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Preaching, The Higher Calling

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In considering the “call” to preaching ministry, we are dealing with a New Testament concept represented by the Greek verb *kaleo* and its noun form, *klesis*. The noun, translated “calling,” appears eleven times in the New Testament—all eleven, in the epistles.¹ In all of these texts except one,² it represents a heavenly invitation. “It is used especially,” Vine says, “of God’s invitation to man to accept the benefits of salvation.”³ For example, in Ephesians 1:17–18, Paul prays that God “may give unto you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him; having the eyes of your heart enlightened, that ye may know what is the hope of his calling.” And Paul says in Romans 11:20 that “the gifts and the calling of God are not repented of.” In Philippians 3:14, he declares that he will “press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

The verb *kaleo* has two connotations, one of which is “to be called by a name” or “to name,” as in Matthew 1:21, “Thou shalt call his name Jesus,” or in Acts 11:26, “The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.” But the primary meaning of this verb is “to invite or summon,” and “it is used particularly of the divine call to partake of the blessings of redemption.”⁴ That is its almost exclusive mean-

ing in Romans and the other epistles.

For example, in Romans 8:28–30 Paul says, “For we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are *called* according to his purpose . . . and whom he foreordained, them he also *called*. . .” Or, 1 Corinthians 1:9, “God is faithful, through whom ye were *called* into the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.” Or, 2 Thessalonians 2:14, “He (God) *called* you through our gospel.” And in 1 Peter 2:9, “But ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that ye may show forth the excellencies of him who *called* you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

There are several texts in which the noun and verb appear together in the same verse and illuminate each other. For example, in Ephesians 4:1 Paul writes, “I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthily of the *calling* wherewith ye were *called*. . .” Or, 2 Timothy 1:8–9, Paul speaks of God who saved us and *called* us with a holy *calling*.

It is significant that the verb *kaleo* begins almost exclusively to take on the doctrinal meaning of God’s calling individuals to discipleship in that part of the New Testa-

ment in which the noun *klesis* is found. We have already noted that this noun, translated “calling,” appears only in the epistles, and that in ten of the eleven times it is used, the word represents God’s invitation to people to accept the salvation that is available through Christ.

This call comes to all men, and it is the preacher’s *primary* call. But preachers have also heard and responded to a *second* call, a call to be evangelists or ministers of the gospel. Although they are not today called through a dramatic confrontation by the Lord as was Paul, they nevertheless walk their own Damascus Road. Recognizing their lostness without Jesus, and being grateful for their salvation; becoming deeply concerned that other lost men and women need to hear the “Good News” from God; and being aware that their intellectual, emotional, and spiritual resources suggest an aptitude for the work, they commit themselves to the work of preaching.

It is this sense of divine call that supplies the preacher’s motivation, the inner compulsion that says with Paul, “Necessity is laid upon me: for woe is me if I preach not the gospel.”⁵ And if it is appropriate to refer to the call to discipleship as “the high calling of God,” I believe it is not inappropriate to refer to the call to preaching ministry as “the higher calling.” Not higher in terms of place or position, but higher in terms of opportunity and responsibility.

Some wonderful blessings are inherent in the ministry of preaching, not the least of which is the importance of the work. Many vocations make positive contributions to the general well-being of the people whose lives they touch, but the preacher’s work seeks to improve people’s lot both in the here and now and throughout eternity.

Another blessing that inheres in preaching ministry is the association with and affection of the best people on earth. The preacher will necessarily reach out in friendship and service to the larger community in which he lives, but most of his time and energy will be spent with the spiritual family with whom he ministers and with whom he shares encouragement and support.

Surely one of the greatest blessings of the preacher’s life is the opportunity for in-depth and continuing study of the Bible and related materials. Fellow Christians will share his interest in Bible study, and some of them will plan their busy schedules to include quiet time for study and meditation. But the preacher’s *vocation* includes quality and quantity time for this purpose.

While the call to preach brings blessings and opportunities, it also imposes requirements and responsibilities.

Fundamental among them is the requirement of a godly life. Paul charged the young preacher Timothy, “[B]e thou an example to them that believe in word, in manner of life, in love, in faith in purity. . . . *Take heed to thyself.* . . .”⁶ Although the preacher will not present himself as the model for his hearers’ lives—that model is our Lord himself—they will judge the genuineness of his ministry by the quality of his life.

Some of the texts that have enabled us to define the New Testament meaning of “call” and “calling” make clear that God requires the response of a changed life. To those texts, I here add another to emphasize that imperative.

Finally then, brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, as you received of us how you ought to walk and to please God, even as you do walk, that you abound more and more. For you know what charge we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to possess himself of his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in the passion of lust, even as the Gentiles who know not God; that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in the matter: because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as also we forewarned you and testified. For God called us not for uncleanness, but in sanctification.⁷

If these words from Paul and Peter are appropriate challenges for all Christians, how much more they should command the attention of those who say “yes” to God’s call to preach the gospel.

Another requirement inherent in the call to preach is thorough preparation. I have spoken of the opportunity for study as one of the preacher’s joys, but the regular and unrelenting demand of specific preparation can become one of his burdens. Purpose and self-discipline are required to plan and maintain a schedule that will include ample time for preparation.

A third obligation of the preacher concerns the integrity of his message. Paul referred to himself and other preachers as “ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God,” and he added that “it is required of stewards that a man be found faithful.”⁸ The message of God’s preacher-stewards, today as then, is specified in the commission Jesus gave his apostles shortly before his ascension. Mark records that Jesus “said to them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that

believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned.”⁹ Matthew’s account repeats Mark in different words, and adds a second element: “teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”¹⁰ From that day to this, preachers have had the dual role of preaching the gospel and instructing those who accept it in the life-response to which Jesus calls his

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disciples. At the center of each of these roles stands the cross of Jesus.¹¹ Peter’s sermon at Jerusalem in Acts 2¹² gives us an example of what “preaching the gospel” actually is, and the preaching of Peter and others in Acts 3, 8, and 10 provides additional insights.¹³

But it is to the preaching and writings of Paul, that transformed Pharisee, that we must turn for an elaboration of the preacher’s message. Paul was converted in Acts 9, and he immediately began to preach “the faith of which he had once made havoc.”¹⁴ The content of Paul’s preaching is indicated in Acts by such phrases as (a) “proclaimed Jesus, that he is the Son of God”; (b) “preached Jesus and the resurrection”; (c) “teaching the word of God”; (d) “reasoning and persuading as to the things concerning the kingdom of God”; and (e) “establishing all the disciples.”¹⁵

Acts also records some examples of Paul’s preaching.¹⁶ In Acts 20:18–27, he gives his own summary of his preaching message: “I shrank not from declaring unto you anything that was not profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, testifying to both Jews and Greeks righteousness toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ . . . that I may accomplish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God. . . . I shrank not from declaring unto you the whole counsel of God.”

In his letters, Paul tells us what preaching must be. He says that he preaches the gospel and that he is not ashamed of it, for the gospel “is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.”¹⁷ He wrote to the church in Corinth that “it was God’s good pleasure through the foolishness of the preaching to save them that believe,”¹⁸ and he said of his own preaching, “We preach Christ crucified.”¹⁹ In fact, he continued, “I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”²⁰ In a definitive summary,²¹ he concludes, “Now I make known unto you, brethren, the gospel, which I preached unto you, which also ye received, wherein also ye stand, by which ye also are saved, if ye hold fast the word which I preached unto you, except ye believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which also I received: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried; and that he hath been raised on the third day according to the scriptures.”

Near the end of his life, Paul wrote his second letter to the younger preacher Timothy, giving him a final charge concerning his ministry. He reminded Timothy of “the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of” and of “the sacred writings which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus,” and then declared that “[e]very scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness: that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work.”²² Paul then charged Timothy, “In the sight of God and of Christ Jesus . . . and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be urgent in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and teaching. . . . Do the work of an evangelist, fulfill thy ministry.”²³ Vine says that Paul’s phrase “preach the word” is speaking “of the ministry of the scriptures, with special reference to the gospel.”²⁴ That is a reasonable interpretation when the phrase is read in context.

From the commission of Jesus and from the preaching and writings of Paul, we come to a clear conclusion: Proclaiming the gospel and teaching those who accept it to do all things whatsoever Jesus has commanded them—that is preaching, the higher calling.

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Notes

¹W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1985), 87.

²1 Cor 7:20.

³Vine, 87.

⁴Vine, 86.

⁵1 Cor 9:16.

⁶1 Tim 4:12–16.

⁷1 Thess 4:1–7; see also 2 Pet 1:1–11.

⁸1 Cor 4:1–2.

⁹Mark 16:15–16.

¹⁰Matt 28:19–20.

¹¹Two books recently published by Abilene Christian University Press should be “required reading” at this point: *The Core Gospel* by Dr. Bill Love, preaching minister for the Bering Drive Church of Christ in Houston, and *The Cruciform Church* by Dr. Leonard Allen, a professor in the College of Biblical Studies at ACU. Love focuses on the *centrality* of the cross as the ultimate expression of God’s grace

and the power that draws men to Jesus. Allen stresses the *reality* of the cross as the transforming force through which men are shaped into the likeness of Christ.

¹²Acts 2:22–42.

¹³Acts 3:11–26; 8:4–5, 12; 10:34–48.

¹⁴Gal 1:23.

¹⁵a) 9:20; b) 17:18; c) 18:11; d) 19:8; e) 18:23.

¹⁶Paul’s speeches and sermons: 13:16–41; 17:22–31; 22:1–21; 23:1–11; 24:1–21; 26:1–29.

¹⁷Rom 1:15–16.

¹⁸1 Cor 1:21.

¹⁹1 Cor 1:23.

²⁰1 Cor 2:2.

²¹1 Cor 15:1–4.

²²2 Tim 3:14–17.

²³2 Tim 4:1–5.

²⁴Vine, 481.