

HOW DO
I KNOW IF
PREACHING
IS FOR ME?

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HOW DO I KNOW that Christ has called me to ‘prayer and the ministry of the word’? How can I be sure? I can’t. Not with the certainty for which I crave. (And if I think I can, I am probably self-deceived.) Rather, God gives us wisdom by his Spirit to know his character and general will (*Colossians 1:9*). And he gives us freedom to exercise that wisdom in making our choices. It is a mark of immaturity to expect to be told what to do in some more immediate way. And so articles on guidance are always disappointing; because God is more concerned with our godliness than our guidance.

JESUS BUILDS HIS CHURCH BY GIVING GIFTS TO HIS PEOPLE

So, rather than start with ourselves, let us begin with the Lord Jesus Christ. He has promised to build his church (*Matthew 16:18*). He has died for her (*Ephesians 5:25f*), been raised, and has ascended as the victor over ‘him who has the power of death’ (*Hebrews 2:14*). As the ascended conqueror he distributes his varied victory gifts to all his people (*Ephesians 4:7f*), in order that his church shall be built up (*1 Corinthians 12:7; 14:5; Ephesians 4:11-16*). Every gift is needed, and no Christian is to despise any gift and think it useless (*1 Corinthians 12:12-31*). But we need to understand the distinct contribution to the church made by what we call ‘word’ gifts.

‘Word’ gifts begin with the apostles and prophets of the New Testament age, who are at the foundation of the church (*Ephesians 2:20; 3:5*). We have their unique and unchangeable testimony to the Lord Jesus in the New Testament. And then there are the ongoing ‘word’ gifts, the evangelists (those who spread the good news, both to Christian and non-Christian), the pastors and teachers, who care for and lead God’s church by preaching and teaching (*Ephesians 4:11f*). These are the equipping

gifts; they equip all Christians to do the work of ministry with their own gifts, so that the church will be built up. So these ‘word’ gifts have a special place in the Lord’s church-building strategy. For without them other Christians will not be equipped for their ministries.

WE MUST USE THE GIFTS HE GIVES US FOR THE BUILDING OF HIS CHURCH

The most important principle to bear in mind here is very simple. It is the principle of stewardship. When the Lord Jesus has given us a gift, **we must use it** to build up his church (*Romans 12:6*; *1 Corinthians 12:7*). This principle applies to all Christians, including those gifted as evangelists, pastors and teachers. On the last day, the Lord Jesus will ask us, “What use did you make of the gifts I gave you?” (cf. the principle in the parable of the talents, *Matthew 25:14-30*). This principle of stewardship is very important. So the question is not, “What do I *want* to do?” but rather, “What am I *gifted* to do?” As sinners we often want to do what we ought not to do, and we shy from doing what we ought to do.

There is little in scripture explicitly about the feelings or desires of the people set apart for word ministry. When Paul speaks of those who aspire to the pastoral office (*1 Timothy 3:1*) he does not make it clear whether the candidates coming forward in Ephesus were to be encouraged or discouraged in their desire.

On the one hand, some desire to enter this ministry, and ought not to. They may for example have a wrong understanding of scripture (eg *1 Timothy 1:7*), a love of power (*1 Peter 5:3*) or prominence (*3 John 9*), a love of money (*1 Timothy 6:5*), or a desire to exploit vulnerable people by making them dependent upon them (*2 Timothy 3:6f*).

On the other hand, some want to avoid this ministry who ought to be in it. For pastoral ministry has its peculiar pressures. And so a love for the world (*2 Timothy 4:10*; *1 John 2:15-17*) or a desire to avoid suffering (*2 Timothy 1:6-12*; cf. *1 Timothy 4:14*) will make us avoid this work, even when we are called to it. So we must be deeply sceptical of our feelings and desires. For it is possible to quench the Spirit (*1 Thessalonians 5:19*).

So, rather than rely on our feelings, we do well to focus on the principles of stewardship. If Christ has given us ‘word’ gifts, then we must use them, whether or not we want to. So the question resolves itself into ask-

ing: how will we discern whether we have these gifts? The New Testament answer may be summed up in three statements.

1. The gifts of Christ are discerned by the body of Christ as they are used by the servants of Christ.

The New Testament picture of a healthy church is one in which all believers are called to ministry (to be servants of Christ and his Church). We are to throw ourselves wholeheartedly into doing what needs to be done. I am not to expect some prior revelation of my gifts, like a bank notification of a new PIN number, the envelope arriving secretly from heaven, so that I alone can scratch the paper to reveal my unique gift. Instead, I am to be an active servant. And as I serve, so the fellowships in which I serve will see what I am gifted at and what am no good at. The latter experience may be painful, but is usually a part of the process. I remember with some pain having to lead the singing at a school assembly unaccompanied (because the pianist was absent); it became rapidly evident this was not my gift! We do not want ‘prima donnas’ who will not volunteer to help, because ‘this is not my gift’. Rather we want servants who will have a go. So, if you are asked to help in some form of Christian service, say yes if you possibly can. Have a go. And as you do, your brothers and sisters will tell you what you are gifted at and what you are not. They will help us ‘think with sober judgement’ about ourselves (*Romans 12:3*).

In particular, if you have opportunities to teach the bible, to lead a bible study, to give a talk at a summer venture or camp, or to preach in church, take these opportunities. Ask a mature Christian friend to watch and listen critically and to give you (in love!) some honest feedback. Not to crush you (if you did badly) or flatter you (if you did well), but to help you see whether you have in bud a gift for bible teaching.

Incidentally, let us beware of replacing ‘gifts’ with ‘strategy’ in our thinking. We love to plan our lives, to ask *and answer* the question, “Where will I be of most use to Christ?” It is a fine question. But only the Lord knows the answer. And it is probably not the answer of our strategising, in which we are in control. We like to plan a life of maximal ‘effectiveness’; but this is not in our power.

2. Church leaders should appoint to word ministries those in whom they recognise word gifts

Leaders are better equipped than we to recognise the gifts and calling of God. They watch our characters, listen to our teaching, see how we relate to others and how we respond under pressure. This is why the responsibility for the leaders of the future lies with the leaders of the present. Paul was subjectively convinced of his call by Christ to be an apostle, and the collective leadership of the church recognised this particular grace given to him, to be the apostle to the gentiles (*Galatians 2:8f*). The leadership in Antioch heard and recognised the call of Christ by his Spirit to Saul and Barnabas to cross-cultural mission (*Acts 13:1-3*). They in turn appointed elders (*Acts 14:23*), as did Titus in Crete later (*Titus 1:5*). Paul and the collective eldership recognised the gift in Timothy; when they laid hands on him they did not confer gifts upon him (as if they were the priestly purveyors of grace) but rather recognised the gifting of the Lord Jesus Christ (*1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6*). And then Timothy in his turn is to look out for faithful people to whom he can entrust the message (*2 Timothy 2:2*).

As Christian leaders seek the next generation of ministers of the word, they will look for four qualities:

(i) **A godly character** They will look first for men and women of godly character. "If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. *Therefore* an overseer must be..." (*1 Timothy 3:1ff*). The logic of the 'therefore' is that because this is a noble task, the qualifications for it must be rigorously maintained. The 'checklists' in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 are overwhelmingly moral. Others will judge this better than us. For if we think we are godly, it is a sure sign we are not. Rather, their judgement will need to overcome our own reluctance (cf. *James 3:1-12*).

(ii) **A clear Gospel** Allied with godly character they will look for a clear and tenacious grasp of the gospel of the Lord Jesus. We must have a clear grasp of this message. But it is not enough to understand it. To be a pastor, we must hold to it tenaciously, be willing not only to teach it positively but also to correct those who teach in error (*Titus 1:9*). We must be prepared to face opposition and suffer for the name of the Lord Jesus (*2 Timothy 1:1-2:13*).

(iii) **The ability to teach** Twice in the pastoral letters one quality is mentioned that stands out from the rest: the ability to teach (*1 Timothy 3:2; 2 Timothy 2:24*). The same quality is implied in Titus 1:9 where the elder ‘must be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it’.

The other qualities listed ought to be true of every Christian. But not this one. A deeply godly believer may not have this ability. And yet without this ability it is disastrous for someone to enter pastoral ministry. For this is the ministry of the word, and therefore suitable only for those who can understand and handle words. So when we interview candidates for the Cornhill Training Course we look for some evidence of an ability to teach the bible. Often this gifting is only evident in bud; but it must be there.

(iv) **A love for people** Lastly, they will look for a love for people. For teaching is more than explanation. It is relational, just as God’s revealed truth is the relational expression of divine love. No teacher will be heard unless he loves the people he teaches. Paul speaks of the ability to teach in the context of a teacher who is gentle when provoked, prayerful when opposed, and driven by a longing to win his hearers back to God (*2 Timothy 2:14-26*). Without this love for people, the clearest and cleverest bible scholar in the world is not able to teach.

3. The Path to ‘Word Ministry’ takes time and testing

We live in a very hurried culture. We want to know now what is the calling of Christ for the rest of our lives. But callings to Christian ministry are to be tested over time (eg *1 Timothy 3:10* for deacons, and *5:22* for elders). The main reason for this is that character only becomes evident over time. A church leader who lays hands on someone in haste will often have to repent at leisure (*1 Timothy 5:22*).

There are a number of ways in which someone can ‘put a toe in the water’ of Bible-teaching ministry, and the Cornhill Training Courses are probably the best known of these. If you think Christ may have gifted you for word ministry, why not investigate a Cornhill course?

Although we have seen that our desires are an unreliable indicator of Christ’s gifts, nevertheless you will expect to find in your heart some

Spirit-given echo of the heart longing of the Lord Jesus for his sheep (*Matthew 9:36; John 21:15-17*). We must expect that the desire of church leaders to set you apart for this work will be answered by a willingness in your heart to be appointed. For this ministry must be done from a willing heart. It is not to be done 'under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you (do it)' (1 Peter 5:2). I may or may not *want* to do it, in the shallow sense that I may want to go on a Caribbean holiday, to give me pleasure, self-fulfilment and delight. But I must be *willing* to do it.

There is perhaps an analogy with the comparison between a western marriage in which the bridegroom chooses the bride, and some cultures in which the parents arrange the marriage. In each case the critical point is that, however the bridegroom comes face to face with the bride, he must consent to marry her. It does not in the last analysis matter whether he himself has taken the initiative to propose to her, or his parents have negotiated the match. What matters is that he is willing, he consents to marry her (and of course, she him!) So with pastoral ministry. It doesn't matter whether the initiative began with me, or began with church leaders. In the end, I must be willing to serve in this way.

CONCLUSION: YOU ARE FREE TO DECIDE!

Finally, remember wisdom and freedom. You are free as a Christian to make your own decisions with the wisdom God gives you. You must neither let yourself be pressured into pastoral ministry by pushy leaders nor dissuaded by worldly motives. You must decide. It is before your own Master you stand or fall; and he is able to make you stand. The rest of us will not sit in judgement upon your decision. No principles in this chapter will make your decision for you. You decide; and as you decide, the Lord Jesus Christ is working out his purposes, fulfilling his promise to build his church. And so the glory will be his alone.



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