us to speak on behalf of someone without being authorized to do so by that person. It would be just as unethical for a person to presume to speak for a Christian congregation without proper authorization to do so. Your call provides you with that authorization. But before we proceed to the practical aspects of pastoral ministry, a further word about your personal ministry.

Personal Ministry in the Light of Scripture

“To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps” (1 Pt 2:21). With those words Peter puts into proper perspective our calling into a personal ministry. We are followers. Paul calls it mimicking God as dear children (γίνεσθε . . . μιμηταί Eph 5:1). We *re-present* our Lord to the world of which we are a part. Together with all Christians, we are ambassadors, no less, of the One who came not to be ministered unto, but to minister and to give his life as a ransom for a lost world. You and I are windows to the world through which others may look to get a glimpse of the living Spirit of Jesus Christ. And because we are pastors, because Jesus has spoken to us personally, not only through his Word, but also through his church, honoring us with a call to help him build and extend his kingdom, we have reason to be larger than ordinary windows. We will want to be spacious picture windows, not just little peepholes. Jesus expects that of us. Nowhere does he tell us to conserve the candlepower with which we let our light shine through the windows. Nowhere does he tell us not to exceed a certain limit in serving him. His claim is a total one. Those who know that they have been bought with a price also know that they have no hours they can call their own, or anything else for that matter (Ps 24:1). They know that Jesus meant it when he said, “Whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mk 8:35). And they know he wasn’t speaking parabolically when he said that unless we

willingly forsake all that we have, we cannot be his disciples. Nor was he speaking with tongue in cheek when he talked about putting hands to the plow with a warning not to look back. Those who live in 21st century Sodom are reminded to remember Lot's wife.

So if you are Christ's own, your commitment to him is complete. That's part of your attitude. You hold nothing back. And you don't ever think of this as your obligation to him. God forbid! It's your *pleasure* to be his love-slave. That is what *διακονία* is all about. Your surrender to him is like that of a virgin bride to her bridegroom. Doesn't the Bridegroom himself use that to picture our relationship to him? When once the effective call comes, the *μετάνοια* as Paul calls it, so that the natural man is routed and the new man takes up residence in the heart, we are no longer prone to ask: how much is he asking of me? Or, what's my fair share of the load? Or, have I done my part? The answer is always, no! We go about our tasks not letting our left hand know what our right hand is doing, never looking for pats on the back, seeking only to bring honor to our Savior's name. We live a paradoxical life - always content and satisfied in the knowledge that Jesus is using us to front for him, yet ever dissatisfied because so much that could be done remains undone. Yet what is more rewarding or more satisfying than to slump exhausted after dinner on Sunday, or at the end of a long day, for that moment of quiet time with him, and to know in that solemn moment that his kingdom got built a little, not because of us, but in spite of us?

This application to pastoral ministry calls for more.

Extending Personal Ministry to the Pastoral Ministry

All that we have said about personal ministry has particular application to our specialized calling as public servants of the Word. And it might be asked, what more needs to be said in this connection? What every Christian is privately and personally, you and I are publically - except that through a divine call, our Lord indicates a specific place and area of responsibility for our ministry to his people. He adds to the requirements for our ministry such specifics as aptness to teach and preach, that we be above reproach, blameless, sober, not covetous, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money and not given to wine, to name a few.

Thus the Lord of the church has laid a hand on you with a call that says, "Follow me." Whenever you follow him, you are making the proper practical application of your call. As his follower, remember that he didn't go to the cross for us only half-committed to the proposition of atoning for our sin. My sin took full commitment on his part, and I would be unfaithful to him if I thought that in following him I could get by with something less. To sum it up, every Christian is called to be a full-time servant of Christ. Your call simply designates a place to serve and a type of full-time service in which Jesus wants you to involve yourself on behalf of the people he entrusts to your ministry. Your commitment to him, however, is total either way, with or without a divine call.

In a society of leisure lovers such as ours is, those of us who have been divinely called are sometimes prone to forget our Lord's call for total commitment with the result that we cast covetous glances in the direction of eight-hour days and forty-hour weeks. But if we harbor such notions in our hearts for long, we may become part of a sick society's problem rather than illuminators of its solution.

Your complete commitment to your Lord as Master of your life has additional applications pertaining to your attitude - an attitude that is shaped by the fact that you have "the mind of Christ". When Paul counseled Timothy about being an effective instrument in the Lord's hands as a pastor in Ephesus, he told him, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed." This obligated him, Paul said, not to "neglect the gift which was given you." Timothy is further instructed, "Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress" (1 Tm 4:14-15).

Clearly God's servants are to be professionally adequate to their calling. In Timothy's case this meant that he should be theologically, pedagogically and pastorally competent. In your case it means the same thing. And I mentioned the word theologically first for a purpose. You may possess all kinds of people skills, but if you don't

know how to make your ministry distinctly and uniquely evangelical, then you are not adequate to your calling. If you know how to exercise all the latest leadership techniques, managerial skills plus power point with ease, but do not know how to handle law and gospel properly in the pulpit, Bible classes and counseling sessions, then you are not presenting "yourself to God as one approved". You are shortchanging God's people. "Do your best," . . . "Be diligent," Paul says. "Give yourself wholly."

The cult of mediocrity has no place in the church. To be satisfied with "good enough" when "better" is possible is a sin, the equivalent of burying one's talent. Enough effort just to get by doesn't cut it when fields are ripe for harvest and the "night is coming when no one can work" (Jn 9:4). As W. Somerset Maugham once put it, "If you refuse to accept anything but the best, you very often get it." The pursuit of excellence as a pastor has got to be one of the goals of your life of sanctification. That's implied in Paul's directive, "Be very careful, then, how you live, not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity" (Eph 5:15-16).

At one of the low points in his life, Elijah forgot that. He wasted forty days making a one-week journey to Horeb and holed himself up there in a cave. He had been "very zealous for the Lord God Almighty," he said, but without any tangible results. Sitting on his duff in a cave and feeling sorry for himself was inexcusable. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" God asked him in a gentle effort to bring him back to his senses. In answer to Elijah's lame excuse, ("The Israelites have rejected your covenant") the Lord said "Go!" Are there ever times when we hole ourselves up in a cave-like office in Elijah-like fashion obligating the Lord to ask us, "What are you doing here? . . . Go." (1 Kgs 19: 1ff).

Among other things, rejecting the cult of mediocrity in favor of the pursuit of excellence means retraining yourself to stay abreast of what's new in an exploding world of knowledge. Educators tell us that because of the rapid growth of knowledge, today's graduates in the field of arts and sciences will have to be retrained three to five times during their careers to remain competent in their field of endeavor. In the fields of medicine and computer technology the retraining is ongoing. The congregation you serve has a right to expect you to continue to qualify yourself to do what your call obligates you to do. We can't excuse mediocrity on our part by saying it's enough that we offer the "one thing needful." The one thing needful was not given to compensate for any inadequacies which, by diligence, self-discipline and the Spirit's help, can be eliminated. It is part of a pastor's role in his congregation to be the best pastor he can be whether his talents number five or two or one.

In Philippians 2:5 the NIV translates the verb φρονεῖτε with the noun "attitude". The context in Philippians suggests that a right attitude is one of humble service. The pastoral Epistles have much more to say about a healthy pastoral attitude. "Set an example for the believers, in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (1 Tm 4:12). And to Titus Paul said, "In everything set them an example by doing what is good" (2:7). God wants his people to be able to see his gospel power in action in us. That is why your attitude, your mind-set, your mood and disposition are so important as you pursue your calling. C.S. Lewis has suggested that perhaps the sin we Christians are guilty of more than any other is the sin of ignoring the apostolic injunction to rejoice in the Lord always. You cannot be glum and a good news proclaimer at the same time. The gospel rightly understood and apprehended puts a smile, not a frown, on our faces. No one can really preach the gospel without living the gospel. Whoever said, "I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day" was at least partly right.

Jesus would subscribe to that aphorism. "He appointed twelve (designating them apostles) that they might be *with* him and that he might send them out to preach" (Mk 3:14). That is a highly significant statement. Before Jesus could send them out, they had to be "*with* him." An old apothegm says, "Like father, like son." A son does not become like his father without being with his father. The father is the model for the child.

Likewise being a good pastor requires being a model. Jesus was that model for his disciples. For three years they not only heard what he said, they saw what he was. He embodied his teachings in his actions. They learned to know their teacher experientially. Jesus understood that the character of a good disciple is caught as well as taught. That is why it was necessary for them to be "with him."

Jesus effected a perfect integration of teaching and doing, of information processing and modeling. He provided something to hear and something to see. Luke alludes to that in the opening words of Acts. "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to *do* and to *teach* until the day he was taken up to heaven." John reflects that too in the opening words of his first Epistle. "We proclaim to you what we have *seen* and *heard*, so that you also may have fellowship with us." I wonder if there is any special pastoral significance that attaches to the fact that "*do*" precedes "*teach*" and "*see*" precedes "*hear*". Paul seemed to think so. In his exhortation to Timothy, he includes this counsel. "Watch your life and doctrine closely" (1 Tm 4:16). That would seem to confirm the maxim that actions speak louder than words, or more importantly, that modeling is an essential part of being what pastors have been called to be. The author of the Meditation for January 8, 2005 asks, "How can people around us even get a taste of what our God is like if we don't model him for them?" Yes, how?

So by watching and listening to the Master Pastor, the disciples were transformed into pastors like their master, not just because they knew Jesus, but because they had become like him. They were able to model for others what they themselves had become in Christ. Nowhere in Scripture is this point made more pointedly than it is in these words of Jesus. "A pupil, when he has been fully trained (κατηρτισμένος) will be like his teacher" (Lk 6:40 NASB). First you become like your teacher, and then you facilitate the process whereby your people become like you. Jesus says, "I have set you an example (ὑπόδειγμα) that you should do as I have done for you" (Jn 13:15). Also, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart" (Mt 11:29) And that is why the author of Hebrews exhorts us to "fix our eyes on Jesus."

Paul says in a mixed metaphor in 2 Corinthians, "Thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ, and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him" (2:14). What a compelling thought that is! Certain aromas can be especially tantalizing. It may be the salty tang of an ocean breeze, or the pine scent in a forest following a newly fallen rain, or perhaps the aroma of Starbucks brewing when you roll out of bed in the morning and are still trying to rub the sleep out of your eyes. Paul's thought here is that God makes you fragrant with the aroma of the love of Jesus Christ. As a pastor you have the rare privilege of making the air around you fragrant with the aroma of the knowledge of him. How much of that aroma would one of your members be able to detect in your study, your Bible class, your pulpit? God's people get to know the love of Christ not just from hearing you proclaim it, but especially from sensing its fragrance in your attitude and actions. It's your call.

A word of caution. We have said that your call obligates you to be professionally competent, even to excel in competence. But such a worthy ambition must not be allowed to blind you to another practical consideration Jesus wants you to be aware of as you minister to his people. Theological competence is never an end in itself, always only a means to an end. And ministry to his chosen people is that end. If you lose sight of that, your professional competence may become a wall between you and the people who called you. Your professional training is not something that sets you apart from or above your people, but in and among them. To illustrate: people sometimes complain that sermons they hear are over their heads and irrelevant, ivory tower stuff. Such sermons may give people the impression that the preacher is trying to impress them with his preaching prowess and his learning rather than trying to impress Jesus on them. You can do that too if you think your call puts you on a pedestal in the congregation. It doesn't. It puts you in the servant's quarters in a glass house. It puts you down there with the lambs as well as with the sheep. Beware of the temptation to talk down to people. Jesus never did that. Don't make people climb over a barrier to get to you. Jesus didn't do that either.

Another practical consideration involving attitudes requires that you remember that your call is not merely a matter of serving your congregation, but to build Christ's kingdom by helping him to extend his ruling influence in the lives of people. A congregation is more than just an institution or an organization. It is an organism. The pastor who views his call merely as a call to serve an organization is likely to see his call as something that puts limitations on his call to serve. The pastor who views his call as a call to partnership with Christ in his kingdom building activity will treat his call as a limitless opportunity to be involved as a co-worker with his Savior and Lord. (The sainted Martin Galstad, a former professor at DMLC in the 1950's, helped me to a deeper appreciation of this truth in an essay "Existentialism and Theology" which he included in his book "Findings" pp 46-61).

Perhaps by now you are thinking: if our ministry is a gospel ministry, then why are we being overwhelmed with the law? In saying what I have said to this point, I am not insensitive to nor unappreciative of the fact that a pastor's schedule is exhausting and that his work is never done. But neither am I unmindful of Parkinson's law. My Lord has shown me time and again that when we approach our tasks in the right spirit, snowed under, but happy none the less to be about our Father's business, he has a way of affording us a kind of superhuman strength for our work. "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint" (Is 40:31). But if we are just plodding along wearily, our Lord tells us bluntly, "You have not because you do not ask" (Jm 4:2). Anyone whom he honors with a call has every right to say with Jacob, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Gn 32:26) or with Paul, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (Php 4:13). Let's never forget it, "Not that we are competent to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant" (2 Cor 3:5-6).

In conclusion, let me underscore once more the word *divine* in your call. You are God's man, serving God's people in God's appointed place. No one on earth has a higher, nobler calling than you do. When you go about your daily tasks, you are filling Jesus' shoes. Your mouth becomes his mouth. Your hands become his hands. Your heart beats with his heartbeat. You love with his love. That is the key to being what God has called you to be.

So, once again, it's your call.

Joel C. Gerlach

Postscript: "Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case - things that accompany salvation. God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised." (Heb 6:9-12).