



“CONSIDER *Your* CALL” Sample Sermon

WHY I AM A MINISTER

Acts 26:1-23

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His name was Cliff. I met him some years ago at a world mission's conference. Following seminary and a stint in local church ministry, he and his wife responded to their sense of calling to foreign missions. They were serving in Peru when I knew them and they were on furlough. After they spoke in our church one Sunday morning, they had a meal and a time to relax there at the house. I asked him about his experience. He told me some interesting, touching, and even funny tales. I asked him if there were lots of surprises out there in the larger world. He assured me that there were, but not as great as some surprises here in the United States. He said that the greatest and most disappointing surprises were when people raised questions about what he was doing. He told me that some people who were Baptists and said they were missionary supporters would actually call his decision into question with questions like, “Can't you be a minister here?” “Don't you feel badly by putting your family in danger?” (He said he felt safer in Peru than he did in the continental United States.) “Don't you feel badly raising your children away from their grandparents?” He said it was disillusioning at times, but it did make him think about what he was doing.

I have had my own such encounters. Aside from the surprises back when I let people know I was going to enter the Christian ministry, it is fairly common even now for people to ask why I do what I do. The motives seem to vary. Most people are merely curious, some are genuinely interested, and some are simply ignorant of what Christian ministry is. One of the hurtful times was in my first church when one of the members asked me why I was a pastor. After explaining to him why as best as I could, I asked him why he had asked. He said he just didn't understand...that I was bright, capable, energetic...and that I could have done anything from law to medicine to business...that I could have made a lot more money doing some other things...that I wouldn't have had to move around the country...that it almost seemed like I could have done better than be a local church pastor. It is at times like that when I realize that some folks just don't get it.

Most of us are asked at times, or simply ask ourselves, why we do what we do. It is a healthy look in the emotional and spiritual mirror. Whether the question has to do with our vocations or our family situation or where we live or how we live or what political philosophies we embody or our hobbies or our faith, I am convinced it is good to do such a thing. Fairly often, decisions result, maybe a decision to continue doing life a certain way...or maybe to change.

Recently, I have felt led to talk about some of the whys of my life. Some of these include why I am Christian, how I have grown as a believer, why I love the church, and why I am a Baptist. Today, I want to share with you some of the reasons I am a minister. I do this, not because I think my story is special, but to help you know me and to get you to think about your own circumstances. As for me, I see myself as a least likely candidate to be a pastor. Yet, here I am, over a half-century-old, having been a local church pastor almost half of my life, and I actually enjoy it most of the time. The reasons why we do what we do in life may be very different from what people think. Why you are in business, why

you work at the shipyard, why you are in the military, why you teach, clerk, are retired, doctor, nurse, etc. are reasons that are your own. People might actually be surprised to find out some of the motives that drive us.

As for me, there was no ministerial family tradition, no family pressure, and it certainly wasn't something I always wanted to do. Also, it wasn't because I was or am a particularly good person, or because I didn't like working with my hands. Growing up on a farm, it always kind of bothered me when people would say I became a pastor to avoid hard work. That resentment will sometimes surface when some well-meaning Baptist soul will shake hands with me and say something like, "It must be nice to not have to do any real work and have such nice, soft hands." As Good Ol' Charlie Brown would say, "AAARRRRGGGGHHHH!"

If you want to know about the history of the early Christian church, read the book of Acts. It is a treasure of knowledge, telling of the major personalities, the major events, the pressures, and the Spirit's involvement in the early church's life. In it, we read much of the story of Paul. You likely know that he was a religious leader of his day. In fact, he was a Pharisee, hostile toward the Christian faith, and had agreed to the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Then he met the resurrected Christ, became a Christian himself, and began taking the gospel to the Gentile world.

For a number of reasons, he wanted to go to Rome. He eventually got his wish, but maybe not in the way he wanted it. It happened that he was arrested for his faith, for, according to the Jewish leaders, being "a pestilent fellow, an agitator among all the Jews, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. He even tried to profane the temple..." (Acts 24:5-6) He might have been released if he had admitted his guilt or recanted, but he refused, appealing his conviction through their system of courts. Finally, he did end up in Rome, but not before having been from Jerusalem to Caesarea to Felix to Festus to Herod Agrippa. Along the way, Paul had to make several defenses of his ministry and of the Christian faith.

Today, I read one of his defenses. It speaks of why he was who he was and why he did what he did. This same scripture is a basis for why I am a minister. Did you hear his story? Paul, who had been an enemy of the Christian faith, had met the Lord, been affirmed by others, was taught and trained by others, was accompanied and assisted by others, had dealt with beatings, had been through trials, had withstood false accusations, and now he was on trial for his life and future ministry. Why? His ministry was in question for some of the same reasons I am a minister. Consider these.

Like Paul, I am a minister because of my love for the Lord. In verses 4-23, Paul gave his testimony. He told of his life before Christ, how he met Christ, and what his life had been like since meeting Christ. It is a testimony of Christ's love for him and his love for Christ. I share that love, however imperfectly. When my parents were married, my mother was a Nazarene and my father wasn't a Christian. My mother pled with my father to go to church with her and her babies. He did so, but to a Baptist church as it was closer by. It was there that I was exposed to the gospel, to Christian people, and to the work of God's Spirit. It was there that I said "yes" to Christ at fifteen years of age. I remember even now the great sense of love and resolve and relief I felt when I made that decision. It remains today.

One can love the Lord without being a minister, though. So, I am also a minister because of my love for the church and for people in general. I can't imagine anything else that could have compelled Paul to make his case again and again to his detractors. He loved Christ, His Church, and His world. It was that love that resulted in Paul giving his all that others might hear the gospel. As for me, I consider myself a people person. I enjoy time alone, and sometimes I seek it. I don't enjoy shallow relationships, but will invest much of myself for substantive friendships. That may be one of the reasons I go to the kinds of churches I pastor. They are large enough to be a challenge but small enough so I can know and care about people in a personal way. Fallible as I am, I do love people.

But one can love the Lord and people and still not be a minister, can't one? Well...not really. According to scripture, if we are followers of Christ, we are ministers or "priests." One of the great doctrines of the New Testament and of the Protestant Reformation is that we all have equal access to God and equal responsibility before God to serve him. Every Christian is to be a minister, but some are vocational ministers. If all Christians love the Lord, love the Church, love people, and are gifted and responsible for some kind of a ministry, then are there any differences in you and me? The answer is "yes," but maybe not as many differences as one might assume. What set Paul and other vocational ministers apart for full-time service?

I am also a minister because of a sense of calling to ministry. In verses 16-18 of our scripture, we read of Christ's calling on Paul's life. Paul was rather unique in that his calling to follow Christ and his calling to full-time service came simultaneously. At the same time Paul was saying "yes" to the claims of Christ on his life, he was being appointed "to serve and bear witness" to Christ in the Gentile world. Such is not the case for most of us. I know it wasn't the case for me. In the summer of 1973, I was between my junior and senior years in college. I was discontented in most every way, including spiritually. I knew something wasn't right in my heart and life. I began to doubt my own salvation, so great

was my misery. I had a wonderful pastor, Nathan Hale, who talked and prayed with me. I told Nathan one night that I sometimes wondered if God wanted something from me other than to be a faithful layman. Nathan had been careful not to suggest this, but quickly added that he had wondered the same thing. The sense of calling opened up a whole new world for me. My continued education, my meeting my wife, my living in the places I have lived, and virtually all else that I do have grown out of that sense of calling.

I would add that I am a minister because of gifts for ministry. It is obvious that Paul had many such gifts. In the course of his writings, he listed upwards of twenty such gifts, gifts like healing and exhortation and service and teaching and discernment. I have a few such gifts. Saying that is not bragging. It is a testimony of God's goodness and expectations. I hope you have a sense of the gifts God has given you for the work of ministry as a layperson or vocational minister. If not, I hope you will spend some time and effort discovering and developing those gifts.

I am also a minister because of affirmations of my calling. In the case of Paul, he had lived out his calling with a great deal of notoriety and success. That was the very reason he was on trial. If people had paid no attention to him, there would have been no trial. In verse 22, he testifies that he "had the help that comes from God..." What an affirmation! In my case, if my ministry had been a disaster, I might have reconsidered. I don't mean that I would have given up easily or that there haven't been very difficult times. I don't know today's statistics, but at one time, half of those who entered the ministry left within five years. It really helped me that people were being saved where I pastored, that the churches grew in health and influence, and that I grew as a pastor. These affirmations have kept me going in the tough times that are inevitable. How well I remember the difficulty of dealing with difficult people in my first church. In one case, I just didn't know what to do with a person who seemed to be criticizing me at every point. I went to be a trusted father figure in the church and was trying to develop some kind of strategy for facing the person. At one point, I asked my friend to go and talk to the other person for me. My trusted friend said, "I will if you really want me to do so, but if I am going to do your job, I ought to draw part of your salary." Ouch! How that hurt! In retrospect, though, I see that differently. In a backhanded kind of way, he was telling me that I was capable of handling the situation and that I should do so myself. Affirmations aren't always fun, but they are necessary. Affirmations have also kept me functioning in the ministry.

There is a final reason why I am a minister, though. It is because, in ministry, I know that I am a part of something that will last, something that is, in fact, eternal. Such was the case with Paul. In verse 22 and 23, Paul contends that he is standing in the shadow of Moses and of Christ. His preaching of the gospel was somehow connected to God's revelation of Himself from the beginning of time until the end of the world. That is pretty important stuff, don't you think? We need to remember daily that, for hundreds of years, thousands even; the truths by which we stand have stood firm. We are in an eternal business. I remember another time when I went to talk with my father figure friend in my first church. He was always so wise and affirming. At that time, I was really down in the dumps. After pouring out my heart, I concluded with the phrase, "I feel so expendable." What I wanted was for him to say that I wasn't expendable, that this church couldn't survive without me, and that the future of the community rested on my being there. He responded, "We are all expendable." Ouch! How that hurt! You would think that I would have learned my lesson the first time, but this was and is no ordinary man. In his backhanded kind of way, he was trying to get me to see the forest and not just the trees. He was trying to get me to think beyond myself, outside myself, and above myself. He was actually trying to connect me to eternal thinking. I hope he succeeded.

So, for these reasons and a few lesser ones, I am a minister. In a broad sense, Christians are all ministers, but these reasons brought me to vocational ministry and have kept me there. The invitation today is for you, if you are or aren't a Christian or a minister. If you aren't a Christian, I hope you will receive Christ as your Savior and Lord. If you are a Christian, you may need to recommit your life to Christ. You may also need to commit yourself to living out your ministry as a layperson. You may even feel the Spirit of God speaking to you and leading you to vocational ministry. Whatever the case might be, you are encouraged to listen to the Spirit, respond as you should, and make your decision public, as you feel led. Amen.