

STEVEN J. LAWSON

CALLED  
TO  
PREACH



FULFILLING THE HIGH CALLING

OF EXPOSITORY PREACHING



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EXPOSITORY PREACHING



STEVEN J. LAWSON



**BakerBooks**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Books  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lawson, Steven J., author.

Title: Called to preach : fulfilling the high calling of expository preaching / Steven J. Lawson.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2022] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021035424 | ISBN 9780801094866 (paperback)  
ISBN 9781540902467 (cloth) ISBN 9781493434060 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Expository preaching.

Classification: LCC BV4211.3 .L385 2022 | DDC 251—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021035424>

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Unless otherwise indicated, Greek and Hebrew terms and translations are from Walter Bauer, Frederick William Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (BDAG) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

22 23 24 25 26 27 28      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Steven J. Lawson, *Called to Preach*

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To Derek W. H. Thomas  
Faithful friend,  
Gifted preacher,  
Brilliant theologian

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# INTRODUCTION



In every generation, the church of Jesus Christ rises or falls with its pulpit. This statement meets few exceptions. No church, no denomination, no movement rises any higher than its proclamation of the word of God. The importance of preaching for the edification of believers and the evangelism of the lost cannot be overstated. Over the centuries, every history-altering era of church history has been defined by the strength of its preaching. And every spiritually low season has been marked by a famine in the land of hearing the word of the Lord.

When the pulpit is strong, the church is strengthened, and her witness to the world is fortified. But when the pulpit is weak, the church languishes in spiritual listlessness, and society suffers for it.

The modern-day church has largely forgotten this truth. Church leaders look to the secular marketplace for new ideas to revitalize the work of God. Endless pragmatic strategies attempt to resuscitate the church. But each worldly remedy

is deficient in reaching the goal. The truth remains—that which is born of the flesh is flesh.

What is widely overlooked is that God established long ago the primary means of grace to be the preaching of His word. In both the Old and New Testaments, the chief method God has chosen to carry out His redemptive work is the Spirit-empowered proclamation of biblical truth. Nothing must ever be allowed to supplant the primacy of the pulpit—not if the church is to flourish.

Tragically, faithful preaching has become a forgotten science and a lost art. New ideas about preaching flood our conferences and podcasts. They promise church growth, numerical success, and personal fulfillment, yet minimize biblical exposition. They all fall woefully short of the permanent pattern set by God in Scripture. Only the centrality of preaching His word can accomplish the task. We cannot improve on what God has ordained.

Regardless of the whims of the times, the church is never allowed to redefine its mission nor its methods. We must never alter what God has fixed into place. No one is at liberty to invent new methods that rise above the pulpit. If the church is to be what Jesus Christ, the Head of the church—the master Architect—designed it to be, then it must follow His divine blueprint.

This book is a bold call to those summoned by Christ to preach the word. Strong preachers are needed in this desperate hour, those who understand the high call that has been placed upon their lives. Biblical preaching is the vibrant heartbeat that pumps spiritual life into the body of Christ. The Scripture rightly preached in the power of the Spirit will elevate worship and mature believers. And a biblical pulpit



will mobilize Christians in the cause of gospel outreach, both locally and globally.

Truly, the church is strongest when the pulpit is strongest.

In the following pages, I will set before you what the Bible says about this lofty responsibility of expository preaching. This is not a book that presents brand-new solutions for the pulpit. Nor is it the result of surveying church attendees or unsaved neighbors about what they want to hear. To the contrary, this book is a serious look at Scripture itself and consults the giants of church history to answer questions such as: Who should preach? What should preaching look like? How should we prepare our sermons? How should we deliver them to honor God?

Having surveyed the landscape we will explore, let us now begin our journey.

Steven J. Lawson  
Dallas

ONE

# Divinely Summoned

DISCERNING THE CALL



The ministry is the most honorable employment in the world.  
Jesus Christ has graced this calling by His entering into it.

Thomas Watson<sup>1</sup>

**P**reachers are not made—they are born. No seminary can make an expositor. No Bible college can create a preacher. No church can manufacture a man gifted in the pulpit. Only God can call a preacher. These individuals were chosen before time began for this sacred task.

To exposit the word is the most strategic assignment ever entrusted to any person. Granted, every vocational calling is God-ordained and is, of course, important. But this summons to preach carries the strictest accountability before

God. There can be no higher calling than to be a mouthpiece for God.

In his landmark book *Preaching and Preachers*, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones addressed this high call of biblical preaching with penetrating insight. This famed expositor made his case for the primacy of the pulpit in his opening statement when he asserted, “The work of preaching is the highest and the greatest and the most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called.”<sup>2</sup> Lloyd-Jones underscored what the Bible establishes, that preaching the word is to be the primary means of grace in all ministry.

Lloyd-Jones added, “The most urgent need in the Christian church today is true preaching; and as it is the greatest and most urgent need in the church, it is obviously the greatest need of the world also.”<sup>3</sup>

### **The Greatest Need**

Lloyd-Jones’s words are as relevant today as when he first wrote them. As the ministry of the word goes, so goes the church. And as the church goes, in turn, so goes much of the culture and the world. To revive the pulpit is to bring the strongest influence to bear upon the spiritual life of the church at the highest level. Ultimately, it will have the greatest repercussions on the world. The pulpit is *that* strategic.

This primacy of preaching was established long ago. Throughout the Old Testament, God sent faithful prophets to declare, “Thus says the LORD” (Exod. 4:22). Then God preceded the coming of the Messiah by sending a preacher to prepare His coming. John the Baptist was a voice in the wilderness, announcing the coming of the long-awaited

anointed One (Matt. 3:3). When God sent His own Son into the world, He called Him to be a preacher (Isa. 49:1–2). No higher endorsement of preaching could be given than for the Son of Man to be called into this holy assignment.

Jesus Christ then called twelve disciples to preach (Matt. 10:7). He spent three years training them so that “repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations” (Luke 24:47). This divine call was fulfilled by Peter (Acts 2:14–40) and subsequently extended to Paul (Gal. 1:15–16), Timothy (1 Tim. 4:14), and other gifted believers whom the ascended Christ would give to the church (Eph. 4:11–13).

Down through the centuries, the Lord has continued to build His church through His chosen instruments who are called to proclaim the Scripture (2 Tim. 2:2). This divine design remains the unchanging pattern until the end of the age.

Concerning this high calling, Martin Luther said, “If I could today become king or emperor, I would not give up my office as preacher.”<sup>4</sup> What loftier appointment could be given than to be divinely summoned to proclaim the truth of Scripture? At the same time, what more humbling station could there be than to herald the gospel of Christ? Truly, if God calls you to be His servant, why stoop to be a king?

---

Has God called *you* to preach His word? Do you feel the pull of the Holy Spirit into this noble calling? How can you know if you have been divinely appointed for this mission?

The answers to these questions are of vital importance for the work of Christ. They are eminently strategic for the

success of the church. And they are key for discerning God’s will for your own life. Given the importance of preaching in the church, it is critical that you understand how to discern a call to the pulpit.

As you pursue God’s will, it is necessary to recognize distinguishing marks that can help you decipher if you are being drawn into the ministry of proclaiming His word. If God is summoning you to preach, the following markers will be evident in your life.

### **A Burning Passion to Preach**

First, you will feel an overwhelming burden to preach. A call to the ministry is made evident when you experience a burning desire for this work. A strong inner compulsion will drive you to give yourself to this sacred task. You will reach a tipping point in which you feel compelled to leave your present occupation to give yourself to preach. The secular vocation you once pursued so wholeheartedly now seems empty by comparison.

Your mind is now preoccupied with spiritual truths and eternal pursuits. You undeniably long to advance the work of God, no matter the sacrifice it may cost you. The work of preaching the word increasingly dominates your mind and drives your heart. This inner tug will not leave you alone.

This is precisely what Paul explains to Timothy: “It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do” (1 Tim. 3:1). The two key words here are “aspire” and “desire.” Both communicate a holy compulsion to serve in spiritual leadership. The word translated “aspire,” *oregō*, is a rare Greek word

that means to seek to accomplish a specific goal; it speaks of striving for something with a strong desire. This word describes the one who longs to step forward to serve God in the ministry. A building passion to preach the word burns within you.

The other critical word Paul uses in this passage is “desire.” It is derived from the Greek word *epithymēō*, which means to have a strong desire to do or secure something. The meaning can be used either positively or negatively, depending upon its context. In this case, “desire” indicates a proper attraction for what is holy, namely a call to the ministry. This word describes a strong inner drive that motivates a person to enter the ministry. The desire is so overwhelming that you will make whatever sacrifice is necessary to fulfill this call.

Charles Spurgeon stressed that this strong desire to preach the word will be present in those called to preach. In his autobiography, he emphasized this necessity:

If a man be truly called of God to the ministry, I will defy him to withhold himself from it. A man who has really within him the inspiration of the Holy Ghost calling him to preach, cannot help it—he must preach. As fire within the bones, so will that influence be until it blazes forth. Friends may check him, foes criticize him, despisers sneer at him, the man is indomitable; he must preach if he has the call of heaven.<sup>5</sup>

This all-consuming desire to proclaim the word is the leading indicator of a call to the ministry. Such a one would rather die than not be in gospel ministry; they feel that strongly

about being involved in the work of God. Gospel work is not something you merely want to do but *must* do.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones himself experienced this overwhelming desire to preach the word. While in his twenties, Lloyd-Jones had already ascended to a prominent place in the British medical community as a brilliant physician. The future seemed to be in his hands for the taking. But God had other plans. The Lord began to stir his soul, and he became increasingly dissatisfied with his successful medical practice. Despite this elite position, Lloyd-Jones was restless and unfulfilled. As he treated many of the affluent in British society, it struck him that he was helping unconverted people become well so they could return to a life of sin.

We spend most of our time rendering people fit to go back to their sin. I want to heal souls. If a man has a diseased body and his soul is all right, he is all right to the end; but a man with a healthy body and a distressed soul is all right for sixty years or so and then he has to face eternity in Hell.<sup>6</sup>

Though he worked closely alongside Lord Thomas Horder, the celebrated physician to His Majesty King George V, Lloyd-Jones realized he must become a physician not of the body but of the soul. He felt that he *had* to give his life to treat the deepest needs of men and women and invest himself in prescribing the only remedy for sin-plagued lives—the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This deep desire to care for the souls of others captured the heart of Lloyd-Jones. He felt burdened to preach the word of God.

I would say that the only man who is called to preach is the man who cannot do anything else, in the sense that he is not satisfied with anything else. This call to preach is so put upon him, and such pressure comes to bear upon him that he says, “I can do nothing else, I must preach.”<sup>7</sup>

Do you feel this same longing for gospel ministry? Do you have a similar discontent with the world? If so, nothing else you can do will satisfy you. You can find no rest until you enter this labor of gospel proclamation.

### **A Marked Ability to Teach**

Second, God’s call to preach will be discerned by recognizing a Spirit-given ability to make His word clearly known. Paul states that those called must be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2). Again, the apostle maintains, they must “be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9). Those whom God sets apart to preach are gifted to teach the word and defend it when attacked. The Lord equips such persons with the supernatural ability to expound the Scripture plainly to others. This God-given capacity to teach through preaching is bestowed on those called into the ministry.

If you are called to preach, there will be a noticeable gifting in your life to rightly interpret the word with precision and clarity (2 Tim. 2:15). You will also be able to make the truth of Scripture clear to your listeners. If you are called to ministry, you will have an inner resolve to dig deep into the Scripture and discover its inexhaustible truths in order to teach them to others (Ezra 7:10).



This gift to teach will always be accompanied by a desire to study. These two—studying and teaching—always go hand in hand. As you teach in your preaching, you will be possessed with a deep desire to better know the word of God. Understanding biblical truth is necessary to help others lay hold of these realities. Though you may not have been a serious student in previous schooling, you should now have a new burst of energy to immerse yourself in studying the word.

Personally, I grew up in an academically driven home in which my father was a professor at a medical school. My younger brother followed in his footsteps to become a cardiologist and a professor of medicine. My mother had graduated first in her classes almost every year, and my sister was a well-respected schoolteacher. But my interest in studying was minimal at best. All I wanted to do was play sports, which was my chief focus through college. Needless to say, my lack of interest in school was a great frustration to my brilliant father.

This lackluster desire for learning continued after my graduation from college—until the day God called me to preach. Then I became gripped by a voracious desire to read and learn the Bible. This new desire was inexplicable, except for the fact that I was being summoned to preach. I was now consumed with a holy passion to study the word, read Bible commentaries, and learn theology. These two desires to study and teach are the heads and tails of the same coin. Wherever you find the one, the other will be present.

Do you have this strong desire to read and study the word?  
Can you teach with clarity the truth you are learning?

## **An Evident Growth in Godliness**

Third, a call to preach will be evidenced by your ongoing conformity to Christlikeness. As you seek to discern God's leading, you should recognize His sanctifying work within you. A wholehearted pursuit of Christ will more and more dominate your life. You should witness deeper longings for personal holiness. Your prayer life should be expanding and your desire for godliness should be intensifying. No one discerns a call to preach while being spiritually lukewarm or entangled in worldly loves.

The depth of your spiritual growth is critical to discerning a call to preach. You will only detect this summons while you are spiritually blossoming. The condition of your walk with God is a determining factor in the ability to recognize that He is drawing you into a preaching ministry. But a lack of personal holiness is a certain indication that you are not ready to begin this process.

These crucial spiritual qualifications are listed in 1 Timothy 3:2–7. Paul writes that an overseer must be “above reproach,” which means that no valid charge of habitual sin should be able to be legitimately brought against the one who desires to preach. Specifically, such a man must be “the husband of one wife,” loving her with singular commitment, and must also be “temperate,” meaning self-controlled, not swayed by the impulses of his flesh. Those who preach must also be “prudent,” possessing discernment and wisdom in spiritual matters, and “respectable,” demonstrating a recognizable spiritual maturity and dignity.

Further qualifications include being “hospitable,” loving people, especially showing Christian love and concern

for visitors and strangers, not being “addicted to wine” but under the control of sound judgment and uninfluenced by external substances, and not being “pugnacious,” meaning not being a bully who is needlessly combative with others in order to intimidate and get his way. Preachers must also be “gentle” and “peaceable,” acting graciously toward others, and “free from the love of money,” not filled with greedy worldliness but freely generous.

### *Living an Exemplary Life*

This godliness is important because preachers influence others not just through their sermons but through how they live. Jesus said, “A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40). Every disciple must be being conformed into the image of Jesus Christ. The same will be true in the life of the preacher. You must model the message you proclaim.

Moreover, you must manage your own household well and exercise a spiritual influence upon your children, who, in turn, live in a manner that reflects your values. You should not be a “new convert” (1 Tim. 3:6) but show maturity in your spiritual life. And you must “have a good reputation with those outside the church” (v. 7), because you are visibly identified with the church in the community.

Your call to preach is confirmed by your close walk with God. This spiritual intimacy is evidenced by consciously living *coram deo*—before the face of God. You find yourself being drawn into closer fellowship with Him in order to rightly discern His leading in your life. While you are not seeking a mystical experience, nor are you hearing an audible

voice, you nevertheless know the Holy Spirit is active in your heart, drawing you to love God more and more.

### ***Discerning the Will of God***

As you discern God's direction for your life, a desire for a closer walk with Him will be evident. When you study His word, different passages of Scripture will capture your heart in new ways. As you pray, you will long for the will of God to be done in your life and will plead with God to reveal the next part of His perfect plan for your life.

When you pray, you will be humbling yourself under the mighty hand of God. You are sold out to Christ with fresh abandon and consciously relinquish the direction of your life to Him, deliberately surrendering your future to God. In detecting the call of God upon your life, the lower you bow before Him, the higher He will lift you up and move you forward into His will. The more quiet and attentive you are in His presence, the louder His word will speak to you.

Shortly after his conversion, George Whitefield sought to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ. He devoured the works of the Reformers and the Puritans, desiring to obtain a solid doctrinal foundation in the Scriptures. His search for knowledge led him to Gabriel Harris, a bookseller who would lend him books. Whitefield biographer Arnold Dalimore describes the unique practice Whitefield developed:

[He prayed] over every line and word of both the English and the Greek till the passage, in its essential message, has veritably become part of his own soul. . . . When, in later chapters, we see him preaching forty and more hours per

week, with little or no time for preparation, we may well look back on these days in Gloucester and recognize that he was then laying up a store of Biblical knowledge on which he was able to draw amidst the haste and tumult of such a ministry.<sup>8</sup>

Whitefield devoted significant time to gaining a proper knowledge of Scripture, theology, and church history in order to become more godly and a more effective communicator of the gospel. He knew this was impossible without fervent prayer as he sought God's wisdom, grace, and discernment. It was in this spiritual mindset that Whitefield identified God's call upon his life to preach.

These same elements of godliness will be vital to your ministry. Before you can discern a call to preach, you must be living an exemplary life that is worthy of being emulated by others. This does not mean you need to be perfect to enter the ministry. If that were the requirement, no one would even come close to being qualified. But it does mean you must be growing in grace and seeking holiness. Your character, conduct, and conversations must reflect the message you will preach in the pulpit.

As you consider a call to the ministry, examine your life. Do you see these character qualities? Do you observe the grace of God shaping your Christian walk? This is a necessary step in detecting this calling from God.

### **A Strong Confirmation from Others**

Fourth, you should receive confirmation from others that you are called to preach. This divine summons should be affirmed by those who observe your life and recognize your

gifting. As they listen to you handle the word, they should offer affirmation of the clear evidence of your gifting to teach and preach.

In 1 Timothy 3:10, Paul says concerning deacons, “These men must also first be tested.” This means a person must be given the opportunity to serve and be examined by others before being entrusted with a church office. The same principle applies for the one called into pulpit ministry. Before being confirmed, your preaching should first be tested. You should be observed and, if qualified, affirmed by wise people in your local church.

What others perceive in your attempts to minister the word is important. It may be the feedback of a close friend who hears you teach or preach. It might be the objective insight of an older saint. It could be the encouraging word of someone in a Sunday school class. Those in the church who hear you teach the word are often the most helpful aids in discerning whether you are called to preach. Sometimes spiritually mature people will recognize the hand of God upon your life before you sense it yourself. Their feedback will be invaluable to you in recognizing God’s call.

A call to the ministry should also be acknowledged by the leadership of the church. The apostle Paul states that preachers must be “sent.” This should be understood to mean a formal commissioning by a sending church. The apostle writes,

“Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? (Rom. 10:13–15)

In sending any preacher, the spiritual leaders of the church—its pastors and elders—must first examine the character qualifications and spiritual gifting of anyone being set apart to preach. They must affirm the validity of their call from God and test the integrity of both personal life and doctrine. Those who pass their appraisal should receive the laying on of their hands to validate what God is doing in their lives (1 Tim. 4:14), then be sent to proclaim the saving message of Jesus Christ.

If God is setting you apart to the work of preaching, the leaders of your local church should affirm this call upon your life. It is critical that you not be self-appointed to the ministry. Other people who are spiritually mature and ministry-minded should affirm that God is at work in your life in a special way. Only then may you have the assurance that you are being separated unto the work of the Lord.

One clear example of receiving the confirmation of others is the Scottish Reformer John Knox. After the martyrdom of his mentor, George Wishart, Knox was asked to teach a class of young men in St. Andrews Castle. He expounded the Gospel of John with such noticeable skill that he caught the attention of the older men present. When they urged him to vocationally preach, Knox adamantly refused. He believed he must not run where God had not called. A lay leader named John Rough soon thereafter preached a sermon, in the middle of which he publicly charged Knox to answer the call to preach. Terrified, Knox “burst forth in most abundant tears, and withdrew himself to his chamber.”<sup>9</sup>

While locked in his room, Knox underwent much soul-searching. At last, he came to the realization he was being called by God. Now in agreement with those who had

recognized his gifting, he stepped forward to affirm his call to preach. Here, the determining factor was the feedback of mature believers in the church. Knox offered himself to be the preacher of that congregation. In future years, he would become one of the most powerful preachers God ever gave to the church. But the recognition of his calling started with the confirmation of others.

As people in your life hear you teach or preach, do you receive their confirmation that you are uniquely gifted to proclaim the word? Do they recognize the hand of God upon your life for good?

Have you presented yourself to the leaders of your church for examination? Have they evaluated your qualifications for ministry? Have they affirmed you before the church?

### **A Spiritual Influence upon Lives**

Fifth, you can know you are called to preach as you observe spiritual fruit in the lives of others from your ministry. The leading of God into the ministry is confirmed when you see people's lives being changed as you teach and preach the word. You will feel an overwhelming desire to see people experience a stronger faith in Jesus Christ. This prerequisite requires that you are spreading the gospel before you can detect a call to the ministry. When you cast the net in preaching the word, you will see souls being caught and transformed into the image of Christ. Your gospel labors will lead to new life in others.

This driving passion to see men and women converted to Jesus Christ was present in the life of the apostle Paul. He wrote, "I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may



win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews . . . to those who are without law, I became as without law . . . so that I might win those who are without law” (1 Cor. 9:19–21). Paul summarized, “I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some” (v. 22). That is, he *must* see souls won to Christ.

This same goal to win people to faith in Jesus Christ will be present in all those called into ministry. Granted, only God can save a lost human soul. And only God can convict, call, and regenerate a spiritually dead heart. But He works through human means to accomplish His eternal purposes. This begins with Him calling individuals to preach the gospel. If someone is to discern a call to the ministry, there must be some evidence of the lost being brought to Christ.

Charles Spurgeon declared that he could not know for certain he had been called to preach until he saw his first convert. This confirmation came when he was seventeen years old, after he first began to preach. After a Sunday morning sermon, he heard an older woman had been brought to faith in Christ under his preaching. He visited her home later that afternoon, and upon hearing the testimony of this precious woman, he believed it was the seal of heaven upon his divine appointment to preach the word of God. He later recalled,

How my heart leaped for joy when I heard tidings of my first convert! I could never be satisfied with a full congregation, and the kind expressions of friends: I longed to hear that hearts had been broken, that tears had been seen streaming from the eyes of penitents. How I did rejoice, as one that finds great spoil, one Sunday afternoon, when my good

deacon said to me, “God has set His seal on your ministry in this place, sir.”<sup>10</sup>

Spurgeon testified that his aim to win souls to Jesus Christ dominated his ministry for the rest of his days. He asserted that he would rather be the means of saving one soul than the greatest orator on earth, would sooner see the poorest person saved than become the Archbishop of Canterbury, and would rather be the winner of souls than a king in theological debate.<sup>11</sup>

Martyn Lloyd-Jones maintained that God gives to those called to preach an evangelistic passion to reach lost people with the gospel. In such people, the Holy Spirit ignites a consuming desire for others’ spiritual welfare. Lloyd-Jones wrote that the true call is accompanied by a heightened concern for the souls of others, a burden for their lost condition, and the desire to lead them to Christ for salvation.<sup>12</sup> This love for others includes the distinct realization that many people are perishing without Christ.

In his own life, Lloyd-Jones experienced this growing concern for others and their eternal destinies. He said,

I used to be struck almost dumb sometimes in London at night when I stood watching the cars passing, taking people to the theaters and other places with all their talk and excitement, as I suddenly realized that what all this meant was that these people were looking for peace, peace for themselves.<sup>13</sup>

This spirited concern grew when he detected his call into the ministry, and this passion to win the lost continued to intensify throughout his life.

Everyone called into the ministry will be possessed with this same desire to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ. It must be more than a mere interest in learning the word of God. There must be a passion for the truth to reach lost souls. There must be some evidence of others being strengthened in their faith. Jesus said, “You will know them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:16, 20). This is true not only for the false prophets who produce corrupt fruit but also for the true preachers who witness godly fruit in their preaching.

As you evaluate your call to the ministry, do you see any evidence of someone being brought to personal faith in Jesus Christ? Have you heard the testimony of someone becoming a believer through your preaching or teaching? Do you see some measure of spiritual fruit in others that would allow you to move confidently toward this goal?

### **A Pressing Urgency in the Heart**

Sixth, a call to preach usually creates a crisis in the heart. A call to the ministry is realized internally as you experience great internal turbulence. You are standing at a crossroads and must decide which way you will go. You are being pulled away from your former life and drawn into this new direction, but not without an intense struggle within you.

For Moses, this defining moment came when he stood at the burning bush and God called him to go speak to Pharaoh (Exod. 3:1–14). He trembled with a sense of his own personal inadequacy, asking, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh?” (v. 11). For Isaiah, it was when he entered the temple in the year that King Uzziah died and encountered the holiness of God (Isa. 6:1–3). This was a disruptive encoun-

ter as Isaiah shook like a leaf in a storm. For Peter, James, John, and Andrew, this watershed moment was when Jesus called them to leave their fishing nets to follow Him (Matt. 4:18–22).

In each of these encounters, the call into ministry had these men leave their former life and pursue this new venture into the unknown. All were dramatic—and often traumatic—experiences in the lives of those called. No one yawned or felt apathetic when they were called. This pivotal moment was undeniably disturbing and soul-arresting. Even so, it will be disruptive for you, if you are being called. You will be shaken to the core of your being.

Describing this kind of a personal crossroads, Lloyd-Jones stated that when someone is called, there must be “an awareness of a kind of pressure being brought to bear upon one’s spirit.”<sup>14</sup> He identified this as “some disturbance in the realm of the spirit” in which “your mind is directed to the whole question of preaching.”<sup>15</sup> Such an internal crisis becomes acutely alarming.

Lloyd-Jones suffered a soul-searching struggle over the call of God upon his life. He lost twenty pounds and endured many sleepless nights and finally came to a breaking point. His personal turmoil reached its zenith one evening when he and his wife, Bethan, along with another couple, attended the theater in London. When the play was over, the four exited the theater and Lloyd-Jones observed a Salvation Army band playing hymns on the street corner. This brave band proclaimed an open gospel witness to all who were walking by.

He was deeply struck by their unashamed witness for the Lord. As he observed this little ministry team proclaiming

the message of salvation, their bold act became a pivotal moment in his life. He said to himself, “These are my people, these are my people I belong to, and I am going to belong to them.”<sup>16</sup> It was at that moment that Lloyd-Jones resolved to shift directions and answered the call of God upon his life to preach.

For each person called, it may not be such a dramatic moment. However, the one summoned to the pulpit will often be confronted with an overwhelming sense of the pull of God. An enlarged awareness of the greatness of God will dominate their life, and an overwhelming humility will grip their soul, because the living God is making a claim upon them.

Can you point to such a pivotal moment in your search to discern the call of God upon your life? Have you felt such pressure in wrestling with this call?

### **An Open Door of Providence**

Seventh, the one called to preach will be providentially ushered into the ministry through opening doors of circumstances. Where God leads, the path will be cleared so you can move forward to preach His word. There will be challenges, but God will sovereignly open the necessary doors and pave the way for you to answer His divine summons. Roadblocks will be removed, training will be made available, and resources will be supplied.

One example of God’s providential dealings in a call to the ministry involved Paul’s son in the faith, Timothy. God moved the apostle Paul into the life of this younger man as the chosen means to prepare him for ministry. The itinerant evangelist Paul traveled to Lystra, where he met Timothy and

invited him to join his second missionary trip (Acts 16:1–3). This was not a chance encounter, but a divine appointment, one orchestrated by the invisible hand of our sovereign God. Behind the scenes, God was at work providing the future preacher with an older mentor who would train him for a ministry in preaching.

God worked similarly in the life of John Knox, as mentioned earlier, to prepare him for the ministry. God crossed his path with that of a powerful itinerant preacher, George Wishart. This traveling evangelist was shaped by deep Reformed convictions, which made such a profound impression upon Knox that he began to accompany Wishart in his preaching journeys throughout Scotland. The younger Knox became so close to Wishart that he became his personal bodyguard. His responsibility was to protect the older preacher with a broadsword against life-threatening dangers from the enemies of the gospel.

Though Wishart was soon martyred, Knox had witnessed firsthand the fearless preaching of the word. This was God's perfect plan to prepare him for the tempestuous lifetime of gospel ministry that lay before him.

What would an open door look like in your life? It may not be as dramatic as the situation in which Knox found himself, but it will be just as real and formative. It might be a pastor or a spiritual leader whom God has brought into your life to provide you with training and counsel for the ministry. This open door might be your acceptance into a reputable seminary for the biblical training you need to carry out effective ministry. Or it might be an unexpected financial gift or material provision that allows you to move forward into the will of God.

Whatever the door before you, it has been swung open by the invisible arm of God to advance you into your needed preparations to preach. Only God Himself can open these doors. He works through secondary means such as people and circumstances to provide these opportunities, but God is the primary agent who prepares the way that leads you to preach His word.

### **Are You Called?**

Is God working in you to answer His call to proclaim His word? Is God pulling on your heart in a way that is becoming unmistakable? He may indeed be drawing you into vocational gospel ministry.

There is a story told about a captain steering his ship into a harbor. The entrance into the port was surrounded by a dangerous, rocky coastline. The captain knew he must line up three objects before he could proceed forward—the lighthouse, the church steeple, and the distant mountain peak. When all three lined up, the captain knew it was safe to sail ahead.

If you observe the indicators highlighted in this chapter take shape and “line up,” you should move forward in answering God’s call for your life. If this is where you find yourself, may God increase your faith to answer His call to preach. There could be no higher calling.