

Broomfield



PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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The Special Call

The Attributes of a Prophetic Call Part 2

I'll never forget the time I was witnessing to a Mormon endeavoring to share of the good news of Jesus Christ. After about an hour of conversation we came to an impasse: He would not give up his allegiance to the doctrine of the Mormon Church, and I had exhausted every line of argument to try to convince him otherwise.

And then it happened. He got up from his chair. He walked to the door. The he turned and said, "Greg, I prayed to God for a burning in my heart to determine if Mormonism was true. I got that burning and nothing you say will convince me otherwise."

I was floored! This otherwise intelligent man was going to stake his soul on a burning feeling that he experienced in his chest regardless of the overwhelming evidence which demonstrates the erroneous claims of Mormonism.

Now we might marvel at the blind faith of this Mormon; yet many in the Kingdom of God exhibit a similar faith when it comes to discerning a special calling from the Lord. In fact, while most Christians base their salvation on the objective work of Christ on the cross; when it comes to discerning God's call, many of these same Christians act like Mormons.

We ask these questions: "Why do you feel compelled to preach the gospel?" "Why do you believe that God would have you enter the mission field?" "Why are you pursuing theological training?" "Why are you aspiring to the office of overseer?" And an acceptable answer is, "Because I have this burning to do so!"

How do you know if God is calling you unto ministry? How do you evaluate the legitimacy of a call? On what basis will we as a congregation place men in office and send men and women unto the mission field?

We are going to answer these questions by looking at the confusion that surrounds the call of God.

There is no question that in our passage Samuel was called by God unto the prophetic ministry.

1 Samuel 2:2a, 4; “And it happened at that time... that the Lord called Samuel; and he said, 'Here I am.'”

However for a variety of reasons he almost missed that call. Lest we too miss the call of God, let's examine this passage noting first what constitutes a special call from God.

The Confusion

1 Samuel 3:5-8a, “And he ran unto Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou calledst me. And he said, I called not; lie down again. And he went and lay down. And the LORD called yet again, Samuel. And Samuel arose and went to Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou didst call me. And he answered, I called not, my son; lie down again. Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, neither was the word of the LORD yet revealed unto him. And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou didst call me.”

Three times the Lord called Samuel; three times Samuel misunderstood this call– he mistook it for the call of Eli for aid. In fact as we read verses 8b-9, we discover the proper way in which Samuel should have responded to God's call.

1 Samuel 3:8b-9, “And Eli perceived that the LORD had called the child. Therefore Eli said unto Samuel, Go, lie down: and it shall be, if he call thee, that thou shalt say, Speak, LORD; for thy servant heareth. So Samuel went and lay down in his place.”

What Eli taught Samuel was the prophet response to the call of God to ministry.¹

Now in a moment we are going to examine the cause of Samuel's misunderstanding of God's call, yet for now recognize that Samuel is not alone. While Samuel mistook God's call for that of Eli, church history is filled with similar errors. For example, PRIOR TO THE REFORMATION, it was understood that an ecclesiastical call was the only possible calling. The cobbler, the woman by the stream washing clothes, the blacksmith, etc. all were inferior tasks in comparison to the call of the priest or bishop. Yet with the Reformation came the rediscovery of “the priesthood of the believer.” Accordingly it was recognized that no matter what you did as a child in the kingdom of God, your service was holy unto the Lord. Yet the time of the Reformation is not the only time people misunderstood the call of God.

During the SECOND GREAT AWAKENING it was believed that if you merely had the desire to preach, then you were called. Charles Finny and many others on the frontier would come into a town, preach, see “conversions,” and then exhort others to heed the call of God and preach. In fact, this was when the US largely became Arminian. Prior to this, most denominations were Calvinistic in their theology. But after this time, Pelagianism and Arminianism won the day.

Why is that? Because reformed evangelists like Asahel Nettleton preached, and men came forward saying, “I too want to preach!” They were sent back east to schools like Princeton to be trained and

¹ In fact, Eli is criticized here for taking so long to realize that God was calling Samuel. The high priest obviously knew enough about God's prophetic call to instruct Samuel. Again that he took so long to do so indicates how spiritually darkened he had become.

educated – lest in their preaching they lead others astray. But when Finny and others like him spoke, and the same young men expressed the desire to preach with no other examination or questioning these men were ordained on the spot and sent out to preach.

And yet it just wasn't in the past, TODAY FALSE NOTIONS regarding the call of God ABOUND. I have heard testimonies by men and women who claim a special calling. They tell of God speaking to them. Men or women coming up to them saying, “God told me that you are a prophet.” They have this burning in their heart.

Brothers and sisters, what constitutes a “special” calling from the Lord? And by “special” calling, are we implying a higher calling in the Kingdom of God?

First of all² we must recognize that if you are in Christ, then you have been called to ministry.

Ephesians 4:11-12, “And he [God] gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.”

If you have been saved by Christ, then you have been saved to serve in His Kingdom. You are called to bear each other's burdens³, restore the weak⁴, shepherd each other's souls⁵, disciple⁶, and teach⁷. In fact you may find this surprising, but there are few “special callings” from the Lord whose activities are beyond the responsibility of each and everyone in the body of Christ!

Secondly, we recognize with Peter that every calling in the Kingdom of God is important.

1 Peter 2:9, “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.”⁸

In Christ we have been made priest such that all that we do is worship! Accordingly, though some might spend an entire week in prayer and the study of the Scripture yet if you are in Christ, then the work you have done this past week is just as noble!

Thus when we use the term “special” call, we do not imply a more important calling or a higher calling. Each and every one of us has a distinct calling from the Lord — a calling to which we must strive as priests to be faithful and zealous.

Having said this, that is not to say that there is not a special call that God places upon individuals — what we might label an ecclesiastical call. While all have been called to teach, shepherd one another, evangelize, share the gospel, there are some who have been specially set apart unto these ends; ministry, there are some who are called to THE ministry — THE ministry of preaching, pasturing,

² The majority of this section was taken from the teaching of Edmund Clowney in *Called to the Ministry*.

³ Compare Galatians 6:2

⁴ Compare Galatians 6:1

⁵ Compare James 1:27

⁶ Compare Matthew 28:18-20

⁷ Compare Titus 2:3-5

⁸ Compare also 1 Corinthians 12:15-18

teaching, evangelizing, and missions.

Activity vs. Authority

In fact, the key distinction when it comes to a call to ministry and a call to THE ministry is not activity, but the issue of authority.

Matthew 16:19, “And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Here Christ is speaking ultimately of church authority. While all of us are called to care for the souls of the body of Christ⁹ those called to the office of shepherd have been given Christ's authority to do so — they have the “keys of the kingdom of heaven.”

And all of this therefore raises the questions: How do you determine an ecclesiastical calling? What today constitutes a special calling from the Lord?

With the close of the cannon, we do not expect God to call an individual in the same way as He did Samuel, Paul, or Isaiah. These each had a calling that was supernatural in character because they involved visions or dreams. Rather today it is recognized that the special call of ministry contains three elements: Desire, gifting, and recognition.

Thus when it comes to candidates for THE ministry — whether that be the special calling of a missionary, preacher, teacher, shepherd, servant, church planter, evangelist, and the like — we ask three questions:

1. Does the person have the desire? Speaking of the elder, Paul wrote these words: This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work” (1 Timothy 3:1). Jeremiah spoke of his calling to preach this way: “But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay (Jeremiah 20:9). Amos put it this way: The lion hath roared, who will not fear? the Lord GOD hath spoken, who can but prophesy?” (Amos 3:8). All of these indicate desire on the part of the one called.
2. Is the man gifted? Has he shown evidence that God has called him unto THE ministry? For example, speaking of the qualification for the office of shepherd, Paul wrote this: “One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?)” (1 Timothy 3:4-5). When it comes to the call of a shepherd, his home will be one of the determining factors in evaluating his call. Regardless of how much a man may claim the desire to care for the body of Christ, if he is not ministering to the souls of his family — if he is not a shepherd — he obviously is not qualified. Edmund Clowney wrote this: “The call of the Word of God to the gospel ministry comes to ALL those who have the gifts for such a ministry.”¹⁰

Truly one's calling is predicated upon gifts. And so if a gentleman has a desire to preach and

⁹ Compare Galatians 6:1-4

¹⁰ Edmund Clowney, Called to the Ministry, page 79

yet can't, he isn't called. If a person has the passion to share Christ in Italy and yet fails to do so here, they aren't called. If a man says he's been called to be an elder and yet does not shepherd, he isn't called! Truly desire is not enough, there also must be the gifts!

3. Do the God-ordained authorities in the church — as well as the church as a whole — recognize this call? With the close of the canon, it is understood that God's will no longer is determined by special revelation. Rather today it is recognized that one of the ways the Lord works His will is through the government He has placed in His church. As Christ is the only head of the church He has chosen to work His will through the parity and plurality of elders — as seen in Acts 15.

And so we finally ask, “Does the body of Christ agree that a person has been called to such and such a ministry?”

Such is the nature of the special calling of God in Scripture. When Samuel was first called unto the prophetic ministry, he misunderstood the call and so at first missed it! And today we see that a similar error has occurred throughout church history. In order that we might not misunderstand or mistake God's call in our life, recognize that today a Special Calling will include the elements of desire, gifting, and recognition.

Well this raises the question, “Why did Samuel — and why do we — miss God's call?”

God's Character

Samuel did not understand God's character.

1 Samuel 3:7, “Now Samuel did not yet know¹¹ the LORD¹², neither was the word of the LORD yet revealed unto him.”

The term *know*, is an important term in the Hebrew. It comes from the general word for knowledge, which is used over 944 times in the Bible. While it has a broad range of meanings, nevertheless its primary significance lies in the fact that it denotes the Covenantal love of God for His people. In essence it is salvific love that is part and parcel of salvation in Scripture.

Genesis 4:17, “And Cain **knew**¹³ his wife; and she conceived, and bare Enoch: and he builded a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son, Enoch.”

Amos 3:2, “You only have I **known**¹⁴ of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.”

This doesn't mean that God is limited when it comes to His knowledge of those on this earth — He is Omniscient. Rather, this means that of all the peoples of the earth, only with Israel did God enter into

¹¹ ידע yada'

¹² יהוה Y@hovah

¹³ ידע yada'

¹⁴ ידע yada'

a special, love relationship!

In Matthew we read of Christ's words to the reprobate on the last day "I never **knew**¹⁵ you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matthew 7:23).

Again this doesn't mean that there are some on this earth that Christ has no knowledge of. Rather it indicates that Christ does not have an intimate relationship with all men- only those whom He knows!

Now in light of these passages this text could imply that Samuel here is a pagan — he had no knowledge of God; he did not have a love-relationship with God. Again we read "now Samuel did not yet know the Lord."

Yet that understanding doesn't fit the context. Recall of all people in Israel, it was Samuel who is shown here to have the closest walk with Christ as he slept near the ark each night. Accordingly Dr. Ralph Klein wrote this:

"In [1 Samuel] 2:12 the same words are used about Eli's sons. For them not to know Yahweh meant they did not acknowledge Yahweh as Lord, or they did not obey him, or they had no relationship to him. None of these seems relevant for the situation of Samuel."¹⁶

Well in what way therefore are we to understand this?

Samuel not yet "knowing" the Lord could also imply that his understanding of the Lord— e.g., His character and ways — was partial, immature, and childish! And that is exactly how this concept is used elsewhere.

1 John 2:12-14, "I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake. I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father. I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one."

The idea here is that like babes, they know their true father though they couldn't articulate what their father is like. This text is important for our purpose because it indicates different maturity levels in one's knowledge of Christ. There are those we might consider as babes in Christ. They know they are saved by God and that God is love. But beyond this, they are not in a position to defend or argue for the faith.

There are the young men in Christ. These are characterized as ones who are strong in the Lord. They know the word and they have overcome the evil one. In other words, unlike the babes in Christ they are not easily moved. They have studied the word, can defend it, and therefore stand firmly in Christ. Yet, struggling with God isn't beyond them.

But then there are the fathers. These not only know their theology, but they have come to the point in

¹⁵ γινωσκω ginosko

¹⁶ 1 Samuel, WBC, p. 32 Joyce Baldwin interprets it much the same way (*1 & 2 Samuel*, TOTC, p. 63).

their walks with Christ where they know the Lord intimately — and therefore do not doubt Him! In other words, not only are they not easily moved, BUT they are never moved from their love of the Lord, their devotion to Him, and trials and difficulties may come their way, but they will not blame God nor doubt His goodness!

Dr. John MacArthur put it this way speaking of 1 John 2.

“These very clear distinctions identify three stages of spiritual growth in God's family. 'Fathers,' the most mature, have a deep knowledge of the Eternal God. The pinnacle of spiritual maturity is to know God in His fullness (cf. Phil. 3:10). 'Young men' are those who, while not yet having the mature experience of knowing God in the Word and through life, do know sound doctrine. They are strong against sin and error because they have His Word in them... 'Little children' are those who have only the basic awareness of God and need to grow.”¹⁷

Brothers and sister, we are on safe ground in interpreting our text in Samuel this way. It is not that Samuel didn't have a relationship with Christ and was not saved. The opening chapters of 1 Samuel would argue otherwise. It is that he was a babe in Christ, and he did not understand the character of the Lord! It is this lack of knowledge/maturity that led to Samuel's misunderstanding when it came to the Call of God.

And immaturity can cause us to misunderstand the call of God.

- How many servants have been lost to immaturity?
- How many have been sidelined on account of a failure to understand the Lord?
- How many young men have been placed in office only to fail on account of pride?¹⁸

Missionary Couple

I'll never forget the true story that a pastor related to me about a missionary couple zealous to serve the Lord. They genuinely loved Christ, and were recognized by many as having exceptional gifts for ministry. But they had one problem — they were young and impatient.

Because of their immaturity their church required them to wait and undergo a certain amount of training. Because of this they left their church. They found an agency that would send them. And they got to the field in months rather than years.

It wasn't a year before this family was back home. They were washed up on account of the difficulties of ministry.

The preacher at the church said, “There are few families that I would have considered to be “made for missions.” This was one of them. And yet this family now twenty years later is still reeling.

It behooves us to be willing to grow up in the Lord. It is essential that we enjoy the time of our youth in Christ — no matter how old you are. Let us therefore not be impatient, but let us take the time to

¹⁷ The MacArthur Study Bible, page 1966

¹⁸ Compare 1 Timothy 3:6

grow deep in our walks with Christ. To do otherwise is potentially to miss the call of God!

Understand God's Counsel

And yet there is another factor that almost cost Samuel his ministry- a factor that also has sidelined many a minister: Samuel did not understand God's counsel.

1 Samuel 3:7, “Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, **neither was the word of the LORD yet revealed¹⁹ unto him.**”

This is not to imply that Samuel had no knowledge of God's word. Indeed by this time he would have had and read at least the five books of Moses, Joshua, and possibly Judges. So indeed he did have knowledge of God's word. What he lacked was knowledge of how prophetic revelation was given — that's the idea here.

Recall that the “word from the Lord was rare in those days, visions were infrequent” (1 Samuel 3:1). Accordingly Samuel was unfamiliar with how God spoke in revelation. He could not answer these questions:

- How do you interpret a message from the Lord?
- Do you sleep on it? — as he did in verse 15a?
- Do you hold it back in deference to the one(s) in question? — as he did in v. 15b?
- How do you handle accurately the word of the Lord?

Because of Samuel's unfamiliarity with the revelation of God's word, he misunderstood God's call!

Today we struggle with a similar, yet more lamentable problem! While Samuel had a lack a familiarity with how God revealed His word, our problem today is that we have a lack a familiarity with the word of God itself.

An integral part of a special call to THE ministry — regardless of what it is — is the ability to handle the word of God accurately.

2 Timothy 2:15, “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

1 Timothy 4:16, “Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.”

Preparation

Truly, part and parcel of understanding the call of God is an understanding of the word of God — which is why James said “My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation” (James 3:1).

¹⁹ גָּלַהּ galah

In other words, as desirable as may be the role of teacher, don't be too zealous to be placed in the position of teacher. Rather, prepare yourself through diligent study for you will be held accountable for what you teach.

And so as we consider ourselves as candidates for a special calling from the Lord, it behooves us now to prepare for such a calling. Not only must we be faithful with the ministries that God gives us via the needs in our paths but we must diligently labor at learning the word, at how to study and interpret it, and to be wise and able stewards of the word of God.

Truly as I look upon our congregation, I see present and future ministers in the Kingdom of God. Lest we find ourselves confused when it comes to God's call may the Lord grant us the grace to diligently labor in the vineyard He has placed us. May we be found serving Him in "the Jerusalem" which is our home. May we be found studying to show ourselves approved of God handling accurately the word of God. May we be men and women of prayer. May we be a people who cultivate and enjoy a deep and abiding relationship with Christ.

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on July 31, 2005. Greg is the Preacher at Broomfield Presbyterian Church. .