

The Theology of the Call and Ministry

Daniel M. Deutschlander

Northwestern College 1993

Is this the time? Is this the time for you to give serious thought to uprooting your life in order to move to and begin a rigorous program of instruction that may end with your entrance into the holy office of the ministry? If you have already considered that question, then you have also no doubt given some considerable thought to the more basic question: What does **God** want me to do and how can I know what he wants of me as I consider this all important question? Whenever Christians want to know the will of God, we do what comes automatically. We will ask him and look for guidance from him in the making of that decision where he has promised to speak, namely in his own holy and inspired Word. We will examine what the Holy Scriptures have to say about our lives as Christians and about the holy office of the ministry, so that you may have the rock of solid foundation of knowledge from God as it relates to your life and to his ministry.

The first and most basic meaning of the word *ministry*, as that word is used in the New Testament is *service*. Any discussion of Christian ministry must begin with Christ himself and his ministry, his service. For his service to us and for us is the cause and source, the inspiration, the content, the goal of anything which would be worthy of the name *ministry* among us. He defines this own ministry perfectly when he tells us: *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many* (Mark 10:45). Jesus spoke those words in answer to a very twentieth century type of question. James and John wanted to rule, “to be empowered” and sit at Jesus’ right and left hand in his kingdom. They wanted not ministry but “rulership.” But Jesus makes it clear that he himself is the model for those who follow him on earth. He served.

And what a service that was! Not part time, not now and then, not when it was convenient or easy, but with his entire being he served. He gave His life for our rescue and ransom. That was the heart and core of his ministry. As no other ministry can compare with the perfection of his ministry, so no other ministry can compare in effectiveness. Look at what it accomplished! He ransomed us from eternal death, from service to Satan and slavery to sin, from hell and its endless torments, from the pointlessness and futility of living only for doom and death. He ransomed us from hell for heaven, from death for life.

Little wonder that those ransomed by so great a ministry, at so great a price and for so great a benefit should cry out from the depths of their ransomed souls: Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? As abundant as the Scriptures are in their proclamation that our salvation is by grace alone, through the merit of Christ alone, on the basis of gospel created and preserved faith alone (cf. especially John 3:16. II Corinthians 5:19-21, Ephesians 2:8-10, I John 4:9-10, I Peter 1:18-19, Romans 3), just so abundant are they also in their answer to this spontaneous question of Christians who long to show their love to him who by his ministry has loved them first.

The answer can be summed up in one word: *ministry*; that is, loving and selfless service to him through loving and selfless service to our neighbor, as neighbor is defined in the great Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33-37). That ministry was given to us already at the time of our baptism (Romans 6), and it continues through all of our earthly life as the Christian's fitting response to the gospel (Romans 12, Ephesians 2:8-10). It is to such ministry that Jesus pointed the disciples who wanted "rulership" instead of ministry when he held up his own ministry as the pattern and saving example: *You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45)*. This truth would be difficult to over-emphasize these days, when most people are obsessed by the exercise of rights and addicted to being served. It is the nature of the Christian's being that he is different from the world, that his highest ambition is to serve, to minister.

This service is carried out in the lives of Christians according to the Word of God and in the stations of life in which they find themselves, stations in life that they have chosen for themselves according to the freedom we have in Christ. Thus husbands and wives serve him when they serve one another in keeping with God's Word (Ephesians 5:22-25), parents serve him when they raise their children according to the Word of God, and children serve him when they are obedient (Ephesians 6:1-4). Employers and employees serve him when they deal with one another honestly and in the fear of God (Ephesians 6:5-9). Citizens serve him when they obey divinely instituted governmental authority (Romans 13:1-7). We all in our stations serve him when we love one another and act in love according to the Word of God (Romans 13:8-10). Additionally and especially we serve him when we carry out the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) and individually as we collectively share the saving gospel with the dying world. We serve him when we do the primary work which he has given the Church on earth to do, when we forgive sins and thus open paradise to the fallen (Matthew 16:17-19, 18:15-18, John 20:21-23). We even serve him and serve him best when we eagerly receive all that he wants to give us in his holy Word (Luke 10:41-42).

The amazing thing about all of this is that such service is a delight to God, a joy to the new man in us, and necessary for the conversion of those whom God still calls and gathers through the life giving gospel. Through our ministry as Christians on our best day remains imperfect and is in need of pardon, though it contributes not in the least to our earning or deserving salvation, nevertheless the forgiving and ever gracious Savior declares of even the works that seem smallest and most insignificant to men: *I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me (Matthew 25:40)*. Even in this life that ministry of Christians serves in the interests of the preaching and teaching of the Gospel, as Jesus indicates, when he tells us: *Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16)*.

Let no one disparage the ministry of Christians to the world and to one another, and speak of it or treat it as though it were of no importance, or as though the only important ministry

were that of the public proclaimers of the Gospel! Christ cherishes that ministry and calls it to the attention of the entire world on the last day. Those do a great disservice to the church and act contrary to the Word of God who imagine that the only real ministry is in the pulpit and the classroom. Those harm their own souls and will doubtless also harm the church who prepare for the public ministry of the church because they think that it is only in the public ministry that God is served. Such seem to think that it is almost a sin to be a layman.

Thus if we understand the word *ministry* in its first sense as meaning the *service* of Christians, prompted by the grace of God in Christ, *service* that flows from faith in Christ, *service* that is offered not to earn salvation or forgiveness but to reflect gratitude for and joy in that salvation, then all Christians have a ministry by virtue of the fact that they are Christians.

But we also use the term *ministry* in a particular sense to refer to that divinely established office or function of the public preaching and teaching of the gospel. While Jesus gave no specific instruction for the establishment of a priestly caste in the New Testament, he makes it clear already in the Great Commission that there will be those who devote themselves to the public preaching and teaching of the Gospel.

He tells the entire Church in every age: *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you* (Matthew 28:19-20).

But not all have the talents necessary to carry out this mighty and gracious command of Christ. While (as indicated above) all the works of Christians as Christians serve the goal of making disciples, especially their witnessing to their faith, not all are able to teach. Indeed no one person can do everything contained in the Great Commission.

Therefore Jesus has distributed various gifts to the Church. These gifts are found in varying degrees in individual Christians for the reaching of the goal given us in the Great Commission. Not the least of his gifts to the Church are gifted people he himself calls for the purpose of preaching and teaching. He gave the apostles and prophets, and he still gives pastors and teachers so that through them Christians may grow in their knowledge and others may be brought into the possession of the saving faith through the preaching and teaching of his Word (Ephesians 4:11-13. Romans 10:14-15, I Corinthians 1:21).

Those who carry out this ministry of preaching and teaching are distinguished from other Christians, not as being better or more important, but as having this special function from God. St. Paul says, for example, of the elders in the church at Ephesus that the Holy Ghost has made them overseers to be shepherds in the church (Acts 20:28). The writer to the Hebrews exhorts those who hear the Word to obey those who teach it, because the ones teaching must give an account to God for their stewardship of that saving office (Hebrews 13:7,17). Jesus beautifully depicts the relationship between himself and those who bring his Word when he picture them as stars that he holds in his right hand as he walks in the midst of the candlesticks, i.e., his churches (Revelation 1:12-16).

Thus this function of publicly preaching and teaching the gospel is not a mere human arrangement or a convenience, but an office rooted in the Great Commission, a function that has its origin with God himself. St. Paul speaks of himself and of all who are joined with him in that divinely established work of publicly preaching and teaching the Gospel when he says: *We are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building* (I Corinthians 3:9) and: *So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God* (I Corinthians 4:1). What greater honor could there be than this one, that God would select mere mortals to be his own co-workers in the greatest task in all the world, that of saving men, yes, of bringing the universal priesthood of all believers over and over again into being through the preaching of the gospel, just as the Apostle says: *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God* (II Corinthians 5:20).

But lest we miss the narrow Lutheran middle road between two false extremes the Scriptures stress repeatedly that this office has not been established for the glory of its occupants but for the glory of the Savior and for the benefit of his church. The lives of the apostles and prophets make clear the surpassing greatness of the work and its object, the church, as compared with the occupants of the office. As far as we know all of the apostles except one died the death of martyrs for the sake of that work, just as all of the Old Testament prophets were persecuted and rejected because of their faithfulness to the coming Savior and his Word. Jesus called the apostles to the high calling of lowliness, to the great ambition of servanthood (Matthew 20:26), and promises those who bear his gospel message that they will be persecuted for it (Matthew 10:16-25). St. Paul says of himself and his co-workers that Christ had given them entirely for the benefit of the church and for the service of the church (I Corinthians 4:9-13, II Corinthians 12:15). St. Peter exhorts all of his fellow pastors to see to it that their ambition is exercised in an eagerness to serve, not to lord it over the flock of Christ (I Peter 5:1-4).

When the servant of Christ is but a spectacle and a laughing stock for the sake of the gospel, he merely follows in the footsteps of Christ and the apostles. If one does not wish to run that risk in faithfulness to the gospel or is unwilling to be used and used up for the sake of him who established this sacred work, then he should do something else with his life. For the essence of this work of preaching and teaching the gospel is faithfulness to that gospel and to the Savior who is its all in all (I Corinthians 4:2-4). Christ gives an abundance of talents and skills to his pastors and teachers, and he makes use of all the individual talents that he has given to them in ways that make an eternal difference; nevertheless they should see themselves as nothing more than the feet and the voice of another. That was St. John the Baptist's claim to fame (John 1:23). That was the glory of the ministry for St. Paul (Romans 10:15). Would the preachers and teachers who follow in their train want more glory than they claimed? May it never be!

If then all Christians are priests and have the universal honor and obligation to proclaim the gospel and forgive sins, to serve Christ in hearing and holding to his Word and all that it commands and gives, and if at the same time Christ himself has established the public ministry of preaching and teaching his Word, how does one pass from the ministry entrusted to the whole church to the public ministry of the gospel? All Christians have their ministry entrusted to them

as a result of faith in Christ. The public pastors and teachers of the church have their particular ministry entrusted to them by a *call*.

In every age God has raised up to himself those who are charged with the public proclamation of his Word. And always that charge was given by a definite and clear *call*. In the case of the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New Testament that call was direct (immediate) and often very dramatic. We think for example of Moses and the fiery bush (Exodus 3), of Isaiah's vision of the temple (Isaiah 6). In the New Testament Jesus personally and directly called and personally taught each of the twelve apostles and St. Paul. The one thing that all of these individual calls have in common is this, that they were from God, God's choice, not from the will of the individuals called. The prophets and apostles did not decide on their own to be public ministers of the gospel. Their calls were not the result of their own feeling that this is what they wanted and thought themselves fit for. To put it another way: their calls were not internal, but external; the call always came from outside themselves, not inside themselves. It is safe to say that in each case there was some external proof or evidence, some kind of external confirmation from God that those called immediately were indeed called by God—not merely imagining that they were called by God.

God still calls, and it is still an external call which places one in the public ministry of the church. The only difference between the external call now and the call of Christ to the prophets and the apostles is the manner of the calling. The call is no longer a direct or immediate one—Christ never promised that he would speak immediately and regularly to the church after his ascension. He speaks through his written Word, the Bible; that's why he gave it. Thus calls already in the early church were extended indirectly, mediately, through the church, to which Christ gave the Great Commission. While the Book of Acts still has some called immediately to the public ministry of the church, that does not appear to be the norm. Instead the various churches have elders, deacons, or bishops for the public administration of the means of grace, the gospel in Word and Sacraments. Paul and Barnabas arranged for such in the missionary churches (Acts 14:23). St. Paul tells us that preachers need to be sent (Romans 10:15). He gives careful instructions to Timothy and Titus concerning the qualifications for those who would be called to the public ministry of the church (1 Timothy 3, Titus 1).

Indeed in the history of the church from its earliest days those who merely felt an inward call, some imagined whisper from the Lord in their ears, some emotional tug or pull to preach the gospel publically have invariably been heretics. St. Paul rebukes such self appointed apostles and teachers who were not called by the church in 1 Corinthians 10-11, throughout the Epistle to the Galatians, in 1 Timothy and elsewhere. St. John warns the church to watch out for such as have not been sent, but have gone out on their own (1 John 4:1), as does St. Peter (1 Peter 2).

The exact manner in which the call of Christ is extended is not prescribed for us in the Scriptures. There is an emphasis on the fact that people should be called and on the qualifications of those called, but the manner of the external call is largely left to the sanctified judgement of the church. From the time of the apostles the church has elected or appointed the public ministers of Christ, while at the same time maintaining that the call is ultimately from God, as St. Paul also testifies concerning the elders at Ephesus (Acts 20:28).

Thus in our day, when the church needs public servants to carry out one or many aspects of the Great Commission, we extend Christ's call to people who have the necessary character, training and ability to meet those specific needs, whether as a parish pastor, a school teacher, professor to help train still other pastors and teachers, a synodical official, a counsellor in a social welfare agency of the church or for any of a number of other functions needed and useful for the carrying out of the Great Commission. And so the circle is completed and in every age repeated: Christ creates and strengthens the Church through the public ministry of the gospel; the Church thus created and strengthened calls still others in the name of Christ to preach and teach the gospel at home and in all the world.

You have come to consider the question: Is this the time for me to prepare for the public ministry? Given all that we have said about the ministry and the call, by what criteria should you answer that question? You do not now have a call to be a pastor or a teacher of the church. That can only come from and through the church. God has not promised to whisper in your ear; to think otherwise is a dangerous delusion. Those who prepare for the public ministry of the church do so with the prayer that one day they may pray with Isaiah: Here I am; send me! and receive Christ's answer through the church: Go! I have sent you!

Is this the time for you to prepare to offer Isaiah's prayer? Those seeking to answer that question need to look first and foremost to the gospel. It is through the saving message of forgiveness and salvation that the desire is born and the longing is created to make the work of sharing that saving gospel a life time work. The future pastor or teacher of the church is first overwhelmed by that fundamental, all important truth: Christ Jesus came to save the world, and therefore he came also for me, even for me; oh that I might live to give what I have received! That desire is good and God pleasing, as St. Paul tells us (I Timothy 3:1). That is a proper motivation, the only proper motivation.

Someone who is driven by the law does not have a proper motivation for what is essentially a *gospel* ministry. We encounter such in our student body from time to time who are driven by guilt to seek the ministry. They reason thus: since sharing the gospel is the most important work in the world, I should want to do it; if I don't do it, I'll be turning my back on God, letting him down. That's not how it works. Only God can give the ability, and only God can give the desire. It is not a sin to want to serve God as a layman.

In point of fact for some it would be better for them to continue to serve as laymen, God may have given an ardent love for the gospel and its proclamation. But at the same time the individual may have numerous obligations that make it clear that the full time public ministry will have to be left to someone else. For if someone with large debts were to leave those debts unpaid, while he pursues the public ministry that would not be God pleasing. Those whose family responsibilities would have to be neglected in order to study for the ministry need to remember that the responsibilities of a husband and father come from God too. To neglect divinely given obligations in order to pursue a call into public ministry is likewise not God pleasing. Such a one will not be able to meet some of the most important qualifications for the ministry (I Timothy 3:5) and at the same time risks falling under judgement of God. (I Timothy 5:8).

The point is that God provides his dear children with many choices that he leaves us free to make as we seek to devote our lives to him. If you meet the restrictions that St. Paul outlines in I Timothy 3, i.e., if you have not made other choices which eliminate the public ministry as a choice, if you have the abilities which come from God to study successfully those things that the church needs her public pastors and teachers to know, if you have the desire and the freedom to make the sacrifices necessary for such study and for the life of a called servant of Christ, then this may very well be the time. The choice then is yours to make, whether to serve him as a faithful layman or to prepare for the day when he may be pleased to call you into his public ministry.

God provides you with the opportunity to consider that choice and to make that decision. But he does not make it for you. Whether you decide that this is the time to come to us or the time to remain in God's service at home, we are confident on the basis of his Word that your very desire to consider such a choice pleases him (I Timothy 3:1). If you decide to remain in his service at home, we pray that he will continue to bless that choice. If you decide to study for the public ministry of the church, we pray that he will also bless that choice. If there is anything that we can do to help you make that decision which is best in your current circumstances, please let us know. In whatever ways we may assist you, in whatever you decide to do, may God our Savior be glorified!