

THE MODERN
INTERPRETATION OF THE
CALL TO THE MINISTRY

BOSWORTH

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BY

EDWARD INCREASE BOSWORTH
DEAN OF OBERLIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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The Claims and Opportunities of the Christian Ministry

A SERIES OF PAMPHLETS

EDITED BY JOHN R. MOTT

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THE MODERN INTERPRETATION OF A CALL TO THE MINISTRY

A "call" to the ministry is usually understood to mean a conviction that God summons a man to the work of the Christian ministry. Can the so-called "modern man" believe that God does ever "call" a man to the ministry or to any other life-work? And if God does, how shall a man recognize the summons? In what form will it come?

Does God call men to their life-work?

The relation of God to the aspirations and choices of all the countless individual souls in His universe is too large a subject for discussion here. Jesus' fundamental teaching regarding the Fatherhood of God may be assumed. According to this teaching, since God is our Father, the lives of His children can not fail to be supremely interesting to Him. Even lesser things, like the fluttering fall of a short-lived bird, interest Him. With how much greater con-

cern will He view the enduring life of His children! He will have preferences regarding their choices. He is near to the spirits of His children, and will have ways of making His preferences known.

“Closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet.” Through the infinite up-push of the Spirit of God in the soul of a man, which we call the sense of duty, God can make known the preferences of His infinite love regarding the choices to be made by His human child. Among the more important of these choices is the choice of a life-work. Therefore, when one has had the courage to venture out unreservedly after Jesus upon the assumption that there is a Fatherly God, there is no difficulty in assuming that He actually summons men to their life-work.

Whatever one's life-work be, he must feel that it has been undertaken because God summons him to it. He decides to be a lawyer because he believes that God has summoned him to the lawyer's career, in order that, as a lawyer, he may be the champion of fair play and so make his best contribution to the on-coming civilization of the brotherly sons of God. Or he becomes a business man, because he believes

that in business life he can best promote the interests of the civilization of friendly workmen, which we call the Kingdom of God. Whatever any man does as his life-work he is to do "in the name of the Lord Jesus," with full measure of Jesus' devotion to the interests of the New Order. In our day the minister may no longer assume for himself some larger share of God's interest than is granted to other men. The young minister simply waited among his fellows, in the great assignment of opportunity, for God to call him to his life-work. God called him to the ministry, and the same God called his friend to the law.

Most of us see the logical necessity of believing that God does direct men in the choice of a life-work. Our difficulty comes in the effort to recognize God's call. How shall an undergraduate find out whether or not God wills that the Christian ministry shall be his life-work?

How shall a man recognize the call of God to the Christian ministry?

If the Almighty God made his preferences absolutely and instantaneously clear, our frail personalities would be so overwhelmed as to have no chance

for the deliberate reflection and initiative that are requisite for character. We are not to be surprised, therefore, by finding that God generally makes the discovery of His will regarding the details of conduct a somewhat slow and character-making process. Our concern is to pass through the process with such industry and conscientiousness in investigation and reflection as surely to be better men at the end of the process than at its beginning.

1. In the process of finding out whether or not God calls a man to the Christian ministry, it is necessary to gain information regarding the opportunities for usefulness afforded by the Christian ministry. One must know what the Christian ministry really is. He must see with some clearness the real contribution made by the Christian minister to the welfare of the community. It is beyond the province of the present discussion to describe this contribution in detail. In brief it is threefold:

The minister is the one to whom all classes and ages in the community may feel that they have a right to come for help in all sorts of emergency. Men in other professions prepare to meet only a certain class of needs, or the needs of a certain class.

But to the minister anyone may come for any kind of help. He is *the* minister. If he can not give the help needed—as in very many cases he can not—he will, in Christ's name, try to find some one who can. He will himself always be ready to give personal help of one vital and fundamentally important kind, help in character-making. He is the specialist in character.

The minister is the one who preaches what we commonly call the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the public on the Sabbath day, and at other times when he finds groups of men ready for his great message. The public church service is to be the centre of inspiration for the life of the community. Men and women who are doing the work of industrial, business, and domestic life, come there weary and heavy laden, but go away spiritually invigorated. All who are engaged in specific forms of philanthropic and religious work, social settlement workers and secretaries of the Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations, should be able to find there, in the clear vision of Christ and His Gospel, fresh inspiration for another week's work.

The minister is the leader of the organization

called a church of Jesus Christ. He studies to secure the development of the life of all its members, young and old. He organizes its activities and relates them to the progress of Christianity in the world. He brings it into contact with the life of the community at any point where such contact will help every man to a better chance for all good things. He discerns opportunity in the community for enterprises, vitally religious in their character, and large enough in their dimensions to enlist the enthusiastic personal effort of the gifted laymen of his church, who are accustomed to leadership in the large undertakings of business and professional life in the community. All the educational, social, ethical, and religious interests of the community appeal to him. He not only preaches the Gospel but he is also the leader of his church in the application of the Gospel to the life of the community.

The work of the minister, so conceived, is large in its scope and diversified in its opportunity. The man who is trying to ascertain whether or not he is called to the ministry will surely make a thorough, conscientious study of the contribution to be made to the community by the minister and his church.

In doing this it is sometimes necessary to shake off the memory of some church, whose minister has not been alive to his opportunity, and whose contribution to the welfare of the community is so meager and indistinct as to make his ministry decidedly unattractive to an earnest man; or the memory of some minister "called" to the ministry by no higher authority than the demand of his own selfishness, to whom the ministry is simply a profession which he entered with the hope of making himself a reputation, and to whom the pulpit is simply a place for the display of "platform gifts." These men are the rare exceptions. There are thousands of men who are finding the ministry to be a great opportunity into which they are throwing themselves with unselfish enthusiasm and with increasing satisfaction. Here is the recent clear testimony of one of them, Dr. William Allen Knight: "In numberless American communities are pastors who are successful, trusted, free from undue restraints in thought and utterance, sure of kindness and fair treatment and magnanimity on the part of their parishioners as a whole, and above all happy in the certainty of vital relations with poor and rich, youth and adult, men and women,

church and town. They have adversities to be sure, as most men in responsible positions do, but they face them as all men must who make up

‘The host that heeds not hurt nor scar
Led by the bright and morning star.’”

These men are not found exclusively in great city churches, but in village and country churches, which present opportunities as vitally connected with the welfare of the nation as are those of the city pastorate, and fully as interesting when once they are realized.

Some of these successful men should be consulted and pains be taken to get their point of view. Biographies of successful ministers should be read, such as Allen's biography of Phillips Brooks, either the longer or shorter edition, Lyman Abbott's "Henry Ward Beecher," Munger's "Life of Horace Bushnell." There are also good books describing the modern minister's opportunity. Perhaps the most comprehensive and thorough of these is Washington Gladden's recently published book, "The Christian Pastor and the Working Church." Less technical and more inspirational in its type is Lyman Abbott's

“The Christian Ministry.” An exceedingly interesting report of personal experience is W. S. Rainsford’s “A Preacher’s Story of His Work.”

In the process of gaining information about the opportunity afforded by the ministry, account must be taken of the demand for ministers. Whether or not one should consider himself called to the ministry depends not simply upon the value of the minister’s contribution, but also upon the number who are preparing to make that contribution. An earnest man wishes to find where he is really needed. He wishes to do some valuable service which is not likely to be done unless he does it. He does not wish to bring his re-enforcement to a point on the line which is already amply manned, but to a point where re-enforcement is demanded. It is an open secret that, while some occupations are over-crowded, for some decades the number of strong men entering the ministry has been insufficient. This may result in forcing small neighboring churches of different denominations to combine, and in securing to the minister a clearer field for work and more adequate financial recognition. But when allowance has been made for such desirable results, the fact remains

that the Church is likely to be confronted by a very serious situation twenty, or even ten, years hence.

An insufficient or an inefficient ministry means a weakened Church, and a weakened Church means weakness in all philanthropic organizations, for they draw their strength and inspiration directly or indirectly from the Church. A recognized leader in the Young Men's Christian Association has said that if the Church should lose its vitality the Young Men's Christian Association would become extinct. It is not in place here to discuss in detail the demand for ministers. It is simply proper here to say that the matter must be investigated by the man who is trying to ascertain whether or not he is called to the ministry. He can enter into correspondence with suitable authorities in the body of Christians to which he belongs, and easily ascertain from them what are the exact facts in his own church.

2. When a man has investigated the nature of the contribution made by the minister to the welfare of the community and sees its value, he must try to see whether he can make this contribution, whether he has the qualities requisite for success in the ministry.

Here again the limits of the subject prevent a detailed discussion of what these qualities are. A bare enumeration of them would include the following: convictions born of experience regarding the fundamental truths of the Christian religion; such quick strong sympathy with men as will transform these convictions into message and action, into a passion for character, into a Pauline resolution "by all means to save some"; sufficient skill in public speech to command attention to the message; some administrative ability; readiness to consider suggestions and to profit by friendly and unfriendly criticism; common sense; and a capacity for hard work.

As a man looks for these qualities in himself he must not expect to find them all fully developed. He cannot expect, for instance, to possess positive, well-developed convictions upon all points of theology, for such convictions grow out of a religious experience and it takes time to produce such an experience. Neither can he expect at once to produce two sermons a week. The ability to do this apparently impossible thing will come in time, as it has come to thousands of men no more gifted than he is. He must be content if he sees only the encouraging be-

ginnings of the qualities which make for success when developed.

Furthermore, he must not require in himself qualities requisite for the success of a Beecher or a Spurgeon. We are most of us simply average men, capable of an average man's success in any calling. A man must not turn away from the ministry because he does not find himself possessed of qualities that would yield him the success of a Spurgeon, any more than he would turn away from the law because he could not be a Webster, or from the work of an electrician because he could not be an Edison. The great work of the world in all occupations is done by average men.

In trying to ascertain his fitness for the ministry he will sometimes be helped by the opinions of him formed by those who know him best. In considering the opinions of his friends, however, it is necessary to be sure that they are Christian men who are themselves controlled by the supreme motives of the religious life.

Perhaps the very best way to ascertain his fitness for the work is to try it in some preliminary and temporary form. Most college students have oppor-

tunity to engage in mission work, either in the city mission or in the country schoolhouse, in Christian Endeavor work, in Sunday school teaching, or in the work connected with the Young Men's Christian Association. In some of these ways a man may see whether he has not some of the qualities requisite for success in the ministry. Many college juniors and seniors are sufficiently mature to offer themselves to a home missionary superintendent for a summer of work in the newer states, or in the needy districts of some of the older states. Many who come to the theological seminary today come from a year or more of preaching after graduation from college. There may be some objections to this practice, but the men who come to the seminary from such an experience generally know that they are called to the ministry, and they are eagerly appreciative of all that a modern seminary curriculum offers.

By such practical testing of himself in some preliminary and temporary form of work, a man also puts himself in the way of recognizing God's call, as many men have recognized it, namely, through providential circumstances. Some little church or mission finds in him what it wants, lays divinely guided

hands upon him, and decisively draws him into the ministry.

3. Closely connected with what has been already said about the way to recognize the call of God is listening to the inner voice. Many men in the process of doing what has already been suggested are pretty sure to hear the voice of God calling them into the ministry. When they see the work needing to be done and feel in themselves the ability, with God's help, to do it, the sense of obligation comes, and the question is settled. Some, however, are so constituted as to see clearly the contribution made to the welfare of the community by a half dozen occupations, no one of which perhaps, to their minds, stands out as pre-eminently useful. After they have done the best they can to make a discriminating inventory of their qualifications, they seem to have no special bent, and to be about as well adapted to the demands of one as another of several occupations. To such an one there often comes the slowly forming conviction, which he cannot justify by a clear course of reasoning, that God would have him in the ministry. As he prays to God month after month for guidance, some special feature of the minister's opportunity,

or the community's demand for ministers, takes hold of him and becomes a decisive consideration. What at first was a tentative opinion or a wavering feeling becomes, as he prays, a more and more settled conviction, and when the time comes for action he finds himself ready, and at rest in his purpose to become a Christian minister. Perhaps he enters a theological seminary before he has fully reached this point, because it seems simply probable that God would have him in the ministry. After a year in the seminary and especially after a summer in home mission work, he is reasonably sure of himself and ready to go on. Some whose success in the ministry has given most satisfactory evidence that God really did call them to it, have entered it in response to a slowly developing sense of call like that just described.

In all the process by which a man tries to recognize the call of God, the main thing is the honest heart. As he lays the matter before God in prayer month after month, he must repeatedly say with sincerity: "Whatever be my life-work, I will enter upon it because I believe it to be the one in which I can make my largest contribution to human wel-

fare as Jesus conceived it. I may not have much ability, but what I have I will apply where it will count most for human welfare as Jesus conceived it." He will not enter the ministry for the sake of the opportunity afforded by it to gratify intellectual tastes and to secure quick social recognition. Neither will he turn away from it because it affords no opportunity for making money and getting the things that money can buy. The ministry has its hardships of course. A great opportunity anywhere almost always involves correspondingly great difficulties, and calls for correspondingly strenuous endeavor, and glad sacrifice of lesser interests. But it brings with it correspondingly ample rewards. To the man who hears his Lord's call to the Christian ministry and heartily obeys it, there come the unique and unexpected satisfactions that belong to those only who do their Lord's will at a cost. In very few occupations can men win the tribute paid by John Watson to the pastor of his youth: "People turned to him as by instinct in their joys and sorrows; men consulted him in the crises of life, and, as they lay a-dying, committed their wives and children to his care. He was a head to every widow, and a father to the orphans,

and the friend of all lowly, discouraged, unsuccessful souls. Ten miles away people did not know his name, but his own congregation regarded no other, and in the Lord's presence it was well known, it was often mentioned; when he laid down his trust, and arrived on the other side, many whom he had fed and guided, and restored and comforted till he saw them through the gates, were waiting to receive their shepherd-minister, and as they stood round him before the Lord, he, of all men, could say without shame, 'Behold, Lord, thine under-shepherd, and the flock thou didst give me.'"¹

Such a minister hears the call of God sounding with increasing distinctness in his soul through all the years of his responding ministry, until summons merges into plaudit, and he enters fully into that joy of his Lord which, in lesser measure, has long been the habit of his soul. If one can justly convince himself that the Almighty God is actually calling him to the Christian ministry, he has reason to rise and, with the vision of the ministering Son of Man before him, bless God.

¹ "The Cure of Souls," p. 242.

