





In Pastoral Ministry (<https://biblicalspirituality.org/category/pastoral-ministry/>)

Is It Unusual for a Minister to Question His Call?

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 By Don Whitney (<https://biblicalspirituality.org/author/stephen/>)

One of my students asked if it were possible for someone truly called to the ministry to ever doubt that call.

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If a man ever has doubts about being called to the ministry, do those doubts indicate that God certainly has *not* called him?

The internal call and the external call

First of all, the question presumes there is such a thing as a call to ministry, that is, a subjective sense of guidance from God into vocational ministry. Personally, I believe those God chooses for vocational ministry do receive such a call, and I have written about it here (<http://biblicalspirituality.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/THE-CALL-OF-GOD-TO-PREACH-THE-GOSPEL-1.pdf>). When Paul says in 1 Tim. 3:1, “If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task,” I believe that “aspires” and “desires” speak of internal realities initiated by the Holy Spirit.

Second, I will assume that the minister who is experiencing such doubts had his internal sense of call affirmed by at least one local church. In other words, a local church has, to a greater or lesser degree, inquired about the man’s aspirations, observed him using his gifts in ministry to others, and concurs with the man’s sense of call. This is the “external call” to the ministry which a local church acknowledges after evaluating a man according to the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3:2-7.

Any biblical examples?

Given that context, we can begin by saying that there’s no clear New Testament example of a God-called minister of the gospel doubting his call. One might *infer* that when John Mark leaves Paul and Barnabas early on the first missionary journey and returns home (Acts 13:13) that he was doubting any call to ministry he might have had prior to that time (even though he later returned to ministry). But there are so many potential difficulties with that inference that it’s not worth addressing. Any other speculation about what might have been occurring in the mind of the Apostle Paul or any other New Testament preacher while they were in the midst of suffering for the sake of the gospel is likewise unhelpful.

In the Old Testament some of the prophets certainly complained about the ministry to which God called them. Perhaps the best-known occurrence of this is when Jeremiah protested, “O LORD, you have deceived me, and I was deceived; you are stronger than I, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me. . . . For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long” (Jeremiah 20:7).

But Jeremiah expresses no doubts about God’s call. Rather he’s complaining that being God’s prophet was much harder than he expected, so much so that he accused God of deceiving him. Doubtless every God-called minister occasionally encounters the awareness that ministry is much tougher than he anticipated. Like Jonah wanted both before and after going to Nineveh, Jeremiah wanted to abandon the role of delivering God’s message. But wanting to turn away from God’s call is not the same as doubting God’s call to proclaim His Word.

In the end, Jeremiah stuck it out. Despite the difficulties and the cost of remaining faithful, he couldn’t walk away. He knew that if he did the internal pressure to declare the Word of the Lord would ultimately prove irrepressible. “If I say, ‘I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,’ there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.” (Jeremiah 20:9).

Doubts in the down times

So while there are no explicit examples in Scripture with men struggling with this precise issue, that alone doesn’t mean it never

So while there are no explicit examples in scripture with men struggling with this precise issue, that alone doesn't mean it never happens. The New Testament does tell us that men called by God retain the capacity to doubt, as Peter did when he stopped walking on water and started to sink (Matthew 14:31). It shouldn't surprise us, therefore, for a person genuinely called by God to the ministry to sometimes doubt whether they misunderstood what they once believed was a call to the ministry.

I don't think it unusual at all for someone to doubt a call to ministry during a season when their ministry bears little evident fruit. Especially in the early years of one's ministry, I believe it's rather normal to question one's call to ministry when the Lord doesn't seem to be blessing your ministry.

Moreover, when a man receives unexpected and/or undeserved opposition—and again, particularly in the early phase of his ministerial labors—he may take this as an indication that he misinterpreted the Lord's will for his life. But since all ministers experience opposition, this *by itself* is no evidence either way regarding one's call.

Therefore . . .

Every God-called minister will pass through seasons—sometimes very long ones—of little apparent impact or of strong resistance. Even Jesus reached a point where few beyond his twelve disciples continued to follow Him (John 6:66ff.), and He experienced constant opposition to His ministry.

This is why it is crucial to be as certain as one can be about his call to ministry at the start. There will be many times when this sense of call, this “fire in your bones,” will be all that keeps you in the ministry.

But if you are questioning that call, first pray and ask the Lord to clarify matters for you. If He's called you to His service, you'll never be more miserable than you'll be doing something else besides vocational ministry. As my dad once said to me (and I know this counsel didn't originate with him), “Son, if you can do anything else except pastoral ministry and be happy, do it.” He was right. In time I began to see that I could never have found anything else more fulfilling than vocational ministry.

Second, get counsel from other godly ministers. No one will understand both the call of God, the challenges of the ministry as they will, and the struggle you are experiencing as they will.

For additional resources on this subject, consider:

The Call to Ministry (<http://amzn.to/1U4ye2M>), by R Albert Mohler, Jr., with Daniel S. Dumas and Donald S. Whitney.

Am I Called? The Summons to Pastoral Ministry (<http://amzn.to/1SBomws>), by Dave Harvey.

Called to the Ministry (<http://amzn.to/1UgH3FM>), by Edmund P. Clowney.

Is God Calling Me? (<http://amzn.to/1U4ym2h>) by Jeff Iorg.

Tags Clouds

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