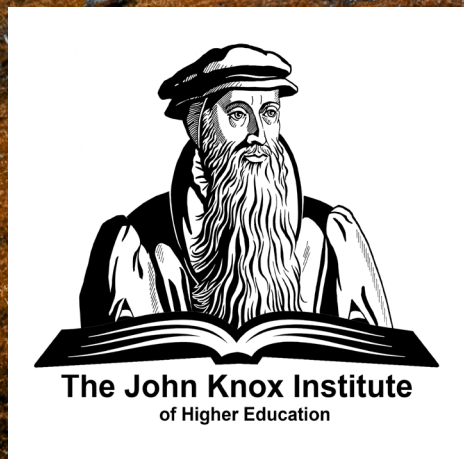


VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

PASTORAL THEOLOGY

by Rev. Harry Woods

LECTURE #2
The Call to the Ministry, part 1



John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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PASTORAL THEOLOGY

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Lecture #2

The Call to the Ministry, part 1

As we continue our study in *Pastoral Theology*, I want to consider *The Call to the Ministry*. I'll begin with this is two parts, so in part 1, we are simply looking at the call to the ministry. Now it's a biblical principle that a man called to the ministry must first be converted. That is almost something that should go without saying, because you cannot preach the gospel if you don't know its saving power, and if you don't believe it. Some preachers began their ministry without grace. There are numerous examples of this. One quite well known is Thomas Chalmers,¹ of the early Free Church of Scotland, and he began as someone who saw the ministry simply as an excuse to pursue his studies in science and in maths. And for years he preached and he saw no power, and by the grace of God, he was brought to the Lord Jesus Christ and converted, and then his ministry began in earnest. It's important, therefore, as we consider the call to the ministry, to consider what a call to the ministry is. Because clearly, Chalmers had a wrong view at the beginning of his ministry.

1. Unbiblical and Misguided Teachings

I want us to begin by looking at some of the unbiblical and misguided teaching on the subject. The first of these is what you might call *the mystical idea*. Perhaps a man may come to his kirk session,² and say, "Well, I've been told by God that I ought to be a minister." He might even say that he was given a text, and that text has had such an impressions upon him that he feels that he ought to be preaching the gospel. Again, some will come and say, "Well, I have an inner impulse. I can't get it away, I can't shake it off. I feel that I'm called to the ministry." Some might even go as far as to say, "Well, I heard a voice saying, 'Go into the ministry.' God told me to go into the ministry." That is a mystical idea, as we'll see later. But some, sadly, think that this kind of experience is essential and cannot be questioned. For if it is true that God told a man to go into the ministry, how can you gainsay³ such a claim? So that is the first idea that is unbiblical and misguided—*the mystical idea*.

And then, you have what you might call *the providential idea*. You might have a man, and he's tried to this work, he's tried to do that work, he's tried at various occupations, and they just haven't

¹ Thomas Chalmers, FRSE (1780–1847) was a Scottish Presbyterian minister, professor of theology, political economist. He was a leader in the Church of Scotland, and was a leading figure in the Disruption of 1843 and the founding of the Free Church of Scotland.

² Kirk is a Scottish term for "church." A session is the governing body of elders in a Presbyterian church.

³ To gainsay is to deny or to speak against.

worked for him. It's as though the doors are being closed to him. And then he believes that he is called to the ministry, and all the doors are opened. How do we read these open doors? Are they obstacles to overcome? or are they answers to our thoughts, answers that say "No." Jay Adams,⁴ the writer, has this to say about "open doors." He says, "Suppose you plan to become a missionary to India. You complete your studies, you get your backing, and apply for a visa, but you're turned down—a closed door. How would you read this circumstance? Are you to conclude, firstly, well, I guess God doesn't want me to be a missionary; or, (2) God doesn't want me to be a missionary in India; or, (3) God doesn't want me to be a missionary in India now; I'll wait for his timing; or, God is testing me to see if I really mean business. What is a rejection anyway? It's merely a human decision. I'll go if I have to swim, with or without a visa if necessary; or, and so on infinitum. It can easily be seen, the utter turmoil that could result in adopting this way of thinking. And the uncertainty that would dog a man through the rest of his ministry, as to whether he had read God's providence aright." What's wrong with this position? What's wrong with this *providential idea*? Well, the problem is that we would be trying to read providence forwards, and that leads to uncertainty. Because when we are in the midst of a providence, we have no idea where that is leading to. We have no certainty. Providence can only be read backwards. We can only reflect, and look, and say, "Yes, the Lord was doing this, that, or the next thing."

The third idea is what I have entitled *the encouragement idea*. Some men enter the ministry, or study for the ministry because they've been encouraged by others. Now, as we'll see at the end of this list, some of these things have an element of truth in them. All who enter study for the ministry, no doubt, have been encouraged by someone or other. I'm not speaking in a sort of absolute term. I'm speaking about the kind of encouragement, the kind of advice that is often given to a young man. You can think, for example, of a young man in a congregation, and he is showing spiritual growth, and he's put up to pray, and he prays so well, and some little old lady comes up to him and says, "You should go into the ministry." And what is this? Well, it's not mature advice. It's often something that arises from sentiment. It's often well-intentioned, but it's often ill-advised.

Then you've got the idea, "Well, *my father was a minister*, and therefore, I'm going to follow in his footsteps." Again, that is not necessarily a bad thing. But there is an old saying in Scotland, "Beware the sons of the manse." In other words, look out for the children of ministers, because sometimes they are the worst enemies that the church has seen in a while. They often do not follow in their father's footsteps. They often are those who drift and go into error and heresy. And so this, in itself is not a good idea of being called to the ministry.

And then, the last couple are really *catchall*⁵ ideas. "*I've got gifts*"—we may examine ourselves and we see that we get on well with people, we're able to communicate, we're keen on study, and we have a passion for souls. All of these things are great. And I'm not speaking just about academic qualifications; we may have to struggle in those. But sometimes the church makes the mistake of thinking that someone who has academic qualifications has all that is necessary for the ministry. And you see how deadly that can be.

The other catchall is, "*It would give me more time to study and pursue my own interests.*" And there are some in the church and out of the church that think that the minister only works three hours a week—two on Sunday, and one midweek. Well, that obviously is a very superficial view of the ministry.

⁴ Jay Edward Adams (1929–2020) was an American Reformed theologian and author, known for developing a counseling approach known as nouthetic counseling.

⁵ "Catchall" means designed to catch, hold, or include a variety of odds and ends.

As I've said, all of these things—the *mystical idea*, the *providential idea*, the *encouragement idea*, *my father was a minister*, *I've got gifts*, *it will give me more time to study*—there may be some element of truth in all of these, but they alone do not constitute a call to the ministry.

2. How Does God Give a Call to the Ministry?

We've got to ask, How does God call then? Well, quoting Robert L. Dabney.⁶ He asks, "How does God give a call to the ministry?"—he answers, "By enlightening and influencing the man's conscience and understanding and those of his Christian brethren, to understand that the biblical truths, and the circumstances, and the qualifications in himself which reasonably point out preaching as his work. The full and certain call to the ministry is uttered by the Holy Spirit, both to the candidate himself, and to the church. The medium of its utterance is God dealing with the candidate, and the principles of the written Scriptures." You'll find that in Dabney's *Discussions, Volume II, What is a Call to the Ministry?*

Now, what are the important points in what Dabney has to say? Well, you'll notice that the definition deals with the divine and the human. It's looking at what the candidate himself, the church rulers on the human side think, and what the Holy Spirit determines on the other. So it deals with the divine and the human. It deals with the internal and the external circumstances. So it looks at what the man desires—as Paul says, he that desires the office of a bishop desires a good thing (1 Tim. 3:1). But it also looks at the external—how is God leading this man? Has God given this man the requisite gifts and abilities for the ministry? Again, it looks at the individual and the church. The call to the ministry is not all about the individual man who thinks he has a call. The church has a role to play in this.

Again, Dabney's article points out that all of these factors have to be considered in evaluating any professed call to the ministry. The church has a God-given responsibility to test the call according to the standards of Scripture, including the individual's providences and qualifications. What do I mean by that? Well, it's not simply that the kirk session, the rulers of the church, look at the requirements listed in the Scripture to see if this man, by and large, has those requirements. But also, it reminds us that even the individual's providences are open to the scrutiny of church rulers. In other words, just because there are open doors that seem open to the candidate, the church has a right to evaluate whether these are evidences of God leading this man into the ministry. One of the things that Jay Adams says when he is speaking about these open doors, he reminds us that some open doors lead to elevator shafts. In other words, just because you think a door is open, it doesn't mean that you have the green light to proceed. So the church has a God-given responsibility to test a call. It is not all down to the individual. It's not simply how a man feels led or impressed upon by the Word or by the Spirit. Rather, the call is to be tested according to the church itself.

Remember, a call is not complete until it is uttered in both the judgment of the candidate and of the church. The church has a responsibility; the candidate has a responsibility. But until a man is called into the church by the church, he cannot say with complete certainty that he has a call to the ministry. Now, of course, there may be times when the church itself is in error in its evaluation of this man or that man. These things happen. We're speaking about the principle here that a call to the ministry is not something that is simply determined by an individual's idea or will.

And when the man is called by the Spirit into the ministry, the Spirit will employ the principles

⁶ Robert Lewis Dabney (1820–1898) was an American Southern Presbyterian minister, architect, and theologian, who also served as Confederate Army chaplain in the American Civil War, and chief of staff and biographer to Stonewall Jackson.

of Scripture to instruct both him and those who rule over him, as to the divine will. That's why we have the Scriptures, the Bible. We come to the Bible, and we ask ourselves, "Well, what does God say a man who is called to the ministry should be like? What should he be doing? What kind of character should he have? What kind of gifts should he have?" And the Word of God will tell us, tell him, and tell the leaders of the church what is expected by the Word of God. In other words, a call to the ministry is determined ultimately by submission to the revealed will of God.

And God, also having revealed his will in Scripture, also often accompanies that with providences, but the providences themselves must be read in the light of Scripture. So Scripture itself is superior, if you will, to the providential experiences of the candidate. Scripture details the necessary qualifications for the ministry. God defines the qualifications, and we'll look at these in the next lecture. We're not left in the dark over this. We're not left to guess what a man should be like, what he should be doing, how he should pursue his thought of a call to the ministry.

Again, as we think about a call to the ministry, Dabney's article draws attention to the fact that the Christian man is also bound to consider the present needs of the church. Now, Dabney goes quite far in this. In his day, he was, in effect, saying that young men in professions—be it banking, lawyers, whatever, or being a grocer, or something else—these young men should ask, "Is there a need for preachers?" And they should be asking themselves whether or not they should be seeking a call to the ministry. And he goes on to labor that point quite strongly. So the needs of the church should be considered. Here we are at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and we wonder at the dearth of ministers, perhaps young men should be looking to seek a call to the ministry.

3. Ascertaining a Call

Now, the process of ascertaining a call is strictly reasonable. In other words, it is not illogical, it is not irrational, it's reasonable, but it is also spiritual. It is reason and rationality governed by the Word of God. A true minister is as really taught of God as the Old Testament prophets were. They are called of God into the ministry. It's only the mode of teaching that is different. They were inspired men. We are not inspired; we are taught of the Lord through the Word of God. To obtain spiritual guidance, the spiritual guidance that is needed if we are to pursue a call to the ministry, is something that requires fervent prayer incessantly offered to the Lord. This is not a whim; it is something we should labor over. And that is often the testimony of men who have been called to the ministry, that for years they have resisted, they have struggled, they have sought to pursue something other than entering into the ministry, and that has called for prayer and a concern to know the Lord's will. And that should be the case with every man who feels called to study for the ministry.

And then, lastly, we ought to note that there is a difference between training for the ministry—in other words, study for the ministry—and being ordained to the ministry. There are some things that are required for the ministry that can be taught, and can be sought, and can be, if they are there, improved. And so, there may be biblical knowledge—there can be instruction, there can be teaching, there can be improvement in a student's biblical knowledge. You think of the languages, teaching the original languages, Greek and Hebrew. Systematic theology—again, we can learn more and more by fervent study, and that is what men studying for the ministry will be engaged in. But there are some things that cannot be remedied. There are some things that can be remedied, but there are some things that cannot be remedied. And there are some things in the life of a man that would simply disqualify him from entering into the ministry, and perhaps we'll see more of that when we come to our second talk on *The Call to the Ministry*. Thank you.