

The Call to Preach

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Allow me, to begin with, to be somewhat biographical. The first indication of a call to pastoral ministry, and hence the call to preach, came to me in November 1984. A farmer-friend of our family here in Namibia had died. Unbeknown to me then, he had told his wife: “If I die, I want you to get that young man to bury me.” Apparently the sharing of the gospel around a campfire on his farm in 1980 must have left some impression upon his soul. Whether he was ultimately converted, I do not know.

Here I was, a young man, a manager of a large retail outlet and a committed member of my church, now called to conduct a funeral of a man I had shared the gospel with four years earlier. The problem was that I had never preached before. Even worse – I had never been to a funeral before. My parents did not believe in taking their children to funerals. Thus I was called to do two things I had never done before. I had never preached, and I had never conducted a funeral!

I received a little help from my pastor in terms of a sermon text and some hints on how to conduct a funeral, and so I “preached” to a congregation of forty rough-looking Namibian farmers. I had prepared myself in the best way I knew, casting myself upon the mercy of God for this onerous task.

It was like a nightmare! I felt very inadequate, and the sermon (if you can call it that) was I’m sure, a hermeneutical and homiletical atrocity. I sensed however that I had urgency whilst I spoke. An amazing thing happened at this funeral. The only son of the deceased

man was converted during that meeting. The mystery of preaching! God can truly use a donkey to speak.

Following this event, the call to preach came to me in a forceful way in June 1985. I resigned from my employment and went to a theological seminary for the next four years. Since then it has been a continuous journey of learning how to become a preacher.

Apparently it takes a life time to become a preacher, and some of the best lessons in the school of preaching are learned in the school of hard knocks. Martin Luther did say that three things make a preacher: prayer, study and temptations (trials)!

The Call to Preach

Where does this call to preach come from? How do we know that there is a call to preach? What is preaching? I believe that these three questions are vitally related. Let us therefore explore these in turn.

1. The call to preach comes from God

I know that this sounds obvious. However, in practice it seems to me that many do not really understand the nature of this call. Many are poorly guided in this matter. To illustrate: In 1989 I was part of a graduating class of sixteen at seminary. I believe that 19 years after graduation only three of us may be left in the office of pastor-teacher. The majority has not continued in the call to preach consistently in a pastoral setting. This high drop-out rate remains, I believe, a reality. There are not a few men that believe that they have “heard the call”, perhaps through a rousing missionary sermon by their pastor concerning “the fields that are white unto harvest.., and the need to pray for laborers in the harvest field”, and on the basis of this “call” have gone off to a theological seminary in order to be equipped as pastors or missionaries¹, only to drop out of the ministry a few years later.

Has God’s call failed? Clearly not, for the Scripture says that “God’s gifts and His call are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29). I know that this text speaks of God’s election of His people, but the gifts (Gr. “*charismata*”) which God gives to people at conversion are included in this call. The Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints surely applies not only to the calling but also to the gifts. My contention is therefore that those that are truly called to and gifted for

¹ I have come to understand that the only viable candidate for the mission field is a man who has been trained and approved as an elder by the church.

the office of a pastor-teacher shall persevere, because God perseveres with them. The experience of the Psalmist in Psalm 139:5 surely is the experience of the preacher: “You hem me in – behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me” The prophet Jeremiah persevered against many odds because God had called him. God was able to make him stand, and God had said to him: “Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you” (Jer. 1:8).

2. How do we know that there is a call to preach?

(i) The call to preach can only come after a man is truly converted.

Conversion is the fundamental prerequisite for the performance of any Christian service. I know a man who had studied for the pastoral and preaching ministry but who was only converted much later in his life. Needless to say, he did not last in the ministry, but thank God that he is converted today. Incidentally, it is also evident today that he does not possess the gift of preaching.

(ii) The call to preach needs to be tested.

Usually it is not advisable for a gifted young man to occupy the pulpit immediately after his conversion. A man of Spurgeon’s caliber, who started preaching and shepherding at the age of eighteen, needs to be seen as an exception rather than the rule. As a rule, an aspiring young preacher needs to be tested and tried. He needs to learn the discipline of humility. The elders of the church *and* the church are the best judges on earth to judge an aspiring preacher. My humble opinion regarding the seminary which I attended is that most men were not thoroughly tested in respect of the call and the gifting required by God for the preaching ministry. The blame cannot be entirely placed upon the seminary. The churches from which these men came had sent them without subjecting them to a thorough test.

We also need to reckon with the problem that Paul addresses in the context of spiritual gifts in Romans 12:3: “By the grace given me I say . . . Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.” Living with a fallen nature is never easy. We do not have the instinctive capacity to “think of ourselves with sober judgment”. That is why the subjective or “inward call” to preach must always be tested, firstly by the standard of Scripture itself, and secondly by an objective call. We have already asserted that the elders of the church and the church herself provide the best evaluation for a potential preacher. The church always calls and sends. If only we stuck

to this rule, there would be fewer people wasting their time at seminary!

The most obvious test should be whether there is evident fruit produced from a preaching ministry. Are people converted under the preaching? Are people helped and built up by the preaching? Do they turn from sin as a result of hearing the preaching? When the Apostle Paul began to truly preach after his conversion (Acts 9), the grace and favour of God upon his ministry was evident. The marks of a gifted preacher are that people are converted, helped and changed under his ministry.

The urge to preach is a tell-tale sign. A preacher is a man with a divine calling. He cannot help but to preach. If he is out of the pulpit he is miserable, because he has to preach. That is why a preacher who finds himself sitting under another preaching ministry sometimes suffers from a critical spirit. He is critical not simply because he is analyzing the sermon in his mind. He is critical because he is a preacher. He is itching to be in the pulpit. He could, like John Calvin, preach every day of his life – even though this intense activity which demands so much energy could kill him.

(iii) The call to preach needs to be developed.

We can hardly expect a man to be an accomplished preacher right from the start. We may even assert that the gift of preaching initially may not be visible –it may be latent. Therefore it must be stirred up. Paul speaks about this to Timothy when he says: “Fan into flame the gift of God which is in you . . .” (2 Tim. 1:6). It is important therefore that senior pastors give their young people opportunities to test their desires, to see if there is a calling. A Sunday school class, small group or youth meeting may be a good starting point.

Apart from this, a preaching gift may need to remain latent for quite a while. A helpful footnote in Charles Bridges’ classic *The Christian Ministry* says this:

The duties of an evangelical preacher before he begins his ministry are:

- a. To grow in piety, by feeding on the bread of prayer.
- b. To give his zeal time to wax strong by reading the Holy Scriptures and the Fathers.
- c. To continue in silence and retirement, till God is pleased to bring him out and to show him to the world . . .²

² Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, 32.

God may keep a man in hiding until He thinks the time is right to bring him out. It is interesting to note that in Christ's case (though He was sinless and not subject to the common immaturities of young preachers), His empowerment to preach came out only after His baptism! God chose to "bring His Son out and show Him to the world" only after thirty years! What a Preacher the Son of Man proved to be! What extraordinary work was accomplished in the span of a mere three years!

Similarly we have reason to believe that the Apostle Paul was not a high profile minister directly after his conversion, but that he might have spent a good number of years in low key ministry and meditation in Arabia (Gal. 1:17), before God brought him out. And when God did bring him out, what a missionary preacher he was. Roland Allen says: "In little more than ten years St Paul established the Church in four provinces of the Empire, Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia. Before AD 47 there were no churches in these provinces; in AD 57 St Paul could speak as if his work there was done"³

3. What is preaching?

With humility we must confess that **effective** preaching is not always that which has come from the mouth of a silver-tongued orator or from a John Chrysostom (347- 407 AD.), who was also known as "the Golden Mouth", trained in the finest schools of Greek rhetoric.⁴ Many men in our day are trained as "pulpiteers", dazzling many by their oratorical performance and skilled "turn of phrase", but not necessarily with a "demonstration of the Spirit's power" (1 Cor. 2:4). For Paul preaching meant God glorifying, Christ-centred, Spirit filled, prayer soaked, unction filled proclamation!

The man who was God's chosen instrument for the conversion of C. H. Spurgeon was a shoemaker, an unschooled man by all accounts.⁵ He had to preach on a cold, freezing December morning of 1849 when the minister of the Primitive Methodist Church could not come because he was snowed in. His text from Isaiah 45:22 spoke to Spurgeon with converting power that day. As I read Spurgeon's testimony, I could not help but think that though this man did not have a prepared sermon when he preached, yet he did as well as he knew how, and he clearly possessed the necessary unction. He was not theologically ignorant. He knew Christ, and He knew how to present Him to sinners.

³ Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?*, 3.

⁴ E. C. Dargan, *A History of Preaching*, vol. 1, 86.

⁵ A. Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 18.

So it was with the men that Jesus called to preach. When the Sanhedrin examined Peter and John after the miraculous healing of the crippled beggar at the gate called “Beautiful” (Acts 3), they asked them concerning their authority and their source of power (Acts 4:7). They discovered that these were “**unschooled**, ordinary men . . . and they took note that **these men had been with Jesus**” (Acts 4:13). The primary fact about this text is not that these men were unschooled. The primary fact of this text to be noted is that these men had been with Jesus. This is the major priority of any gospel preacher – “to have been with Jesus”! The preacher comes from his communion with God before the people and as His spokesman says: “Thus says the Lord . . . !”

Christ’s disciples may not have had a classical training in any rabbinical school, but they were certainly not theologically ignorant. They were perhaps theologically **more astute** than the Sanhedrin, having been with Jesus and having been trained by Jesus to read and understand the Scriptures accurately and with the proper focus. They were taught by Jesus to think biblically about doctrine and life. They were taught to put Him at the centre of their interpretation.

Above all they were not “dead” men. They were empowered by Christ (and by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost) to preach. Therefore they were bold and earnest men as they proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. They were men in the hand of God, and therefore the Word which they spoke was effective and powerful to their hearers.

The major qualification for the preaching ministry is certainly not a degree in theology. An unknown poet penned these humorous words:

A lad at college called Breeze,
Weighed down by B.A.’s and Ph.D.’s
Collapsed from the strain,
Said the doctor: “It’s plain!
You’re killing yourself by degrees.”

The major qualification for the preaching office, as we have already seen, is the call and gifting from God. Some preachers such as Spurgeon, Lloyd Jones and A. W. Pink never had formal seminary training in the accepted sense of that word. And yet they all had a remarkable and influential ministry. Though being dead, they still speak today through their voluminous printed sermons and books. They were rigorous students! A. W. Pink studied the Scriptures twelve hours a day! They submitted to the rigorous disciplines that accompany effective preaching: exegetical accuracy, doctrinal substance, clear

structure, vivid illustration, pointed application, helpful delivery and supernatural authority.⁶

I am not for a moment suggesting that formal theological training is a hindrance in terms of developing a preacher. We have many examples of men that greatly profited from their training and went on to be fine pastors and preachers. The fact remains however that good preaching, or “life giving preaching”, is not necessarily possessed by those that have learned all the necessary homiletical and hermeneutical skills before they mount a pulpit. Preaching is firstly clearly a gift from God. The preacher is firstly a man in the hands of God. The mystery of preaching begins there! God chooses a man and tells him, “You are my chosen instrument . . .” (Acts 9:15). Having said that (and in the interest of balance), we need to assert that preaching is not only a matter of gifting, but also of hard (heart) work.

Preaching skills require hard work and must be developed

We have already seen that the preaching gift must be stirred up and developed (2 Tim. 1:6). While God undoubtedly uses the preaching of unschooled men to bring saving life to unregenerate people, I doubt that I as an “unschooled” young man preaching on the “off chance” at a funeral or Spurgeon’s shoemaker-preacher could have sustained a ministry of feeding the sheep without the disciplines that accompany effective preaching.

I have already made reference to Stuart Olyott’s helpful book *Preaching – pure and simple* in which he outlines the elements of true preaching that must be developed and worked on. I close with a short synopsis of his points. Good preaching requires hard work at all these various levels:

Exegetical Accuracy

Study which brings out the intended meaning of words and sentences is called exegesis. We cannot preach what we think the Scriptures mean. Our preaching must be exegetically accurate. We must study hard in order to understand the text.

Doctrinal Substance

Every sermon should be full of doctrine and rich in theology. Stuart Olyott says: “If at the end of the sermon my hearers understand the preaching passage, but do not have a better understanding of the *system*

⁶ Stuart Olyott, *Preaching – pure and simple*, 24, 25, 147.

of truth that is taught in the Bible, then my preaching is a failure.”⁷ We need to work hard to make sure that our hearers get the doctrinal substance entrenched in their minds and in their lives.

Clear Structure

Unity, order and proportion are important so that our hearers can follow us when we speak and remember afterwards what we have said. All our hard work will be wasted if our hearers cannot understand us.

Vivid Illustration

Illustrations are like windows that let light into a dark room. People tend to understand pictures better than abstract, theoretical reasoning. Illustrations explain the truth, make the truth attractive and make the truth memorable. Preachers need to work hard at making the truth understood. Good illustrations often “switch the lights on” in people’s minds.

Pointed Application

Since we are called to be doers of the Word and not hearers only (James 1:22), we must work hard on pressing the demands of a text upon the consciences of our hearers. Application is important, because it takes the hearers beyond “sermon tasting” to show them how the subject applies to them and what practical demands it makes of them. The preacher must preach to the people and not just *in front of* them. The Truth must take root in our hearers.

Helpful Delivery

The best sermon in the world will be of little value if delivered poorly. Therefore, the preacher will have to work hard in this matter. He has to watch his spirit, his language, his simplicity, his grammar and pronunciation, his voice, his non-verbal communication, his appearance, his movements and gestures and also the time!

Supernatural Authority

No amount of exegetically sound, doctrinally correct, well structured sermons will have an effect on an audience if the preacher does not possess unction, a divine sense of urgency and passion that breathes life into the sermon.

⁷ Olyott, 55.

Conclusion

All this leaves us in no doubt that the call to preach is not to be trifled with. The call to preach is the call to be a spokesman for the King, and what the spokesman has to say on the King's behalf needs to be accurate, precise, and delivered in the spirit in which the King would have spoken had He spoken Himself.

The call to preach is therefore not for those who have carnal ambitions to occupy a speaker's platform. It is not the place to show off one's oratorical skills. The pulpit is the place where the preacher pours out his heart for his King with exegetical accuracy, doctrinal substance, clear structure, vivid illustration, pointed application, helpful delivery and supernatural authority. Therefore the preacher had better make sure that he has a call from God to preach.