

The Book of Acts (#10); Conversion to Christ (1)

For a number of weeks we have addressed the events that took place on the Day of Pentecost, in which the Lord Jesus baptized His disciples with the Holy Spirit. The events of this day resulted in the sudden and miraculous conversion of thousands of Jewish people from unbelief and rejection of Jesus as their promised Messiah to repent of their sin and express their faith and submission of their lives to Jesus their Lord of the inaugurated kingdom of God. Thus far we have given attention to the remarkable signs and events that first took place and the content of Peter's sermon that he proclaimed to the gathered Jewish crowd in Jerusalem. Today, however, we will begin to consider the reaction and response of above 3,000 people to Peter's sermon, which was the result of God's work of grace due to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit through the proclamation of the Word of God. Let us read Acts 2:37 through 47 which immediately follows the conclusion of Peter's preaching to the gathered Jewish crowd.

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?"

³⁸Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

⁴⁰And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." ⁴¹Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. ⁴²And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. ⁴³Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. ⁴⁴Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

⁴⁶So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

This passage records one of the great works of God's grace in history in bringing many lost souls unto salvation. These results were somewhat duplicated, even augmented, in another event that would soon take place, which is recorded in Acts 4, in which over 5,000 "men" were converted on one occasion. But this passage of Acts 2 contains many details of what transpired so that it may be regarded as an instructive archetype for us revealing the nature and means of God's work of saving grace in bringing sinners to receive salvation. It is our desire and intention to consider principles and practices from this passage that will direct us in better serving our Lord, winning the lost to Him, and expanding the kingdom of God in our day.

Of course all that transpired was due to the risen and enthroned Lord Jesus baptizing His disciples in the Holy Spirit. This affirmed and demonstrated that the promised kingdom of God--the messianic kingdom promised and foretold throughout the Old Testament Scriptures--had been inaugurated. The old covenant had now passed; the new covenant between God and His people had commenced. The enthroned Lord Jesus baptizing His disciples with the Holy Spirit signified the onset of the kingdom of God within history and the Lord's bestowal of the blessings of salvation upon citizens of His kingdom. What had arrived is the age of the Holy Spirit, the imparting and experiencing of eternal life within the kingdom of God.

It is clear that all that had transpired on this day was due to the Lord Jesus at work in His world through the Holy Spirit, the third person of the blessed Holy Trinity. Upon the resurrection from the grave and His ascension to the throne of His Father in heaven, in which the Father conferred to Him all authority in

heaven and earth, Jesus, having received from the Father the promise of the Spirit, gave the Holy Spirit to His people (Acts 2:33).

Now if we were to attempt to distinguish and clarify the elements of God's work of grace in bringing salvation to sinners that is set forth on Pentecost, we might consider the following work of grace through the Holy Spirit upon and in the lives of His people.

1. The Holy Spirit enables the gospel to be proclaimed (Acts 2:14-36).
2. The Holy Spirit illuminates sinners to biblical truth (2:37).
3. The Holy Spirit convicts sinners of the guilt and condemnation before God (2:37).
4. The Holy Spirit calls and enables sinners to repent and believe the gospel (2:38a).
5. The Holy Spirit commands and moves converts to be baptized (2:38b).
6. The Holy Spirit adds newly converted souls to the church (2:41, 47).
7. The Holy Spirit leads the new converts to enjoy and experience church fellowship (2:42-47).

It is our desire and intention to examine and consider these actions of both the Holy Spirit and the actions and reactions of these converts as they responded in faith to the way of salvation through Jesus Christ. In doing so we will become more informed about the manner and means that the Lord will bless our efforts to bring sinners to Christ. We will also grow in our understanding of the grace of God and our dependence upon the power of the Holy Spirit in our desires and labors to expand Christ's kingdom. We will be addressing these matters for some weeks to come, Lord willing.

But before beginning our consideration of these matters, let us affirm the necessity and importance of the Lord Jesus to give us the Holy Spirit to enable us to serve Him and expand His kingdom in this fallen world.

John's Gospel records for us the interaction between our Lord and His apostles the night He was betrayed and taken from them. Jesus had told apostles, "But now I go away to Him who sent Me, and none of you asks Me, 'Where are You going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart" (John 16:5f).

The apostles knew that the time for them together with Jesus was at an end, for He would soon leave them. They were understandably filled with sorrow on hearing this news of His departure. But our Lord would not have them continue with a downcast spirit. He told them that not only was it necessary for Him to leave them, but that it would be for their benefit and advantage that He do so. Jesus told them, "Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you" (John 16:7). Upon His departure and His ascent to heaven, He would send them the Holy Spirit who would enable them to fulfill their calling for which He had chosen them. Jesus spoke of the coming of the Holy Spirit,

And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: ⁹of sin, because they do not believe in Me; ¹⁰of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; ¹¹of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. (John 16:7-10)

Apart from the Holy Spirit, the apostles' work to further the kingdom of God would not be possible. They were ill-equipped. They were incapable of converting sinners--to bring them out of their sin and unto faith and service unto Jesus Christ. They could not change hearts, so that the lovers of sin would become lovers of Jesus Christ and His righteousness. But with the coming of the Holy Spirit, He would do in the hearts and lives of sinners, that which the apostles were incapable of achieving. And so, our Lord sought to comfort His sorrowful brethren and encourage them of the necessity of His departure and of the benefit for them. An older Puritan writer sought to express the tenderness of our Lord toward His apostles through this illustration:

I think, brethren, Jesus Christ here comes to His disciples and speaks to them as a tender-hearted husband to his dear wife when he is about to undertake some great journey or some voyage, to go away from her. She is mourning and weeping, he comes and speaks comfortably to her and persuades her to

be of good cheer, as if he should say, “My dear, there is no remedy. I must go away. I must take this journey. There is no help for it. It is necessary, it is expedient, nay, and it is for your sake. It is to fetch comforts for you and necessities for you; it is expedient not only for me to finish my business because my occasions and business call me abroad, but it is expedient for you that I take this voyage or journey. It is for your comfort, and be assured that I will send for you before long, you shall hear from me before long. I will send one on purpose to comfort and refresh you in my absence. And know that I will not stay away always from you but will come again in a short time again. Thus Jesus Christ spoke to His disciples when He was about to leave them: “My occasions call Me to go away from you and, not only so, but it is expedient for you; it is for your benefit and advantage, and though I am personally absent from you yet I will send one unto you who shall supply My absence, even the Comforter. And after a short time I will come again to you.”¹

The events recorded in Acts 2 are the fulfillment, the realization, of our Lord’s words regarding Him sending the Holy Spirit to be with His disciples. As a result of the Holy Spirit coming upon our Lord’s disciples, 3,000 souls were convinced and convicted regarding their sin, their need of righteousness, and of the certainty of God’s judgment upon them. This awareness wrought in their souls by the Holy Spirit, coupled with the grace to repent of sin and believe on Jesus Christ, resulted in the conversion and the onset of new life in thousands of souls in the blessed kingdom of our Lord.

Let us then consider the events of Acts 2 with particular attention to the work of the blessed Holy Spirit whom the enthroned Lord Jesus gave to His people. It is our desire to be clear and strait forward in our understanding of these matters, perhaps rehearsing what is commonly understood by us and reinforcing some matters that may not be familiar to some of us. It is not our intention to be exhaustive in our study, but certainly to be thorough in our attempt to build teaching upon teaching as the passage unfolds before us.

First, we see that the Holy Spirit makes Jesus Christ known to sinners through the preaching of the Holy Scriptures, the Word of God. We may conclude from our Lord blessing Peter the apostle, that...

I. Converting sinners to Jesus Christ occurs by the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the gospel (Acts 2:14-36)

The greater content of the Acts 2 passage is the apostle Peter proclaiming the Word of God to the gathered people in Jerusalem. It was the Lord using His Word proclaimed by Peter through which the Holy Spirit wrought this great miracle of the conversion of many souls on this day. We may say a few words regarding the authority and proclamation of the Holy Scriptures as the instrument that the Lord uses in saving His people from their sin.

A. First, we affirm the foundational truth that the Bible is the authoritative written Word of God.

The Bible is the holy, inspired, inerrant written Word of God, through which God has ordained to accomplish His will in His creation. The first article in most historic Protestant confessions of faith sets forth the inspiration and authority of the Bible. Here is the first paragraph or the first article in our Baptist Confession of 1689:

1. The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience, although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and His will which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord at sundry times and in divers manners to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His church; and afterward for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan, and of the world, to

¹ Thomas Allen, **The Way of the Spirit in Bringing Souls to Christ** (The Northampton Press, 2024, first published 1674), 7.

commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scriptures to be most necessary, those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased.²

It is through God's Word that He first created this world, even the entire universe. "By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible" (Heb. 11:3). God had spoken the creation into existence. The psalmist exclaimed, "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth. (Psa. 33:6). And in Psalm 104:24 we read, "How many are Your works, O Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of Your creatures."

The Bible is the inspired and authoritative Word through which God reveals Himself and He instructs His creatures on what to believe and how to live. **J. I. Packer** (1926-2020) wrote about the Holy Scriptures:

Decisive assurance that Scripture is from God and consists entirely of His wisdom and truth comes from Jesus Christ and His apostles, who taught in His name. Jesus, God incarnate, viewed His Bible (our Old Testament) as His heavenly Father's written instruction, which He no less than others must obey (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10; 5:19-20; 19:4-6; 26:31, 52-54; Luke 4:16-21; 16:17; 18:31-33; 22:37; 24:25-27. 45-47; John 10:35), and which He had come to fulfill (Matt. 5:17, 18; 26:24; John 5:46). Paul described the Old Testament as entirely "God-breathed"—that is, a product of God's Spirit ("breath") just as the cosmos is (Psa. 33:6; Gen. 1:2)—and written to teach Christianity (2 Tim. 3:15-17; Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11). Peter affirms the divine origin of biblical teaching in 2 Peter 1:21 and 1 Peter 1:10-12, and so also by his manner of quoting does the writer to the Hebrews (Heb. 1:5-13; 3:7; 4:3; 10:5-7, 15-17; cf. Acts 4:25; 28:25-27).³

B. Secondly, we affirm that it is through the written Word of God that the Holy Spirit brings sinners to salvation.

The Holy Spirit uses the written Word of God read, taught, or preached, to create spiritual life in the dead souls of sinners. The Word of God is the instrument that the Holy Spirit employs to cause dead sinners to come alive. James wrote, "Of His own will He brought us forth *by the word of truth*" (James 1:18). Peter wrote of both the regenerating and sanctifying power of the Word of God in the lives of God's people.

Since *you have purified your souls in obeying the truth* through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, ²³*having been born again*, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, *through the word of God* which lives and abides forever, ²⁴because

"All flesh is as grass,
And all the glory of man as the flower of the grass.
The grass withers,
And its flower falls away,
²⁵But the word of the Lord endures forever."

Now *this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you*. (1 Pet. 1:22-25)

C. Thirdly, God has chosen to save His people through the preaching of His Word, more specifically, through the proclamation of the gospel.

² 2 Tim. 3:15-17; Isaiah 8:20; Luke 16:29; 31; Ephesians 2:20; Rom. 1:19-21; 2:14f; Psalms 19:1-3; Heb. 1:1; Heb. 1:1; Prov. 22:19-21; Rom. 15:4; 2 Pet. 1:19, 20.

³ J. I. Packer, **Concise Theology; A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs** (Tyndale House Publishers, 1993), 3f.

God has purposed that He would save sinners from their sin through the preaching of the gospel. The apostle Paul spoke of his own preaching ministry that the Lord used to convert the Christians in the church at Corinth:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.”

²⁰Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, ***it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.*** ²²For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; ²³but ***we preach Christ crucified***, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Cor. 1:18-25)

Shortly after these words Paul spoke of his own preaching:

And ***my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.*** ⁶However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. (1 Cor. 2:-6)

Paul also expressed to Titus the essential role of preaching the Word of God so as to secure the salvation of souls.

I Paul, a bondservant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God’s elect and the acknowledgment of the truth which accords with godliness, ²in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began, ³***but has in due time manifested His word through preaching***, which was committed to me according to the commandment of God our Savior; (Tit. 1:1-3)

D. The gospel that the Holy Spirit will bless to the conversion of sinners is proclaimed through God-called, God-equipped ministers.

God chose, called, and equipped Peter to proclaim the gospel on this occasion in order to convert souls to Jesus Christ. Now thankfully, the Lord can and does save souls through the witness of individual Christians to those about them. But God has purposed to call some men to the public ministry of the Word of God, men through whom He chooses and purposes to bring increase and expansion to His kingdom.

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) wrote in distinguishing between the general responsibility of all Christians to witness to others and the special public office the God-called preacher.

Any Christian has a right to disseminate the gospel who has the ability to do so; and more, he not only has the right, but it is his duty so to do as long as he lives. Revelation 12:17. The propagation of the gospel is left, not to a few, but to all the disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ: according to the measure of grace entrusted to him by the Holy Spirit, each man is bound to minister in his day and generation, both to the church and among unbelievers... Now, all in a church cannot oversee, or rule—there must be some to be overseen and ruled; and we believe the Holy Ghost appoints in the church of God some to act as overseers, while others are made willing to be watched over for their good. All are not called to labor in word and doctrine, or to be elders, or to exercise the office of a bishop; nor should all aspire to such works, since the gifts necessary are nowhere promised to all; but those should addict themselves to such

important engagements who feel like the apostle, that they have received this ministry.” (2 Cor. 4:1). No man may intrude into the sheepfold as an under-shepherd; he must have an eye to the chief Shepherd, and wait for His beck and command. Or ever a man stands forth as God’s ambassador, he must wait for the call from above; and if he does not so, but rushes into the sacred office, the Lord will say of him and others like him, “I sent him not, neither commanded them; therefore they shall not profit this people at all, saith the Lord” (Jer. 23:32).⁴

Paul wrote of the special calling of God of a man to proclaim the gospel in Romans 10.

⁹that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. ¹¹For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” ¹²For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. ¹³For “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

¹⁴How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? ***And how shall they hear without a preacher?*** ¹⁵***And how shall they preach unless they are sent?*** As it is written:

“How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace,
Who bring glad tidings of good things!”

¹⁶But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our report?” ¹⁷So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. (Rom. 10:9-17)

The enthroned Lord Jesus over His kingdom calls and equips men and then sends them to serve in His churches to this end. Ephesians 4 speaks of this:

⁷But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift. ⁸Therefore He says:

“When He ascended on high,
He led captivity captive,
And gave gifts to men.”

⁹(Now this, “He ascended”—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)

¹¹And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers... (Eph. 4:7-11)

When the Lord purposes to bless His churches and expand His kingdom through revival or through regular evangelism, He calls and equips men whom He chooses to be His spokesmen to His people. However, when the Lord intends to chasten the world, a nation, a community, or a church, He will withhold calling and sending men whom He has gifted and equipped to proclaim His Word, through which He works salvation among His people. Amos spoke of the judgment of God upon Israel in his day:

I will turn your feasts into mourning,
And all your songs into lamentation;
I will bring sackcloth on every waist,
And baldness on every head;

⁴ Charles Spurgeon, **Lectures to My Students** (Zondervan, 1954), 22f.

I will make it like mourning for an only son,
And its end like a bitter day.

¹¹“Behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord God,
“That I will send a famine on the land,
Not a famine of bread,
Nor a thirst for water,
But of hearing the words of the Lord.

¹²They shall wander from sea to sea,
And from north to east;
They shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord,
But shall not find it. (Amos 8:10-12)

Others have spoken about the problem of uncalled men in the pulpit. **Matthew Henry** (1662-1714) wrote against this problem: “We must not be ***forward*** to put ourselves in the exercise of spiritual gifts. Pride often appears in this, under the pretense of a desire to be useful. If the motive be correct, it is good; ***but humility will wait for a call.***”⁵ **Charles Bridges** (1794-1869) wrote of the Church of England in his day: “The national Church 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...”⁶ **D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones** (1899-1981) wrote of the common problem of men not called by the Lord who enter the ministry:

The more common occurrence is that men feel called who are not called; and it is the business of the Church to see to this and to handle the situation. I could give many examples and illustrations of this. I have always felt when someone has come to me and told me that he has been called to be a preacher, that my main business is to put every conceivable obstacle that I can think of in his way...

This is a most subtle matter. One’s nature, or one’s ambition, or one’s liking for particular offices, or particular tasks, may create in one a desire to be a preacher, and we persuade ourselves that this is the Spirit of God leading us. I have known this happens many times; and one of the most painful tasks that ever confronts a minister is to discourage a man who comes to him in that way.⁷

The call of God of a man to the gospel ministry is personal, subjective, and may vary in detail from one man to another. One Baptist pastor, **Isaac Backus** (1724-1806), stands out in history as one who promoted the special call of God to the gospel ministry. He lived and ministered here in Massachusetts in the 18th century. He wrote this regarding his own call:

Hitherto a private life had been my choice and delight; but a new scene was before me, which I had no idea of, till I was led into it in the following manner. Being at a certain house where a number of the saints were met, the command, ‘pray ye the Lord of the harvest that He will send forth laborers into His harvest,’ was read and spoken upon. A conviction seized my mind that God had given me abilities which His church had a right to the use of, and which I could not withhold with a clear conscience. Soon after, a spirit of prayer for divine teaching was given me in a remarkable manner, and eternal things were brought into a near view, with a clear sight of the truth and the harmony of the Holy Scriptures; also these words were impressed on my mind: “Son of man, eat this scroll.” Never did I more sensibly eat natural food than did my soul feast upon the solid feast upon the solid truths of God’s word. Yet I did not then conclude that I should ever preach the gospel in public.

A few days after, our minister invited me to go with him to Colchester and Lyme, where there was a revival of religion. I went accordingly, and on the journey two souls were hopefully converted. I returned home with rejoicing, and much life in my soul. The next day, September 27, 1746, new views were given me beyond those which I had before received. My business led me out to work alone in the

⁵ Quoted in a footnote in Charles Bridges, **The Christian Ministry** (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991, orig. 1830), 96.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁷ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, **Preaching and Preachers** (Zondervan, 1971), 108f.

woods, where, with none to interrupt me, I had such converse with my God as I never had before. His former teachings now came to this point, *that He called me to preach His gospel*. And I was led to count the cost of obedience to the will of God in this work, as distinctly as ever to cast up any particular sum. Many and great enemies appeared in my way, reproaches, losses, imprisonment, and death; but God showed me that He could make them all fly from my path as chaff flies before the wind. I thought of my own ignorance and weakness; but He gave me to see that He had knowledge and strength for me. I urged the plea that I was slow of speech and very bashful; but the answer came: cannot He who formed man's mouth cause him to speak? I said if I go and preach the gospel with success, I might be lifted up with pride and fall as many others have done. This difficulty seemed to me like a great mountain, rising far above all the rest; but God said, *My grace is sufficient for thee*; the mountain was taken away and every excuse gone, so that it appeared like trifling with Divine majesty to make another objection. And though I looked upon the work as too great for an angel to go through with in his own strength, yet I saw it was very easy for God to carry such a poor worm through it, make him faithful unto death, and give him at last a crown of life. So I was enabled then to give up my soul and body afresh to God, with all my interest, to serve Him in preaching His gospel. He then gave me a particular message from the fifty-third Psalm, to lay open the universal corruption of mankind. As our church allowed each brother free liberty to improve his gift in teaching, I delivered that message the next day (Lord's day, September 28, 1746) with special clearness, and with acceptance to the church. And as I was then free from all worldly engagements, I devoted my whole time to that great work.⁸

Isaac Backus preached for over 61 years, having started and ministered in over 50 Baptist churches here in New England. He pastored in the days when the state would not permit him to preach because the state church would not authorize him. In 1753 Backus published a book entitled, "*Discourse on the Nature and Necessity of an Internal Call to Preach the Everlasting Gospel*." He asserted in it that "all true ministers of the gospel are called into that work by the special influences of the Holy Spirit."⁹ He asserted that a true minister's qualifications consist more in "divine enlightening than in human learning."¹⁰ He wrote:

...the Holy Spirit inwardly calls men to preach the word, by giving them a specially clear view of the present state of the church and the world, by opening and committing to them the treasure of the gospel, and by constraining them sweetly and powerfully to enter upon this great work at God's command.¹¹

Before the revival of the Great Awakening in the Colonies, there was often a failure to restrict the office of pastor to a man who was called by God to proclaim His Word to His people. A good and godly presbyterian pastor name **Gilbert Tennant** (1703-1764), wrote of this matter in 1740. He gave forth a sermon entitled, "The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry", which was a common problem of the day. Here are a few excerpts from that word:

Natural men have no call of God to the ministerial work, under the Gospel dispensation. Remarkable is that saying of our Saviour, 'Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men', See, our Lord will not make men ministers, till they follow Him. Men that do not follow Christ may fish faithfully for a good name, and worldly self; but not for the conversion of sinners to God. Is it reasonable to suppose that they will be earnestly concerned for others' salvation, when they slight their own? – The apostle Paul thanks God for counting him faithful, putting him into the ministry; for how can these men be faithful, that have no faith? It is true, men may put them into the ministry through unfaithfulness or mistake; or credit and money may draw them; and the devil may drive them into it, knowing, by long experience, of what special service they may be to his kingdom in that office; but God sends not such hypocritical varlets (servants).

⁸ Alvah Hovey, *A Memoir of the Life and Times of Isaac Backus* (Gano Books, 1991), 60-62.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

... such who are contented under a dead ministry, have not the temper of the Saviour they profess. It is an awful sign that they are as blind as moles and as dead as stones, without any spiritual taste and relish. And alas! Is not this the same with multitudes? If they can get one that has the name of a minister, with a band and a black coat or gown to carry on Sabbath days among them, although never so coldly and unsuccessfully; if he is free from gross crimes in practice, and takes good care to keep at a good distance from their consciences, and is never troubled about his unsuccessfulness; O! think of the poor fools, that is a fine man indeed; our minister is a prudent and charitable man; he is not always harping upon terror and sounding damnation in our ears, like some rash-headed preachers, who, by their uncharitable methods, are ready to put poor people out of their wits, or run them into despair.¹²

In many places in our land churches (so-called) are like those in ancient Israel whom Jeremiah criticized:

“An astonishing and horrible thing
Has been committed in the land:
³¹The prophets prophesy falsely,
And the priests rule by their own power;
And My people love to have it so.
But what will you do in the end? (Jer. 5:30-31)

One of the specific commands that our Lord Jesus gave us to pray for is for God to send forth laborers into His harvest, that is, that the Lord will call and equip men for the public proclamation of the Word of God, of the message of the cross, of the good news of the kingdom of God. Jesus declared,

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. ³⁶But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. ³⁷Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. ³⁸Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.” (Matt. 9:35-38)

The special call to the ministry of the Word is often neglected and even denied by many in today’s evangelical world. However, the call to the public ministry of the Word was always proclaimed and promoted by notable men of God in the past. Charles Spurgeon, Isaac Backus, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones and many others taught and proclaimed the necessity of an individual divine call to the ministry of the Word. **Hezekiah Hervey** (1821-1893), a Baptist pastor of the 19th century, wrote a book, *The Pastor; His Qualification and Duties*. His first chapter was entitled, The Divine Call to the Ministry. He wrote these words:

A SPECIAL call from God is essential to the exercise of the Christian ministry. Reason itself would suggest that He, as a sovereign, would select His own officers and send His own ambassadors; and the divine call of the ancient prophets, the analogous office in the old dispensation, creates a presumption of such a call in the Christian ministry. None were permitted to intrude into the prophetic office. God said: “The prophet which shall presume to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, shall die” (Deut. xviii. 20); “Behold, I am against the prophets that steal My words” (Jer. xxiii. 30; see also Isa. vi.; Jer. i.4-10). The proof of this is seen in the following considerations: 1. Ministers, in the New Testament, are always spoken of as designated by God. This is obviously true of the apostles and of the seventy, but it is seen also in the case of the ministry in general. The elders of Ephesus were set over the flock by the Holy Ghost (Acts xx. 28). Archippus received his ministry “in the Lord” (Col. iv.17). Paul and Barnabas were separated to their work by the Holy Ghost (Acts xiii. 2). 2. The ministry constitute a special gift from Christ to the church; for “He gave some,

¹² Ibid., 547f.

apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists ; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. iv. 11,12). The gifts for these offices are bestowed by God, and the men are sent forth to their work by God Himself, in answer to the prayers of His people. (See Rom. xii. 6,7; Luke x. 1,2.) 3. The nature of the office, as implied in the terms used to designate it, requires a personal divine call. They are called “ambassadors for Christ,” speaking in His name; they are “stewards of God,” entrusted with the gospel for men. The ministry, then, is not chosen as a man chooses a profession, consulting his inclination or interest. It is entered in obedience to a special call from God, and the consciousness of this is essential to personal qualification for the work. The emphasis which the Scriptures place on the divine vocation of the minister implies a distinction between a call to the ministry and the ordinary choice of a profession. This distinction, in one important element at least, may perhaps be thus expressed: In the case of the minister the work is one to which the conscience obliges; he feels that he ought to engage in it, and that he cannot do otherwise without guilt. But in the case of one choosing another profession it is a matter of aptitudes, tastes, interest; he feels that it is right and wise thus to choose, but there is no sense of imperative obligation, so that it would be morally wrong to do otherwise.¹³

God had called and enabled Peter to stand forth and proclaim the Word of God that the Holy Spirit blessed to the conversion of thousands. The gospel that the Holy Spirit will bless to bring salvation to sinners is proclaimed and blessed by Him through men He has called and equipped to stand and speak forth His Word. Let us pray that the Lord would call and raise up many faithful heralds of His Word in our day.

¹³ Hezekiah Hervey, **The Pastor; His Qualifications and Duties** (Backus Books, 1982, orig. 1879), 13f.

The internal call of God to the **Public Preaching of the Word of God**

By an internal call of God, we speak of what the man himself senses and experiences. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones described it well:

“Am I called to be a preacher or not? How do you know?” I would suggest that there are certain tests. A call generally starts in the form of a consciousness within one’s own spirit, an awareness of a kind of pressure being brought to bear upon one’s spirit, some disturbance in the realm of the spirit, then [sic] that your mind is being directed to the whole question of preaching. You have not thought of it deliberately, you have not sat down in cold blood to consider possibilities, and then having looked at several have decided to take this up. It is not that. This is something that happens to you; it is God dealing with you by His Spirit; it is something you become aware of rather than by something you do. It is thrust upon you. It is presented to you and almost forced upon you constantly in this way.

And so, this internal call is subjective in nature; it is in the realm of personal persuasion and conviction.

There was an occasion when a young man asked the preacher and hymn writer, **John Newton**, how he might know if God was calling him to the ministry. Newton sent a letter in response:

“Your case reminds me of my own; my first desires towards the ministry were attended with great uncertainties and difficulties, and the perplexity of my own mind was heightened by the various and opposite judgments of my friends. The advice I have to offer is the result of painful experience and exercise, and for this reason, perhaps, may not be unacceptable to you. I pray our gracious Lord to make it useful.

“I was long distressed, as you are, about what was or was not a proper call to the ministry. It now seems to me an easy point to solve; but, perhaps, it will not be so to you, till the Lord shall make it clear to yourself in your own case. I have not room to say so much as I could. In brief, I think it principally includes three things:

“1. A warm and earnest desire to be employed in this service. I apprehend the man who is once moved by the Spirit of God to this work, will prefer it, if attainable, to thousands of gold and silver; so that, though he is at times intimidated by a sense of its importance and difficulty, compared with his own great insufficiency (for it is to be presumed a call of this sort, if indeed from God, will be accompanied with humility and self-abasement), yet he cannot give it up. I hold it a good rule to enquire in this point, whether the desire to preach is most fervent in our most lively and spiritual frames, and when we are most laid in the dust before the Lord? If so, it is a good sign. But if, as is sometimes the case, a person is very earnest to be a preacher to others, when he finds but little hungerings and thirstings after grace in his own soul, it is then to be feared his zeal springs rather from a selfish principle than from the Spirit of God.

“2. Besides this affectionate desire and readiness to preach, there must in due season appear some competent sufficiency as to gifts, knowledge, and utterance. Surely, if the Lord sends a man to teach others, he will furnish him with the means. I believe many have intended well in setting up for preachers, who yet went beyond or before their call in so doing. The main difference between a minister and a private Christian, seems to consist in those ministerial gifts, which are imparted to him, not for his own sake, but for the edification of others. But then I say these are to appear in due season; they are not to be expected instantaneously, but gradually, in the use of proper means. They are necessary for the discharge of the ministry, but not necessary as pre-requisites to warrant our desires after it. In your case, you are young, and have time before you; therefore, I think you need not as yet perplex yourself with

enquiring if you have these gifts already. It is sufficient if your desire is fixed, and you are willing, in the way of prayer and diligence, to wait upon the Lord for them; as yet you need them not.¹⁴

“3. That which finally evidences a proper call, is a correspondent opening in providence, by a gradual train of circumstances pointing out the means, the time, the place, of actually entering upon the work. And until this coincidence arrives, you must not expect to be always clear from hesitation in your own mind. The principal caution on this head is, not to be too hasty in catching at first appearances. If it be the Lord’s will to bring you into his ministry, he has already appointed your place and service, and though you know it not at present, you shall at a proper time. If you had the talents of an angel, you could do no good with them till his hour is come, and till he leads you to the people whom he has determined to bless by your means. It is very difficult to restrain ourselves within the bounds of prudence here, when our zeal is warm: a sense of the love of Christ upon our hearts, and a tender compassion for poor sinners, is ready to prompt us to break out too soon; but he that believeth shall not make haste. I was about five years under this constraint; sometimes I thought I must preach, though it was in the streets. I listened to everything that seemed plausible, and to many things which were not so. But the Lord graciously, and as it were insensibly, hedged up my way with thorns; otherwise, if I had been left to my own spirit, I should have put it quite out of my power to have been brought into such a sphere of usefulness, as he in his good time has been pleased to lead me to. And I can now see clearly, that at the time I would first have gone out, though my intention was, I hope, good in the main, yet I overrated myself, and had not that spiritual judgment and experience which are requisite for so great a service.”

Newton conveys a character trait that is very important--that of humility. In all of God’s works and through all of God’s workers, God works in a manner so that He alone gets the glory. In all that He does, He does it so that “no flesh may glory in His presence.” Even the most immanent preacher in the pulpit, must be a humble man. It was Charles Spurgeon, who said of himself,

A certain class of brethren have a great facility for discovering that they have been very wonderfully and divinely helped in their declamations; I should envy them their glorious liberty and self-complacency if there were any ground for it; for alas! *I very frequently have to bemoan and mourn over my non-success and shortcomings as a speaker.*¹⁵

¹⁴ Spurgeon, who provides this quote, interjects this comment at this point: “We should hesitate to speak precisely in this manner. The gifts must be somewhat apparent before the desire should be encouraged. Still in the main we agree with Mr. Newton.” In Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Zondervan, 1977), pp. 38f.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.