

THE HEART OF MINISTRY - THE CALL OF GOD

Paul Beasley-Murray

Let me set the scene by quoting two marvellous passages of purple prose from the pen of Silvester Horne, a great Congregational minister and Free Church historian. In *The Romance Of Preaching*, Silvester Horne waxes lyrical on the call to preach: “The real romance of history is this romance of the preacher; the sublime miracle of the God-intoxicated soul with vision of an eternal Will, and sense of an Empire to which all continents, tongues, races belong. This man stands serene amid the clash of arms and the foolish braggadocio of Force, asking only for the sword named Truth, for the harness of Righteousness, and the spirit of Peace. This is the world’s unconquerable and irresistible Hero. All its most enduring victories are his. It is he who, year after year and generation after generation, in spite of rebuffs, defeats and disappointments, has planted the manner of the kingdom of justice, freedom and humanity on the conquered and dismantled fortresses of opposition, selfishness and wrong”.

A little later he writes: “Who shall be proud of their calling if not we? What other history has ever equalled ours? Think of the processions of the preachers! No range of mountains has been high enough to stay their progress; no rivers deep and broad enough to daunt them; no forests dark and dense enough to withstand their advance. No poet has ever sung the epic of their sacrifices. Was ever such a romance? Was ever love exalted to so pure a passion? Was ever in the human soul so unquenchable a fire? Silver and gold they had none. They did not seek to win mankind by materialistic gifts. Such as they had they gave. The alms they distributed were faith, hope, love. Wherever they went they trod a pilgrim road, and flung forth their faith, often to a sceptical and scornful generation. But what heeded they? They passed onward from frontier to frontier, ‘the legion that never was counted’, and, let us add, that never knew defeat. Gradually, before their message, ancient pagan empires tottered, heathen despots bowed the head, in the lands of Goth and Vandal stately cathedrals reared their splendid towers and spire, and the battle music of the Christian crusade rang triumphant in chiming bells and pealing organs over conquered races. In the recesses of Indian forests, up the dark rivers of Africa and South America that often flowed in

red, along the frozen coast of Greenland and Labrador, the pioneer preachers made their pilgrimage. Let every village preacher who climbs into a rude rostrum, to give out a text and preach a sermon to a meagre handful of somewhat stolid hearers, remember to what majestic Fraternity he belongs, and what romantic traditions he inherits”.

I find such writing a tonic to the soul! It accepts that there are difficulties in the ministry, but does not allow difficulties to have the upper hand. On the contrary, the pride in the calling to preach “the boundless riches of Christ” puts any difficulty in the shade.

However, for good or ill, we belong to a different generation. Much as I count it the greatest of all privileges to be a minister of Jesus Christ, I have never been conscious of that sense of romance. Ministry has been a high calling, but it has been a tough calling, and like the Apostle Paul, I bear many of its scars. Yet, although in that sense I am not a romantic, I do believe along with Silvester Horne that ministry is a calling. Ministry is our response to the call of God on our lives.

Furthermore, I identify with Silvester Horne in seeing the call to preach being at the heart of Christ’s call to be a minister of the Gospel. I recognise that at this point there may be those from other Christian traditions who would understand ministry in different terms. Much as I count it a privilege to preside at the Lord’s Table or to be allowed to share in another’s pain, for me as a Nonconformist in general and as a Baptist in particular, preaching is at the heart of my calling. It is when I preach that I come most alive. In any given week it is my preparation for preaching which has the priority. Yes, I am called to lead the church, to care for the flock, to mobilise the church for mission, to equip the saints for ministry, but above all I am called to preach. If there is one text in particular which sums up my call to ministry it is to be found in some words of Jeremiah: “If I say, I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name, then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot”. As far as I am concerned, ministry is not one option among many - I feel I have never had any other choice - God has laid his hand upon me and there is no escape.

There are some, however, who question whether this sense of personal calling to ministry is truly necessary. In recent years this questioning has been most articulately expressed by Francis

Dewar in *Called or Collared: An Alternative Approach to Vocation*. Dewar defines vocation in three different ways: first, there is the general vocation or 'calling' which all of us have to be followers of Christ; second, there are the various vocations or 'jobs' which people may have - this category would include the 'role' of being a pastor; and third, there is a specific vocation which is unique and personal to each individual to be the kind of person that God has called them to be.

Dewar's primary concern is with the pastoral calling, which he sees as being primarily a 'role' or 'job'. He disputes the relatively recent belief that "a candidate for the priesthood should have an inner sense of calling to that office", and argues that in the first ten centuries of the church's history it was the Christian community that had the chief part to play in the choice of its leader. Ordination at that stage had nothing to do with an inner personal sense of call, but rather to do with the call of the church. Traces of this earlier attitude to ordination apparently still survive today in the Orthodox Church, where the candidate for the priesthood is led forward to be ordained by two clergy who hold him by the arms - in case he tries to escape!

Dewar believes that we need to recover that earlier understanding of the church playing the key role in ordination. "A person chosen for the ordained ministry does not need an inward sense of vocation to the basic task. What he or she does need are the right qualities for it. That is why the choice needs to be made by others, by the duly appointed representatives of the institution. The church in effect says to a person, 'You are called by God to be ordained'".

Dewar goes on to argue that the clergy still need an inner sense of vocation, but only in "some aspect of your activities", which may indeed have nothing to do with one's job as a minister. This inner sense of vocation links with his third level of 'calling', which has no connection with a role, but rather with a particular person.

I disagree with Francis Dewar. The sense of a call cannot be limited to the prophets. It is present in the New Testament church, as evidenced by the way in which Paul begins almost every letter acknowledging his sense of calling. True, the church has a role. Thus, if we understand aright Luke's account of the setting apart of Paul and Barnabas to missionary work, it appears that it was the church which under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit took the

initiative. Similarly it is noteworthy that in Paul's list of qualifications for a "bishop" or church leader, no reference is made to a sense of call - the emphasis is on personal qualities. In the light of such passages as also in the light of experience I happily acknowledge that there may well be occasions when individuals within a church may take the initiative that God is indeed calling a particular individual to leadership among his people, not least because of the personal qualities he or she may evidence.

However, this does not mean that there is no place for a sense of personal call. Both are needed. Indeed, I wish to argue there are times when only this sense of personal call will keep us going.

Without a sense of a divine call, ministry is unthinkable. For this reason C.H. Spurgeon, told his students: "'The first sign of the heavenly call is an intense, all absorbing desire for the work. 'Do not enter the ministry if you can help it,' was the deeply sage advice of a divine to one who sought his judgement. If any student in this room could be content to be a newspaper editor, or a grocer, or a farmer, or a doctor, or a lawyer, or a senator, or a king, in the name of heaven and earth let him go his way; he is not the man in whom dwells the Spirit of God in its fullness, for a man so filled with God would be utterly weary of any pursuit but that for which his inmost soul pants".

In similar vein George Adam Smith, the great Scottish Old Testament scholar, wrote: "'There are men who pass into the ministry by social pressure or the opinion of the circles they belong to, and there are men who adopt the profession simply because it is on the line of least resistance. From which false beginnings rise the spent force, the premature stoppages, the stagnancy, the aimlessness and heartlessness, which are the scandals of the professional ministry and the weakness of the Christian Church in our day. Men who drift into the ministry, as it is certain so many do, become mere ecclesiastical flotsam and jetsam, incapable of giving carriage to any soul across the waters of this life, uncertain of their own arrival anywhere, and of all the waste of their generation, the most patent and disgraceful. God will have no driftwood for His sacrifices, no drift-men for His ministers".

The *sine qua non* of ministry is a personal and inescapable sense of God's calling. It is true that there are other components to ministry. The call to ministry, for example, needs to be marked by appropriate gifts and graces. It needs too to be tested and

recognised by the wider church. Furthermore, in today's church, as part of the ongoing testing process, there needs to be appropriate training. But at the heart of ministry must be that sense of inward constraint.

The call to ministry comes in different ways. Just as there is no stereotyped conversion experience, so too there is no fixed pattern of call. A call need not be dramatic in nature - the experience of Isaiah in the temple, for instance, is no more typical of a call than is the experience of Paul on the Damascus Road typical of conversion. In my own case, there was never a time when I did not believe that God wished me to be a minister. I wish that I could say that it was otherwise. I wish that I could not be so open to the charge of following in my father's steps. But the truth of the matter is that like Jeremiah the prophet and Paul the apostle, I have been conscious of God's hand upon my life from the very beginning of days. True, as a teenager at one stage I sought to make a half-hearted struggle against it, but I quickly gave up. As far as I was concerned, there was no other option.

This sense of call has sustained me and acted as a sheet-anchor, when difficulties have come my way. I am not in ministry out of choice, but because God has called me. In the words of the Apostle Paul: "An obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I preach not the Gospel". Or, in the words of Martin Luther: "Here I stand, I can do no other". My security is not to be found in the fact that the church has to give me nine months' notice if it wishes to get rid of me, but rather in the fact that God has laid his hand on me and called me to be his minister. The church may pay me a stipend, but the church does not own me. In the eyes of the Inland Revenue I may be employed, but in the eyes of the law as indeed in the sight of God I am accountable to God and to God alone. Like the Apostle Paul I have been "sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father".

This is a frightening thought, but it is also a liberating thought. It means that ultimately I am not dependent upon what others may think of me - it is not other people's judgement which counts, but God's. My call to ministry gives me security. True, there is an inevitable degree of subjectivity in the call. A call is always an inward experience. It is an affair of the heart involving only God and the individual concerned. It is an inner conviction arising from a sense that God has laid hold of me - even "overpowered" me (see

Jer 20.7). I cannot in any way prove scientifically my sense of call. All I know is that I did not volunteer, rather I responded: “Here am I; send me” (Isa 6.8).

Yet, having said that, there is an objective side to our calling, for the genuineness of my call has been tested by God’s people and found not to be wanting. The very act of ordination on 10 October 1970 was the church’s public recognition of the rightness of my response. I believe that when we are tempted to doubt our calling, there is much to be said to look back to that occasion when hands were laid upon us - just as when Martin Luther was tempted to doubt his standing in Christ he used to reply: “*baptisatus sum* (I am baptised)”.

THE PASTORAL CARE OF PASTORAL COUNSELLORS

Paul Goodliff

The very people who offer pastoral care and counselling to those in crisis face a growing crisis of their own. What does this demanding professional role of pastor, carer or counsellor do to their marriage or how does it challenge their singleness?

Is it just a personal impression, or is it really the fact that those who train as counsellors are more likely to leave their marriage partner? If it is indeed more than just a tragic, but unrepresentative, trend amongst my friends and acquaintances, then there are some serious issues to address about pastoral counselling.

In my work as a ‘pastor to the pastors’, and especially as a pastoral counsellor, I am in close contact with both men and women. The heart of both roles is to love people. More specifically, it is to love individuals, often hurting and vulnerable individuals, whose projections and fantasies must ‘bear thinking about’. The personal risk and vulnerability is sometimes high. The psychotherapist Petrushka Clarkson puts it like this: “We are required to act constantly in the arena of love, yet renounce all personal gratification; we work in one of the most potent cauldrons of intimacy, yet we are prohibited to drink from it; we give solace or wisdom perhaps to those who suffer, knowing full well that we