

Discerning the Call from Charles Spurgeon

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We must recognize that the New Testament gives us clear guidelines to what qualifications should already be evident in the life of the man who would hold the office of pastor. However, just because one might give evidence of meeting the qualifications it does not automatically suggest that he should serve in the pastoral office. The qualifications are spiritual characteristics that all believers should strive for and we would hope many, even most would walk in a life that exemplifies these characteristics. So how would one, after examining the qualifications, assess that he is certainly qualified and called to the pastoral ministry?

Would you agree that to make such a declaration would appear somewhat arrogant? So what should we suggest to those that are wrestling with a call to preach and a call to pastor? I believe one of the classic answers is found in Spurgeon's Lectures to My Students, in the second chapter entitled, "The Call to the Ministry."

Spurgeon gives at least five signs he believes are present in the life and circumstances of one genuinely called to ministry:[1]

An intense, all-absorbing desire for the work. We have all heard, "If you can do anything else, then do it!" Spurgeon argued that if you could be content doing any other work then you most certainly should do it. He exclaimed, "A man so filled with God would utterly weary of any pursuit but that for which his inmost soul pants." Spurgeon clarifies that this desire must be one that is God honoring not self-promoting. He explains, "If a man can detect, after the most earnest self-examination, any other motive than the glory of God and the good of souls in his seeking the bishopric, he had better turn aside from it at once; for the Lord will abhor the bringing of buyers and sellers into his temple."

Aptness to teach and some measure of the other qualities needful for the office of a public instructor. There should be some level of giftedness for the work, certainly the Lord can supernaturally fill the void, but normally there would be a level of readiness for the duties required in the work of the office.

He must see a measure of conversion work going on under his efforts or he may conclude that he has made a mistake. Spurgeon argues that if a man is genuinely called to preach he will see a measure of conversion work taking place in his preaching and ministry efforts. He writes, "I could never be satisfied with a full congregation, and the kind expression of friends; I longed to hear that hearts had been broken, that tears had been streaming from the eyes of the penitents . . . there must be some measure of

conversion work in your irregular labors before you can believe that preaching is to be your lifework.” He continues by declaring he cannot understand “how men continue at ease in preaching year after year without conversions.” He concludes, “The meanest occupation confers some benefit upon mankind, but the wretched man who occupies the pulpit and never glorifies his God by conversions is a blank, a blot, an eyesore, a mischief . . . and meanwhile the transient barrenness will fill the soul with unutterable anguish. Brethren, if the Lord gives you no zeal for souls, keep to the lapstone or the trowel, but avoid the pulpit as you value your heart’s peace and your future salvation.’

I would argue that the pastor that preaches year after year and sees no one come to Christ, and it does NOT burden his soul, is not worthy of the call of Christ Jesus!

The will of the Lord concerning pastors is made know through the prayerful judgment of his church. Spurgeon is right when he declares that the church is a powerful authority on the legitimacy and genuineness of one’s calling. He writes, “Churches are not all wise, neither do they all judge in the power of the Holy Ghost, but many of them judge after the flesh; yet I had sooner accept the opinion of a company of the Lord’s people than my own upon so personal a subject as my own gifts and graces.”

If an individual claims the call of God on his life, but does not have the confirmation of a local body of believers, it should cause great hesitation on the part of those who might consider coming under his teaching.

If your call from the Lord be a real one you will not long be silent. God will grant opportunity to those He has called to serve him in preaching and in the office of the pastor. Spurgeon warns, “Do not run about inviting yourselves to preach here and there; be more concerned about your ability than your opportunity, and more earnest about your walk with God than about either.

We must consider a word of warning in the area of opportunity so that we not too narrowly define what is an opportunity. If you are not willing to serve the Lord in proclaiming the gospel in a less prominent venue, than you are not worthy to represent the Lord in any venue.

There is value in Spurgeon’s description of how one might know they ARE called to the ministry, but he gives several ways someone might know they are NOT called as well.

– “Young brethren apply who earnestly desire to enter the ministry, but it is painfully apparent that their main motive is an ambitious desire to shine among men.” Spurgeon explains, “They have embraced the idea that if they entered the ministry they

would be greatly distinguished; they have felt the buddings of genius, and have regarded themselves as greater than ordinary persons, and, therefore, they have looked upon the ministry as a platform upon which to display their supposed abilities.” He concludes, “We find that we have nothing whereof to glory, and if we had, the very worst place in which to hang it out would be a pulpit; for there we are brought daily to feel our own insignificance and nothingness.”

– “So, too, those who cannot endure hardness, but are of the kid-gloved order, I refer elsewhere.” If you get your feelings hurt easily, you might want to avoid the pulpit.

– “One brother I have encountered—one did I say? I have met ten, twenty, a hundred brethren, who have pleaded that they were sure, quite sure that they were called to the ministry—they were quite certain of it, because they had failed in everything else.”

– Here is one that may have been rectified since Spurgeon’s day, but still interesting. Spurgeon writes, “That narrow chest does not indicate a man formed for public speech. You may think it odd, but still I feel very well assured, that when a man has a contracted chest, with no distance between his shoulders, the all-wise Creator did not intend him habitually to preach. If he had meant him to speak he would have given him in some measure breadth of chest, sufficient to yield a reasonable amount of lung force.”

I would add at least one more attitude that shows me one is not genuinely called to pastor and that is if they have what I call the “Mighty Mouse” syndrome. If you remember the cartoon from the 1980’s when the superhero mouse would get ready to leap into action he would yell, “Here I come to save the day!” There seems to be way too many preachers who think the church has lamented for hundreds of years and now finally here they are to save the poor thing.

Let me assure all of us, Christ’s church is not in need of a Savior, she already has a spotless One! However, in God’s sovereign plan I do believe she could benefit from a flood of God-called, Spirit-filled, Biblically qualified, passionately evangelistic, and theologically sound pastors!

[1] Unless otherwise noted quotes and information are gleaned from C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to my Students*, Reprint (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2010), 22–4