

Called to the Ministry

Throughout my grade school, high school and college years, the word, “Every young man should consider the ministry,” or some variation thereof, penetrated my heart as the sower’s seed the hard path. That word never received even a momentary or passing consideration. I never considered *why* the ministry was *not* for me because I never considered the ministry period. Yet the Lord had ordained me for the gospel ministry and therefore he would in his time exercise his almighty providence in powerful ways and by his Spirit forcefully lay hold of my heart to call me and make me a minister of his sacred word. It was not until I was around 22 years of age that I began to experience the power, the sometimes frightening and confusing, but always irresistible power of the Spirit. I resisted. Vigorously I resisted. But the Spirit had his way with me. Over nearly two years he sweetly bent my will so that the seminary life and gospel ministry I feared and studiously avoided became more and more the desire and joy of my heart. In September of 2011, at age 30, I was ordained into the gospel ministry. My wife Michelle and I with our four children happily serve Hope PR Church in Redlands, CA.

I was born and raised in Grand Rapids, MI. From junior high onward I was determined to become an architect and design buildings. The Monday after my high school graduation I began working for a Protestant Reformed businessman at Baroque Residential Designers. Later that summer I would enter Grand Rapids Community College and after two years and one semester receive an Associate’s Degree in Architectural Drafting. Through those two years of college and in the years following I continued working at Baroque as a draftsman, though according to God’s good purpose only part-time, since full-time work was unavailable. The rest of the time I worked for my father as a drywall finisher. There I was working two part-time jobs. One (the one involving sanding) I tolerated; the other (the one involving drawing) I enjoyed. I met Michelle Dykstra and in the summer of 2003 we married. I was 22. My father told me I really ought to find a full-time job. There was no full-time work in residential design. Drywall was for others. I pondered returning to school to become a licensed architect. At least four more years of school, while married, was too much.

It was during this time that the Lord used a host of circumstances to start turning my heart toward the ministry. Among the many, I mention only a few. Four years of coaching high school cross country led to the discovery of a then unknown God-given ability to work with, teach, and motivate young people. There was a growing sense of frustration that sitting at a drafting table drawing houses, though enjoyed, was stifling God-given abilities. There was a growing excitement over and profound love for the Reformed faith that came through attendance for a time at Prof. Hanko’s Monday night class in the

basement of Hope church, listening to old sermons on cassette tapes at work, and the weekly worship services at my home church, Grandville PR Church. The call to prepare for the ministry—although at that time I was not sure that is what it was—became stronger and stronger. But there were so many doubts: “I? How could I be a minister? I am not holy enough. I am not intelligent enough. I am not gifted enough. Besides, I am not willing to make such great sacrifices.” The call became yet stronger. Somewhere in there I had to open up my heart to my wife. Whatever future we may have envisioned the day we exchanged rings and vows, it certainly did not include seven and a half years of school for me and then the gospel ministry.

Sometime in the first year of our marriage, I enrolled at Grand Valley State University and pursued secondary education with the hope of teaching Bible for the Spirit’s satisfaction. Before I could finish a year, the Lord took my fifty year old father to heaven, shaking my selfish, earthly-minded heart and bringing me to see and appreciate the precious promises of the gospel as never before. Months later I said, “I am willing.” I altered my college courses a bit and fearfully began taking some foreign languages. The languages were much enjoyed. Eventually I entered seminary, and though seminary humbled me again and again, as it properly does every man, I loved it there and eagerly anticipated the gospel ministry.

If the Lord calls a man to the ministry, that man will be a minister. Not all men who believe (even strongly) that they are called *are* called. That makes it hard. Time will tell. Through life experiences and people of the church who speak (speak, people!) God reveals. Those whom God has called to the ministry he will lead to seminary, through seminary, and into office. And even if a man goes to seminary but never enters the ministry, as many did during my years in seminary, that time is never squandered. Not only do those men gain valuable experiences and instruction for their future life in the church, but they benefit, in more ways than they might know, the students who do graduate and enter the ministry.

Other men who have written in this series have ably identified various objective factors for those aspiring to the ministry to consider. For brevity, here are only two to add or reinforce. A man must love to study. No workman can rightly divide the word of truth without study. I doubt a minister can survive, much less flourish in the ministry if he can merely tolerate studying. He must love it. Be aware, some college courses may lead you to think you dislike studying when actually you have only a strong aversion to the particular class, not to studying as such. Second, a man must be able to teach (“apt to teach”). Not every brilliant mathematician can *teach* math. Similarly, not every man who loves the Reformed faith and loves to read, study, and discuss it can *teach* it to others. In considering the ministry, look for

opportunities to teach, even something like Sunday school, and honestly weigh any feedback God's people give. The ministry is fundamentally teaching—in sanctuaries, catechism rooms, Bible study halls, living rooms, hospital rooms, cemeteries, counselling rooms, etc.

There are pressures felt and burdens borne by the minister. To be very general, they include the burden of one's own sinfulness, the weight of setting forth the God and Father of Jesus in all of his glory in every single text at least twice every week, the disappointment and pain of seeing sin and the consequences of sin and wrong attitudes and reactions to sin, and people hurt by another's sin. Because sin is so dreadful and souls are so eternally valuable, there are times of disappointment when the work makes your soul feel squeezed like a sponge, so that nearly every drop of moisture is emptied; yet faithful Jehovah has many buckets of grace into which to dip the pastor's soul again and again.

The joys are numerous. Every Monday morning the next sermon texts await like a treasure chest bursting with treasures new and old. Uncovering them is thrilling. Working long and hard with devoted, selfless elders, enjoying the fellowship and communion of a congregation knit together in love, laboring among people who truly love God and his preached word and are willing to give themselves in service to the church, learning from those who humbly and quietly bear up under enormous burdens, working with young people for confession of faith or marriage, and learning from the aged and little ones are great joys. It is truly delightful to watch the word of God, as the power of salvation, work in the congregation, transforming lives and bringing fruit. Then come the moments of reflection unto gratitude, "Who am I to be a herald of Christ proclaiming the truth, and in the Protestant Reformed Churches?"

The climactic experience of the ministry is without a doubt to be found in the pulpit. I am no revivalist preacher who urges and celebrates radical, mystical experiences as the mark of a true Christian. But there are the genuine experiences of the Christian life, and there are those moments in preaching when it is as if the new Jerusalem comes down from God out of heaven and one beholds the stunning glory of the triune God himself. I think it was to such an experience that Charles Spurgeon referred when he said,

If I were forbidden to enter heaven, but were permitted to select my state for all eternity, I should choose to be as I sometimes feel in preaching the gospel. Heaven is foreshadowed in such a state: the mind shut out from all disturbing influences, adoring the majestic and consciously present God, every faculty aroused and joyously excited to its utmost capability, all the thoughts and powers of the soul joyously occupied in contemplating the glory of the Lord... (*Lectures to My Students*).

Blessed are you who know that from the pulpit or the pew.

May God preserve the ministry and congregations, and give ministers.