

# DO YOU FEEL CALLED BY GOD?

Rethinking the call to ministry



MICHAEL BENNETT

When Michael Bennett took the first steps towards full-time, ordained Christian ministry, he dreaded being asked whether he ‘felt called’. Because in all honesty, he didn’t.



Many years later, and after extensive biblical research, he came to the conclusion that the common idea of needing to feel a subjective call from God before entering the ministry is misguided and unbiblical. In *Do You Feel Called by God?* he shares his story, including the evidence that changed his mind.

Full of wit, personal biography and clear biblical teaching, *Do You Feel Called by God?* provides an encouraging challenge not only to those considering full-time ministry, but also to all Christians who want to hear and respond to the call of God.



**Michael Bennett** trained as an architect in Brisbane, Australia, before becoming a believing Christian at the age of 24. After training at theological college, he pastored two churches before developing the *Christianity Explained* evangelistic course—a course that has been effectively used in Australia and overseas for many years.



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# WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

I have written this book from a very personal perspective. It is not meant to be some kind of autobiography, but I do want to convey some of the struggles I went through in my early life as a Christian believer, and especially the struggles I had with the often-heard expression, “I feel God is calling me into the ministry”. The content of this book has not been written in an academic ivory tower in order to add yet one more tome to the voluminous titles that choke our Christian bookstores. Most of the topics I deal with here concern struggles I have personally experienced in trying to understand the sacred Scriptures and the faith called evangelical Christianity.

The object of this book is to attempt to help people who are seeking the guidance of God in their lives, and who may particularly be considering full-time Christian ministry. What does the Bible actually teach about the call of God, in both the Old and New Testaments? Should we expect to experience dramatic and overt signs such as the Israelites witnessed in the olden days? Should we actually hear the voice of God, or see a moving finger writing on the wall? Is there any such thing as ‘the call of God’? My desire is to set down the results of my own research over many years, and to be helpful.

In chapters 3 and 4, I examine the use of the word ‘call’ and

the recorded examples of God having called people throughout the pages of first the Old Testament and then the New Testament. My studies in this area have led me to attempt a detailed analysis of the Greek verb *kalein*, ‘to call’, and its cognates within the Greek New Testament. What I have discovered is a word so rich, so varied in its meaning, that (as I comment later in the book) it is hard to see how the New Testament could have been composed without it! ‘Call’ is used in vital connection with just about every phase of Christian experience, from gospel proclamation to regeneration to faith to holiness. The very word ‘church’ is a noun cognate of *kalein*. I have discovered that ‘call’ is used more than 300 times within the pages of the New Testament, and with at least 11 separate meanings. You can find the results of this examination in chapter 5.

Out of this detailed examination I have arrived at two conclusions in regard to the important subject of the ‘call of God’, conclusions that I think can fairly be described as radical within the context of everyday evangelical piety today. The rest of this book explains the process by which these conclusions have been reached. The conclusions are:

1. The often-heard and almost universally accepted expression “I feel God is calling me” is totally foreign to the revealed content of both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. The continued use of this unscriptural pietistic language may be having negative consequences for churches, missionary societies and other Christian organizations in the choosing and training of future leaders.
2. *Without denying in any way God’s ability to call people into ministry by overt and supernatural signs*, it is argued here that this is not usually God’s method today. The motivation to serve the Lord, particularly in what is termed full-time ministry, is a *human desire* to do so, and not a *felt call*.

However, this human desire, which must spring from one's love for Jesus and the gospel and genuine compassion for people, is not sufficient or valid in itself: it must be *rightly motivated and rightly tested*.

The remainder of this book argues this second conclusion, but particular attention is given to it in chapter 10, aptly titled 'A human desire'. If you are one of those people who like to read the ending of a detective novel at the beginning, you may choose to read chapter 10 now and then decide whether you want to read the rest of the book.

I hope you will not think me big-headed if I say that I wish I had had a book like this when I started out. It would have short-circuited a lot of time and heartache.



one

# A MOUSE CALLED SPIRIT

The long-fringed lampshade, Western movie style, hung low over the green baize tablecloth. A group of dark-clothed, sober-faced men sat staring at me as I waited apprehensively for their enquiries to begin. In the dim light I could see collars of white turned towards me. In a moment of madness I imagined that one of them might actually produce a pack of cards and begin to deal. Finally, the question came that I knew must come, and for which I had no answer that would satisfy them: “And why do you feel God is calling you into the ministry?” Actually, that was the second time I had heard the same question within the space of a few minutes. The first time it had come from my own lips on the other side of the old panelled door just before I had been called in.

I had been sitting in a kind of vestibule with another young man of about my own age as we nervously waited for our turn to be interviewed. We were applying to enter the local theological college of our church denomination with the possible long-term result of going into full-time ministry, though I was by no means convinced at this stage that that was where I wanted to finish up.

I had not met this young man before and, as far as I know, I have not again since. But as we fell into rather strained

conversation, awaiting our turn to face a panel of our church leaders, I was somewhat surprised by the direction in which our conversation went. He began to tell me about his girlfriend, and then began to relate some of the exploits he and she got up to in the back seat of his car at the drive-in movies. At that time, drive-in movies were a novelty in our town (before television killed most of them off) and had the reputation of being modern-day ‘lovers’ lanes’.

Now it occurred to me that in view of the occasion, this was a rather bizarre conversation. We were sitting there waiting to be asked why we wanted to enter theological college, and why we considered we might be fit and suited to enter the ministry of the sacred gospel. It seemed surreal. I knew that at any moment I was about to face the selection panel, and I also sensed that they were going to ask me the question for which I knew I had no ready or satisfactory answer, so I decided to put the same question to my nervous colleague: “Why do you feel God is calling you into the ministry?”

The answer that came back, I felt, was even more bizarre than the previous conversation, and my immediate reaction was to say to myself, “There must be a better reason than that!” I will come back to his reply in the next chapter. But eventually that day I did sit before the selection committee, and inevitably that question was asked of me, and I had to reply honestly, “I’m sorry, I do not feel called to the ministry. I would, however, like to study at the college, and I am open to anything the Lord may call me to in the future; but I cannot truthfully say at the moment that I do feel called.”

These conversations started me on a drawn-out, painful, and sometimes perplexing quest to discover the answer to this seemingly pivotal question. They also led, in time, to deeper questions such as, “What do we mean by the call of God?” and

“What does the Bible teach about the call of God?” I will come back to these questions later, but first I need to sketch in briefly the chain of events that led me to this turning point in my life.

## Early days

I grew up in Australia at a time when it was considered right and proper for parents to send their children to Sunday School at the local church. Neither of my parents was a believer or religious, but in those days you could be considered a negligent parent if you did not encourage your children in this direction. I think my parents’ motive was their hope that I might pick up some morals that would help me through my later life. If they had known then that it would be an important link in a chain of events that would eventually lead me into full-time Christian ministry, I am fairly sure they would immediately have stopped me from going!

So while my parents sat up in bed with the Sunday morning papers, my siblings and I were sent off to the local Anglican church for Christian instruction. I was not all that interested and would get out of going as often as I could, but over a number of years I picked up a good smattering of Bible stories. However, probably because of the hit-and-miss nature of my unwilling attendance, these stories were all jumbled together with no coherent order, and I would have sympathized with the question a girl once asked in a religious education class, “Miss, did Moses come to Australia before Captain Cook, or after?”<sup>1</sup>

When I was too old to attend children’s Sunday School I

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1. It may come as a surprise to know what Sunday was like in those not-so-distant days. There was no television and no Sunday sport. No shop or picture theatre would dare to open its doors to the public on a Sunday. In fact, the most exciting pastimes available to many people on that day of the week were going to church or Sunday School, having a bush picnic with your relatives and friends, and listening to the radio at night.

went through something called ‘Confirmation’, which I took to be graduation, and promptly left off having any meaningful contact with the church. I would not return in any serious manner for more than ten years. The minister who prepared me for Confirmation, however, used an illustration of humanity that has remained with me ever since. If you rub mud on a wall, he told us, and then paint over it, for a while it will look all right. But after some time the paint will crack and peel and the muck underneath will begin to reveal itself. Somewhere deep in my heart I knew this was true. Although I liked to project a nice scrubbed-up middle-class appearance, and considered myself (wrongly) to be the moral equal (and even superior) of my peers, I was beginning to experience a taste of human depravity in my unseen moments.

## School days

My father, being a medical doctor, had the funds to send me to a local church school from an early age. I was there for nine years and it was a very positive experience, though I enjoyed the sport and companionship much more than either the study or the spiritual side of school life.

In fact, in my last year, when we in our final grade were all meant to be the responsible school prefects and leaders, my class had the dubious distinction of driving one of the local church ministers out of the school forever. He would come in once a week to try to give us spiritual instruction, and our combined object was to destroy every lesson he attempted to present. He must have dreaded the day of the week on which we would torment him.

During one of these disrupted lessons, the minister gave out a sheet of paper with some notes on it. We students were continuing with our normal rubbishing behaviour (“Oh, sir,

you've printed it upside down"; "No intelligent person could believe this, sir"; and similar comments) when one of the students turned around, held up the paper and said, "The answer is on the sheet, guys!" I was thunderstruck. John, the speaker, was on the minister's side! And John wasn't a nerd: he was captain of a premiership-winning cricket team! It was a small but courageous stand, and made a lasting impression on me.<sup>2</sup>

Eventually, in the middle of another disastrous lesson one day, the tormented minister shut his books and announced, "I'm sorry boys, but you are unteachable!" With that, he left the school and never came back. I can still remember him walking down the school driveway, head down, probably believing that he had totally failed his Lord. We did not mind; we had achieved our objective. The only sorrow from our perspective was that we forfeited what we considered to be a free period, as this was subsequently replaced with a normal lesson. On reflection, with the benefit of believer's hindsight, our behaviour was extreme and not a little demonic. The paint was peeling off and the muddy reality was on show. I am now ashamed of my own participation in this episode. The school now has full-time chaplains and I believe the situation is much improved, with a strong group of Christian students attending the school.

After leaving school I had a number of false starts, which I am sure cost my father a sizeable amount of hair, but I finally settled on architecture as the direction I wanted my life to take. It was possible then to study the course for six years either full-time at university or part-time at a technical college, and as I had lost a university scholarship as the result of one of my false

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2. Some years later when I was in full-time ministry, John's sister attended our church. She mentioned this to John, whose reply was, "I remember a Michael Bennett from school, but it couldn't possibly be *that* Michael Bennett!"

starts, my father and I chose the latter. This meant working in an architect's office during the day and then going off to evening lectures. But by the fifth year of my studies the Hound of Heaven was on the loose.<sup>3</sup>

### **"There must be more to life!"**

We have all heard stories of people who have become believing Christians because some disaster has come into life. A loved one has died; a terrible illness has struck; a marriage has fallen apart; financial ruin has occurred. One of the most famous of such stories is that of the American politician Chuck Colson, who was one of the closest advisers to the President of the United States. He had easy access to the then most powerful man in the world, Richard Nixon. But when the scandal called Watergate was uncovered, Nixon was forced to resign as President, and Colson and several of the other White House aides found themselves disgraced and in prison. In that context, Colson came to genuine repentance and faith in Christ, largely through reading CS Lewis's book *Mere Christianity*. Stories like this are not uncommon. Tragedy comes into a person's life, so the person comes to find a new beginning in Christ.

However, in my own case it was the very opposite. I became a Christian because everything in my life was going too well. Let me take you back to a period of about three months during my fifth year of studies, when I was 24 years old. For this three-month period, everything in my life was incredibly rosy. At the

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3. 'The Hound of Heaven' is a Victorian poem by Francis Thompson (1859-1907). Born in a devout Catholic family, Thompson graduated in medicine but became an opium addict and vagrant. He was later rescued by a kind prostitute and Christian friends. His poem, much admired by Tolkien and Chesterton, is said to have partly inspired *The Screwtape Letters* by CS Lewis. It pictures a prodigal being relentlessly pursued by a loving God. The Victorian prose makes for hard reading today.

time I was playing rugby, which I loved, for one of the top local teams. I was eventually promoted to the first-grade senior team. During this period we won eight games in a row, which must still be something of a club record, and we were placed at the top of the rugby competition in our city. Although it was not usual for rugby matches to be televised, on one particular Saturday afternoon the cameras turned up to broadcast our game. We had a big win and I had one of my best games ever, scoring two tries that secured the match for us. The local newspaper used to take votes for the best and fairest player in each round of the competition and, to my surprise, there was my name. Some of my teammates reckoned I only played at my best when the cameras were rolling!

At the same time I was going out with a lovely girl with long blonde hair, and our tastes were very similar in terms of music, art, morals and life. She endured rugby! I was young and single with my own car and plenty of money with which to enjoy life. At work I was beginning to be given responsibility and allowed to take building projects from the first interview with the client right through to construction and completion, with little supervision from the firm's partners. Although I was never a brilliant student, I discovered later that I was one of only two students up to that time at the technical college who had completed the six-year architectural course without ever failing a subject and having to repeat. In another area, also, life in the Michael Bennett garden was just fine. I belonged to a painting group called the Contemporary Art Society and entered works into their exhibitions. During this rosy period one of my works was mentioned favourably in the papers, and someone even offered to buy one of my paintings!

I hope you will not think I am being boastful in relating all this. I just want to make the point that for one short period of

my life, about three months, nearly everything was as good as it could be—as someone might crassly say today, “Life doesn’t get any better than this!”

But I felt empty and miserable.

Walking to work one morning I recall saying to myself, “There must be more to life than I have discovered so far. I have all these things that the world tells me are to be desired and strived for, things that make life full and meaningful. Why do I feel so dissatisfied?”

### **A long and painful quest**

For some unexplained reason, I felt the answer might lie in religion, so I began to undertake a preliminary examination of the great religions of the world. Christianity was the only faith I had ever known, so I looked into the other major alternatives. I bought books on Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Humanism and others. I read the works of Confucius. But still the nagging emptiness persisted. These all seemed to be conduits of man-made values and rules, laws and religious regulations. By this time the cracking paint was really beginning to fall away from the muck, and I was having to face the uncomfortable reality that I was not the superior moral being I had kidded myself into believing I was. I could not see how doing a few half-hearted religious practices would impress God if they did not impress me. Would my empty void really be filled by saying a few prayers when in trouble, undertaking fasts or joining pilgrimages? Was God so cheap that he could be bought off by an imperfect display of external religion?

At this time my rosy world began to fall apart. I was dropped from the top grade rugby side, there was a messy break-up with my girlfriend and, worst of all, my parents’ marriage was beginning to disintegrate as a third party entered the equation.



Not knowing where to turn next, I considered that I should give Christianity another go—the faith that I had rejected, or rather neglected, since my early teens. I bought myself a modern translation of the New Testament and began to read it with some genuine interest for the first time ever. I began to attend a local church in the suburb where we lived. But immediately a series of doubts began to plague me.

The first was easily disposed of. I asked myself, “How do we know such a person as Jesus Christ ever existed? How do we know that the whole story about Jesus is not some fictitious invention, some kind of elaborate hoax that has somehow been inflicted on the world for whatever reason?”

I soon discovered, however, that three secular historians who lived during roughly the same period as Jesus mention him in their writings. These historians—Josephus, Tacitus and Suetonius—were not Christians, and in some cases were very hostile to the new religion. They were totally independent writers, with no reason to promote Christianity. Yet if you put their records together, it can be shown beyond reasonable doubt that a man called Jesus lived in Judea at the time recorded in the Bible, that he was put to death by Pontius Pilate in about 33 AD, and that his followers believed him to have risen from the dead.

But then, I reasoned, how do we know the story of Jesus has not been exaggerated and embellished, bearing little resemblance to the real happenings? There may have been a good man—perhaps even a prophet—called Jesus who did live at that time, but perhaps over time his life and teachings have been deliberately corrupted. After all, we have seen in our times the extent to which Hollywood film producers are masters of this craft!

There was another, similar question that had to be dealt with. It was the old ‘Chinese whispers’ argument. The gospels,

with the rest of the New Testament, have been handed down over a period of some 2000 years. These writings have been copied and re-copied, and dozens of translations into English alone have been completed. How do we know that the text has not been altered during this process— a little here, a little there, until the final product bears little resemblance to the original?

I spent many hours in bookshops and libraries seeking to understand the documentary evidence for the transmission of the Bible, and especially the gospels, upon which virtually our whole knowledge of the life of Jesus depends. I found the evidence to be very impressive. A small army of textual scholars is constantly working on a rich supply of early New Testament manuscripts, and I became convinced that the New Testament we hold in our hands today is, for all practical purposes, a faithful record of the originals.<sup>4</sup>

Yet I found I still could not believe.

Next I began to look into the discipline of archaeology. Have those who specialize in digging up the past unearthed believable confirmation of the biblical record? There have been some impressive discoveries. The existence of King Belshazzar, mentioned in the Old Testament book of Daniel, was greatly doubted by secular scholars, as there was no mention of his existence in the Babylonian record. There seemed to have been no place available for him in the list of the kings of Babylon, which was believed to be a complete list. However, a more recent archaeological find has confirmed Belshazzar's existence, and also that he was co-regent with another king, Nabonidas, at the time of Babylon's demise.

One of the prized possessions in my personal library is the

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4. Plenty of information on this subject is available through Christian bookshops. At that time I found FF Bruce's small book *The New Testament Documents: Are they Reliable?* extremely useful, and I believe it is still in print.

famous tome by Sir William Ramsay dated 1896 entitled *St Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*. In it, Ramsay describes his early historical scepticism concerning the New Testament book ‘The Acts of the Apostles’. Ramsay initially considered Acts to be a largely untrustworthy record, essentially a fiction written a considerable time later than the writings of the apostles. The writer’s object, he believed, was to provide some pious stories about the doings of the early leaders of the Christian church, legends composed at a significantly later period, and also to support a supposed ‘Paul versus Jesus’ faction in the early church. Ramsay spent a considerable portion of his life comparing the historical, geographical and cultural details found in Acts against the records we possess concerning life in the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus and the apostles. The result of this intensive investigation was a total reversal of his views. In section 1 of the opening chapter, entitled ‘Trustworthiness’, Ramsay states:

There is... [in Acts] the historical work of the highest order, in which a writer commands excellent means of knowledge either through personal acquaintance or through access to original authorities...<sup>5</sup>

Ramsay goes on to explain one of his reasons for “placing the author of Acts among the historians of the first rank”:<sup>6</sup>

It was gradually borne in upon me that in various details the narrative showed marvellous truth.<sup>7</sup>

Now there is a sting in the tail here that may not be obvious. There is a large body of scholarly agreement that both Acts and

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5. WM Ramsay, *St Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, GP Putnam’s Sons, New York, 1896, p. 2.

6. Ramsay, p. 4.

7. Ramsay, p. 8.

the Gospel of Luke were written by the same hand—that of the physician Luke, Paul’s regular travelling companion. If so, it is reasonable to argue that if Acts can be found to be historically trustworthy, and its author proven to be a historian of the highest integrity, then the same may be said about the Gospel of Luke. If this is so, then it is reasonable to hold that the story of Jesus in Luke is also likely to be a reliable record.

Vast tracts of the Bible are not, or cannot be, confirmed by archaeology. For instance, for obvious reasons no archaeological record can ever be found for the account that Jesus walked on water. But archaeology does allow us to dip into the historical record at various points to test its trustworthiness, not unlike the time-to-time quality control exercised in a factory. Once again, I found this process, even with all its inherent limitations, to be impressive.

Yet still I found I simply could not believe!

By this stage I was in considerable despair. I had collected a small mountain of material concerning the trustworthiness of the Jesus record (and I was later to discover there was not much I had missed), and yet still this tenacious unbelief remained.

## **A mouse called Spirit**

A little mouse had begun his work, however. Let me picture my stubborn unbelief as being like a large pile of wheat, and the Holy Spirit as a small hungry mouse. Bit by bit, at an agonizingly slow pace, this mouse began to eat his way through the pile. I desperately wanted to find meaning and purpose for my life, and by now I was seeing the cross of Jesus as the stark difference between Christianity and all other religions. I also perceived the cross as the answer to the peeling paint, which was more and more exposing my truly depraved nature, but I found I could not believe. How could I place all my faith in—

and be 100 percent committed to—a person for whom there was incomplete (if impressive) evidence as to his true significance? (Apart from the gospels, whose writers, I reasoned, obviously wished to promote his cause.)

## **Metamorphosis**

It took that slow, steady mouse about 18 months to complete his tedious work. Gradually, painfully, I knew not how, the pile of unbelief was disappearing and faith was being born. There was no dramatic heavenly thunderclap; no band struck up; but while sitting alone in church late one night, I found myself saying, “I do not want to live my life any longer without Jesus”. A metamorphosis was taking place. The grub was dying and the butterfly was struggling to emerge. Now that I know a bit more Christian theology, I would say that what was happening to me at that time was called spiritual ‘regeneration’ or new birth by the inward work of the Holy Spirit; but I did not know that then. All I knew was that, like the man who was blind from birth in John’s Gospel, “though I was blind, now I [could] see” (John 9:25).

## **Decision time**

By this stage I was nearing the end of my six years of architectural study and needed to make a decision about life after graduation. I enjoyed the profession of architecture very much and probably could have continued to work for the firm that employed me. But I desperately wanted to understand the Bible more fully. Apart from Sunday School, my Christian instruction had been haphazard and sketchy at best. I felt I understood the gospels reasonably well, but the epistles and the Old Testament remained largely puzzling mysteries.

Much to my parents’ dismay, I decided to apply for entry to

a local theological college. My mother would later say to her friends that it was “a waste of a damn fine architect”, but from my perspective she was mistaken on two counts: it was not a waste; and I was not a damn fine architect.