

CHAPTER VI

THE WANT OF A DIVINE CALL A MAIN CAUSE OF FAILURE IN THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

The want of Ministerial success may sometimes be traced to the very threshold of the entrance into the work. Was the call to the sacred office clear in the order of the church, and according to the will of God? This question bears with vast importance upon the subject. Where the call is manifest, the promise is assured, “Certainly I will be with thee.”* But if we run unsent, our labours must prove unblest. Many, we fear, have never exercised their minds upon this inquiry. But do not we see the standing ordinance of the church written upon their unproductive Ministrations—“I sent them not, nor commanded them; *therefore they shall not profit this people at all, saith the Lord?*”* The curse of barrenness was not, that their doctrine was unsound, but that they preached unsent.

Under the old dispensation it was marked as the most dangerous presumption to touch the ark of God without a Divine warrant. Nor is it a less direct act of usurpation to take authority in the Church of Christ without a commission from her Divine Head. Christ himself appeared with *delegated* not with *self-commissioned* authority. He declared his Divine call prophetically† upon his prospective undertaking of his work. It was manifested to the world as the preparatory step to his public Ministry, as well as in the course of his work.‡ Often did he appeal to it as the credentials of his commission.§ Those who “entered into the fold,” without his authority, as the Head of the church, he stamps as “thieves and robbers,” and he only who “entered in by” his Divine commission at “the door into the fold was the Shepherd of the sheep.”

‘The Ministry is a matter of pure grace and favour, who then will dare to enter into it without a Divine call! There is nothing in which a king would willingly be more absolute than in the choice of his Ministers. And shall we dare to contest and take away this right from the King of kings?’

The different illustrations indeed of the office necessarily suppose a regular call. We cannot conceive of a herald—an ambassador—a steward—a watchman—a messenger—an angel—with self-constituted authority. The Apostle asks, with regard to the first of these characters—“How shall they preach except they be sent?” They may indeed preach without a mission, but not as the messengers of God. No one can be an ambassador, except he be charged *expressly* with instructions from his Sovereign (else would he deliver what was the fruit of his own brain, not his Sovereign’s will and commands.) Nor can any one legitimately come in the name of God to confirm the revelations of his will to man, except by his own express appointment. Hooker admirably observes—“They are therefore Ministers of God, not only by way of subordination, as princes and civil magistrates, whose execution of judgment and justice the supreme hand of Divine Providence doth uphold; but Ministers of God, as from whom their authority is derived, and not from men. For in that they are

Christ's ambassadors and his labourers, who should give them their commission, but He, whose most inward affairs they manage?''* The Divine call is either external or internal. As external, it is manifested by a commission received from and recognized by the church, according to the Scriptural and primitive order: not indeed qualifying the Ministers, but authorizing him whom God had internally and suitably qualified. The external call communicates only official authority. The internal call conveys personal qualifications. But both these capabilities, though essentially distinct in their character, and flowing from different sources—are indispensably requisite for the exercise of the Divine commission. Both of them may be expected to unite unto the government of Him who "is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints,"† and whose unction, fitting his servants for his work, is of a rational, holy and orderly character, harmoniously combining with the constituted appointment of his will. How plainly do the superscriptions of St. Paul's Epistles, (with one or two exceptions,) stamp his instructions to the churches with the seal of his Divine commission! As Quesnel observes, 'He is never weary of inculcating to us this truth, that the will of God is the sole rule of any man's call, and the only gate, by which he can enter into the Ministry. The Mission is Divine in its fountain and institution—human in its channel and way of communication.'*

We need scarcely remark that the external call—as being the mere delegation of man, though necessary and authoritative in its character—is of itself insufficient to constitute the full credentials for the sacred office. It is upon the *presumptive ground* of the inward call—the work of Divine influence—that our church delegates her authorized commission. Nothing can be more explicit than the solemn question which she has put to us. "Do you trust that you are inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost to take upon you this office?" 'Certainly,' as Bishop Burnet remarks with his usual seriousness, 'the answer that is made to this ought to be well considered; for if any says, *I trust so,*' that yet knows nothing of any such motion, and can give no account of it, he lies to the Holy Ghost, and makes his first approach to the altar with a lie in his mouth, and that not to men, but to God.'† If indeed there be any meaning in terms as illustrative of things—an inward movement by the Holy Ghost must imply an influence of this Divine agent upon the heart. It is not indeed manifested by any enthusiastic impulse. But it enlightens and influences the heart under a deep impression of the worth of souls, and the constraining influence of the love of Christ. It directs the conscience to a deep, sober, searching self-inquiry—to a daily habit of searching the word of God, and prayer in distinct reference to this important subject, and to a careful and considerate observation of Providential circumstances, as the clear indications of the will of God.

However, 'that which no man ought to do, almost every man does, in making himself the sovereign judge of his own calling.'* Many mistakes are made from the influence of a wrong bias upon the mind—from the excitement of feeling, self-will, or adventitious circumstances. Constitutional bias, or considerations of a worldly nature, often perplex the

path, and darken those tokens of the Divine guidance which faith and simplicity warrant us to expect. May a man presume that he is thus “inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost” because he has had an inclination to the Ministry—or he has been educated for it—or he is thrust into it by the wishes of friends, or even by parental counsel or authority? Certainly not. Man may propose, but God must dispose; and happy that person who can say with the apostle, that it is “through the will of God,” and not *through his own*, or *that of his parents*, that he is in the sacred Ministry.† Nothing could open a wider door for enthusiasm, than to suppose that an inclination or bias of the mind was a sufficient warrant for this most solemn undertaking. Motives and feelings, individual character and capacities, are so often viewed through the medium of self-love and self-complacency, that in this, as in various other matters of moment, we are reminded of the Divine aphorism—“He that trusteth to his own heart is a fool.”* What would remain when the fervour of the bias had subsided, besides the melancholy exhibition of barrenness and want of furniture for the work? Nor must we admit the interference of parental influence in the choice of a work that wholly depends upon the basis of what Burnet calls ‘a Divine vocation.’ ‘The national Church,’ as has been truly and feelingly stated by one who had a deep personal interest in the subject, ‘groans and bleeds from the crown of its head to the sole of its feet from the daily intrusion of unworthy men into the ministry,’ from this source.† ‘The will of man’ must be in subserviency and submission, not in forward operation, on a point so deeply connected with the interests of the church of God, and on which the will of God makes the sole and ultimate decision.

Nor should we allow personal and consistent piety—irrespective of other considerations—to form this decision. ‘No man,’ indeed, as Bishop Burnet remarks, ‘ought to think of this profession, unless he feels within himself a love to religion, with a zeal for it, and an internal true piety, which is chiefly kept up by secret prayer and reading the Scriptures. As long as these things are a man’s burden, they are infallible indices, that he has no inward invocation, nor motion of the Holy Spirit to undertake it.’* Yet, on the other hand, every Christian is not ordained to be a Minister. The example of Aquila and Priscilla,† and the various helpers of the primitive church called over by name in the apostolical salutations,‡ clearly prove, that an anxious concern, and a devoted application to the cause of God and of his Church, is a component part of Christian obligation, and honoured with the Divine approbation, in the ordinary walk of life. A wide field of service is opened to the Christian laity, for the exhibition of the spirit and zeal of the sacerdotal office in perfect consistency with the duties of their respective callings, and without an unauthorized intrusion upon the express commission of the sacred office. Without a Divine call, therefore, the greatest talents, the most holy spirit, and the most sincere intentions, cannot justify the entrance into the sacred office.

The two grand combining requisites for this “Divine vocation” may be determined to be, *a desire and a fitness for the office.*

I. We mark *the desire of the work* as a prominent feature in the Ministerial character and qualifications of Christ. From the beginning, while in the bosom of the Father, and in the anticipation of his ministerial work, he speaks of himself “as rejoicing in the habitable parts of the earth, and his delights were with the sons of men.” § “When he cometh into the world,” for the accomplishment of his work, the same earnest desire distinguished him,—“I delight to do thy will, O my God.” || In the course of his Ministry he told his disciples, that in a state of want “he had meat to eat that they knew not of:” and in explanation of his hidden meaning, he bid them understand, that his delight in his Father’s work was to him “more than his necessary food.”* The apostle strongly marks *the desire* as a primary Ministerial qualification—“*This is a true saying,*” (his peculiar mark of emphasis, 1:15, 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:11) “If a man *desire the* office of a bishop, he desireth a good work.” † The apostle evidently intends to mark a *constraining* desire, an excitement much beyond that general desire to promote the glory of God, which is the predominant principle in every Christian heart; a special kindling within, concentrated in this particular point, in character, if not in intensity, like “the burning fire shut up” in the prophet’s bosom, and overcoming his determination to go back from the service of his God. ‡ By this sign Moses separated the Divinely-called labourers for the building of the tabernacle, “every one whose *heart stirred him up to come unto the work to do it.*” § The fire of love is that which “many waters cannot quench.” || Its constraint overcomes all difficulties, and quickens to a readiness of mind that would appear like presumption, were it not restrained from self-confidence by an attendant sense of unfitness and unworthiness. The sense of defilement almost shuts the mouth, but the sense of mercy constrains the heart, and it “cannot stay.” ¶ The work of the Ministry is more desirable than the highest earthly honours: so that even under the pressure of an overwhelming sense of its difficulty it cannot be relinquished.* The desire which is evidential of a Divine call will be most enlivening in the most spiritual and humble frames, and associating the longing to communicate the blessing to others with an ardent longing to receive larger measures of reciprocal benefit.

It should also be a *considerate desire* not hastily allowed to influence the mind—but a permanent bias—the result of matured deliberate calculation of the cost. This, it is to be feared, has been sometimes lost sight of, when secular professions, (more especially the army and navy,) have been relinquished for the service of the altar. But under few circumstances is it more important to remember the declaration—“He that believeth shall not make haste.” † Waiting time is of the utmost moment to scrutinize the real principles of the heart, which have dictated an abandonment of the calling to which it was presumed that the Providence of God originally directed the decision, and in which it is the will of God in *ordinary* cases that we should “abide.” ‡ A departure from a former course connected with a reference to the sacred office, can never be justified *in foro conscientiae*, or be productive of ultimate advantage either to the individual or to the Church, without the clearest light in the way of Providence—the most watchful caution against the influence of

natural inclination, as the interpreter of Providence—the most earnest and persevering prayer—and the most satisfactory evidence of abstraction from all motives of personal ease, indulgence, or interest. Under these circumstances, where the call is not evidently of God, a due contemplation of the difficulties in prospect, combined with a trembling sense of his own weakness, will probably direct the mind of the candidate to some other undertaking of less cost and responsibility. This *inconsiderate desire* will gradually weaken and die away—or, if it should act presumptuously in pushing forward to the work, it will issue as has before been hinted, in bitter and unavailing fruits of repentance.*

It must also be a *disinterested* desire. Pure intention is of indispensable necessity to the meanest service in the Lord's work. Much more important therefore is it for the service of his sanctuary—that we should be divested of the selfish motives of esteem, respectability, influence, ease, worldly comfort or advantage—that we should “seek not great things for ourselves”—that we should aim at nothing but souls, rather willing to win one to Christ than a world to ourselves—and that we should exhibit a devoted consecration of all our talents to the service of God.† ‘He who is called to instruct souls,’ said Bernard—‘is called of God, and not by his own ambition; and what is this call, but an inward incentive of love, soliciting us to be zealous for the salvation of our brethren. So often as he, who is engaged in preaching the word, shall feel his inward man to be excited with Divine affections, so often let him assure himself that God is there, and that he is invited by him to seek the good of souls. To the same purpose Quesnel observes—‘One of the most certain marks of the Divine call is, where it is the purpose of a man's heart to *live to labour and to possess nothing*, but for Jesus Christ and his Church.’* Where the heart is freed from selfishness, and purely acted upon by the will of God, and the readiness of love, there is much encouragement to advance in the direction of the Christian Ministry. The importance and the purity of this desire are distinctly marked as the grand qualification to “feed the flock of God, taking the oversight thereof,” not by *constraint, but willingly*; not for *filthy lucre*, but of a ready mind.”* It can hardly be conceived that a Minister can have either an evidence of a Divine call, or an assurance of the Divine blessing, except he finds that he was inwardly moved to this work by an earnest desire for the honour of his God and the benefit of his fellow-sinners in it. “If I do this thing willingly,” says the Apostle—“I have a reward.”†—‘But if you do not feel in yourselves,’ as the eloquent Massillon addresses his clergy, ‘a *desire* of being employed as the ambassadors of God—judge ye yourselves, *whether ye are called into the Lord's vineyard*. God implants a love in the heart for the service to which he calls; and better would it have been for you to have felt that it was not the Ministry for which you were intended, than that you should possess a want of inclination for the performance of its duties. *It is not necessary* that a voice from heaven should say to you in secret—“The Lord hath not sent you.”—Your judgment enforced by the dictates of your conscience, tells you so.’*

II. But as was remarked—the desire alone is not satisfactory evidence of a Divine call. There must be added to it a *competent measure of Ministerial gifts*. With this our Lord was furnished as the evidence of his call, and the endowment for his work.† These were the credentials of his mission, which his own messenger exhibited in setting him forth to the people—“He, whom God hath sent, speaketh the words of God; *for God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him.*”‡ The Apostle distinctly connects this ability with the delegation of the Ministerial commission—which he directs to be consigned not to “faithful men” generally—but to those among them “*which shall be able to teach others also.*”§ He elsewhere marks this particular among the series of Ministerial qualifications by a word which our translators have given with sufficient accuracy—“apt to teach.”|| This subject has however already come under consideration.¶ We need only therefore recommend the habit of diligent waiting upon God—with a conscientious improvement of natural capacity and all opportunities of adding to intellectual and spiritual store—and we doubt not, but the seal to the desire for the Christian Ministry will be, in most instances, clearly vouchsafed. But the results must not be too hastily expected—nor are they necessary to warrant a preparation or a desire for the work. But, as indispensable for an useful and edifying discharge of the Ministry, the immediate duty is to expect them in God’s appointed way of diligence, prayer, simplicity, and faith.

The combination of the desire and capacity for the office, seems so important, that neither separate from the other, can be deemed sufficient. The desire for the work—though correctly answering to the standard of intensity, consideration, and purity—does not of itself attest a Divine vocation. We cannot suppose the Lord to appoint to a work without furnishing the necessary means. We cannot conceive him to send unqualified labourers, *however willing*, into his vineyard:* and none but he can qualify them. The Christian may however submit himself to the will of God, even under circumstances of disappointment to his most ardent wishes. His desires are accepted, though his services be not required.† Yet the richest furniture of Ministerial gifts, without a special desire and interest in the Ministerial work may qualify the Christian for important usefulness as a helper of the Church; but will not, I apprehend, evidence a movement by the Holy Ghost for this high and important service. The combined desire and ability appear to constitute the main feature of the inward call, which is legitimately authorized by the representatives of the Church, and will doubtless be yet more clearly attested by the positive and beneficial influence of the Ministry upon the flock.

The view that has been taken of this subject is nearly identical with Bishop Burnet. It may be sufficient to refer to his statement; but his application is too striking to be omitted. ‘*This man,*’ remarks the Bishop with a solemnity truly episcopal, ‘*and this man only—so moved and qualified, can in truth and with a good conscience answer, that he trusts he is inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost. And every man that ventures on the saying it without this, is a sacrilegious profaner of the name of God, and of his Holy Spirit. He breaks in upon his*

church, not to feed it but to rob it; and it is certain, that he who begins with a lie may be sent by the father of lies; but *he cannot be thought to “enter in by the door,” who prevaricates in the first word that he says in order to his admittance.*”*

A confirmation however of these leading features of the Ministerial call ought to be *looked for in providential circumstances*. The kingdom of Providence is ‘the wheel within a wheel,’ moving in harmonious conjunction but in direct subserviency to the purposes of God respecting his Church. It is reasonable, therefore, to suppose, that in his inward call to his own work, he would providentially dispose the circumstances of the individual so as to direct his thoughts, inclinations, and studies to this main end. The arrangements of his Providence ultimately decide the choice of a lawful secular calling. Much more clearly, therefore, may we expect him thus to mark the path on a matter so intimately connected with the interests of his own Church. Various circumstances of connections and education will subordinately tend to reflect light upon the track. The disappointment of plans previously projected for a future course in life—the unexpected and repeated closing up of worldly avenues—unlooked for openings in the Church (in the *way of usefulness, not of preferment*)—some particular crisis in the individual sphere—some control or direction of family circumstances may prove as a word behind us, saying, “This is the way, walk ye in it.”* The direction, however, will probably be given rather in the way of restraint than of indulgence of a constitutional propensity. A warm and sanguine temperament will often be damped, and an indolent habit shaken, by untoward tokens of Providence. Wise and tender discipline will form the submissive and teachable spirit, to discern and follow the track of the Divine guidance. The Lord usually trains his servants to waiting, and to many conflicting exercises in the way of their call to his immediate service. But in the spirit of humility, faith, and patience, their “path will be as the shining light.”

The *judgment of experienced ministers* might prove of essential service in assuring the mind of the sound basis of the ministerial call, lest the desire for the work should prove rather the impulse of feeling than of principle, and lest the capacity should be the confidence of self-delusion. The late pious and learned Dr. Leland took this satisfactory view of his own case. ‘God has been graciously pleased,’ said he, ‘to *give me some talents*, which seem capable of being improved to the edification of the church. He hath *disposed and inclined my heart to a willingness* to take upon me the sacred Ministry, and that not from worldly, carnal ends and views, but from a sincere intention and desire of employing the talents he has given me in promoting the salvation of souls, and serving the interests of truth, piety, and righteousness in the world. And I have been encouraged by the judgment and approbation of several learned and pious Ministers, who after a diligent course of trials, carried on for a considerable time, judged me to be properly qualified for that sacred office, and animated me to undertake it. Upon seriously weighing all these things, I cannot but think I have a clear call to the work of the Ministry, and I verily believe, that, if I rejected it, I should sin against God, grieve many of his people, counteract the designs of Divine

Providence towards me, and alienate the talents he has given me to other purposes than those for which they seem to have been intended.*

But in closing our consideration of this subject, we cannot forget, that this inward call has not, in every instance, been combined with the investment of Ministerial authority. It is a painful recollection with many of us, that we entered into this sacred office with hearts unenlightened with Christian doctrine, and unimpressed with Ministerial obligations. Yet if in the remembrance of this, we “go softly all our days in the bitterness of soul;” in humiliation, let it be not in despondency—afflicted indeed for the unhallowed touch of the sacred altar, yet not “swallowed up with overmuch sorrow.” Have we been subsequently directed by Divine grace to consider our ordination vows with contrition, self-abasement, and simple determination of heart? If we were not “inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost” at the time of our ordination, “do we trust that” we have been so since—that we are so now—when our work is developed before us in a new perception of its elevation and responsibility? Having received with shame and self-reproach, as it were, a second commission, are we given to this commission? Are we ready cordially and habitually to lay aside whatever is inconsistent with its high dignity and heavenly consecration, and to bow our necks cheerfully to its daily yoke of self-denial and self-devotedness? If conscience bears witness to a sincere love to our Master, and a desire to feed his flock, our call to the Ministerial work may well be considered to be real and evident. We may be excited with the assurance of needful direction, support, and encouragement under all our difficulties, and of a measure of Divine success according to the sovereign pleasure of God.¹

¹ Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry, with an Inquiry into the Causes of Its Inefficiency*, First American from the Second London Edition Corrected and Enlarged, vol. 1 (New York; Boston: Jonathan Leavitt; Crocker & Brewster, 1831), 120–137.