

A CONTEMPORARY ISSUE AND A HISTORICAL SURVEY

INTRODUCTION

On becoming EFCC¹ General Secretary it has swiftly been made clear to me that one of the crisis points for us as a church group is the shortfall of people entering the ministry. This problem is not restricted to one evangelical church grouping but I am told is affecting other groups, evangelical and non-evangelical, as well. The FIEC² Pastors' Association report that there are three churches seeking a minister for every potential pastor seeking a church. Many factors have contributed to this growing crisis within UK non-conformity. However it is not my intention to focus on the reasons relating to our current situation but rather to try to take a broader view. By focusing on the nature of the call to the ministry, and seeing this in the light of a particular historical debate, we will be better equipped to respond biblically and responsibly to the current situation.

A HISTORICAL DEBATE – THORNWELL AND DABNEY ON THE CALL TO THE MINISTRY

It would be important to establish first that this debate was not one occurring in the abstract. It reflects a shortfall of ministers in the denominations that James Henley Thornwell and Robert Lewis Dabney were serving. The discussion is about the nature of the call to the ministry and inferences are then drawn about the best measures to take – or the validity of taking any measures at all – in order to stimulate recruitment to the ministry.

James Henley Thornwell (1812 – 1862) was a pastor and professor of theology serving latterly in the Theological Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina. The article on 'The Call of the Minister', which is on pages 14 – 42 in volume 4 of his writings, is an 1847 review article on an ordination sermon preached by Dr Robert Breckinridge. In the sermon Dr Breckinridge aims to: 'vindicate the Divine calling of the Pastors of the Christian Church, to illustrate the divinely-appointed evidence thereof, and to lift up a warning voice against prevailing errors.'

Robert L Dabney (1820 – 1898) was for forty years Professor of Union Seminary, Virginia. His article: 'What is a Call to the Ministry?' is found in volume 2 pages 26 – 46 of his: *Discussions – Evangelical and Theological*. Unhelpfully there is no record of the original date of the article in the book or of where the article was first published. So it is impossible to work out whether in any way the two articles directly relate to one another or whether it is simply true that both relate to an ongoing debate in Southern Presbyterianism in the mid-nineteenth century. It is helpful to compare the two because the abilities of the writers are such that they highlight very clearly a deep divide – a watershed in understanding the call to the ministry – and the consequences that will flow from such a divide.

First, I will show some of the superficial points in common between the two. I will then point out the deep underlying divide between them and look at its modern equivalents and at its consequences. We will consider these as they affect the response to individuals seeking ministry and in terms of possible responses we might make to a shortfall of ministers.

POINTS IN COMMON IN REGARD TO THE CALL TO THE MINISTRY

1. There is a great measure of theological and ecclesiastical consensus. Both Thornwell and Dabney are Presbyterians and strongly confessional in their outlook. They are both theologically conservative although not afraid of original thought or of controversy with those committed to the same theological standards. Predictably this means that they list similar points to be noted in connection with a call to the ministry. Independents may find that in some matters at least they do not have the same perspective.

2. Both hold that God alone can call to the ministry Dabney (page 26): 'The church has always held that none should preach the gospel but those who are called of God.' Thornwell (page 24): 'It is the prerogative of God, and of God alone, to select the men who shall be invested with authority in His Church.' That I think will cause none of us any problems, although we may feel that call to eldership and pastoral office are not biblically distinct.

3. Both hold similar views as to the true grounds of the call of a Christian Pastor By this I mean the requisites that are to be in place for a call to be recognised. Thornwell (page 24) approves of Dr Breckinridge's statement that the true grounds of the call of a Christian Pastor: 'have relation to 1. God himself; 2. To the man's own conscience; 3. To the Christian people; and 4. To those who bear office in the Church.' Dabney lists (page 97ff.), 'the man's conscience and understanding' and 'those of his Christian brethren.'

The reason I say that these points are of superficial

correspondence and resemblance is because there is a fundamental difference between Thornwell and Dabney in their understanding of the call to the ministry and this will affect dramatically how they understand the grounds of the call and how they approach the problem of shortfall in entrants to the ministry. These differences of approach are replicated in our own day and we might far better understand some of the differences that exist between us if we grasp what lies behind our attitudes to the problems that confront us.

AN UNDERLYING AND CRUCIAL DIFFERENCE IN REGARD TO THE CALL TO THE MINISTRY

We will just quote each writer on this subject:-

1. Thornwell (page 24): 'Conscience, the Church, the Presbytery – these do not call into the ministry, but only declare God's call; they are the forms in which the Divine designation is indicated-the scriptural evidences that he who possesses them is no intruder into the sacred ministry.' (Page 24 quoting Dr Breckinridge): 'At every period and under every dispensation God has been pleased to reserve to himself a great and direct agency in designating those who should minister to his people in holy things.' He later (page 25) refers to: 'the doctrine of an immediate call.' He sums up his position (page 41): 'the doctrine of a Divine, supernatural call to the ministry by the immediate agency of the Holy Ghost, evinced by the testimony of conscience, the approbation of God's people and the sanction of God's judicatories, we hold to be alike the doctrine of our Standards and of the sacred Scriptures.' So God's call to the Ministry is something that comes to us immediately from him and is confirmed by Scriptural criteria.

2. Dabney (page 27): ‘The call to the ministry then, is to be found, like the call to every other duty, in the teachings of God’s revealed word. The Holy Spirit has ceased to give direct revelations. He speaks to no rational adult now through any other medium than his word, applied by his gracious light to the understanding and conscience. ... While the call of prophets and apostles was by special revelation, that of the gospel minister may be termed a scriptural call.’ Again: ‘a call to preach is not complete until the Holy Spirit has uttered it, not only in the Christian judgment of the candidate himself, but in that of his brethren also.’ He is insistent that our pattern is not to be (page 26): ‘sought in those places of Scripture where a special divine call was given to Old Testament prophets and priests, or to apostles, although such passages have often been thus misapplied. ... The call of these peculiar classes was extraordinary and by special revelation, suited to those days of theophanies and inspiration. But those days have now ceased, and God governs his church exclusively by his providence, and the Holy Spirit applying the written Scriptures.’ (Page 43): ‘This Spirit will come, indeed, not through the medium of a voice, a vision, or an inspiration, but through the channels of the Christian’s own conscience, judgment and sanctified affections.’ In other words for Dabney the call is not immediate, rather God’s call is mediated to the individual through the means of scripture and conscience.

Thornwell’s doctrine of an immediate call seems to be equivalent to the ‘call by ... special revelation’ specifically rejected by Dabney. While we could quibble about this and make fine distinctions

between the two ideas, I think we may fairly conclude that the two concepts – rejected by one and accepted by the other – are strikingly similar.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THIS DISAGREEMENT IN ASSESSING A CALL TO THE MINISTRY

Firstly: as regards the conscience and sense of call of the candidate

Thornwell (page 32): ‘Men are not led to the pastoral office as they are induced to select other professions in life; they are drawn, as a sinner is drawn to Christ, by a mighty, invincible work of the Spirit. The call of God never fails to be convincing. Men are made to feel that a woe is on them if they preach not the gospel.’ Again: ‘it is not that upon a due estimate of their talents and acquirements they promise themselves more extended usefulness in this department than in any other, for no man is anything in the kingdom of heaven except as God makes him so: but it is that the Word of the Lord is like fire in their bones; they must preach it or die; they cannot escape from the awful impression, which haunts them night and day and banishes all peace from the soul until the will is bowed, that God has laid this work upon them at the hazard of their souls.’

Without this sense of call we would not conclude that people should have a bad conscience about withholding themselves from the ministry. Indeed without such a sense of call they should have a bad conscience about seeking to enter the ministry.

If you read Dr Lloyd-Jones’: *Preaching and Preachers* you will find the same basic approach. (page 104): ‘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 on one's spirit, some disturbance in the realm of the spirit, then 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, and God acting upon you by his Spirit; it is something you become aware of rather than what you do. It is thrust upon you, it is presented to you and forced upon you constantly in this way.'

Typically, Dabney will urge consideration of the Ministry on men and is fairly dismissive of the dangers of people intruding themselves into it. (Page 44): 'To intrude into the pulpit without a call is doubtless a sin; for no man possessing such means of instruction and promises as the Bible affords him can make this mistake, except from the predominance of sinful motives or the neglect of prayer and enquiry. It is a sin which is likely to bring mischief upon the church and chastisement and repentance on the mistaken child of God. But to stay out of the pulpit when called to enter it is also a sin, a sin which can only proceed from evil motives, and which must naturally result in the damnation of souls which should have been saved through the disobedient Christian's preaching, but were not, and which must bring him under the frown and chastisement of an offended Saviour.' Dabney notes:

1. Scriptural arguments for the consecration of the believer (page 28ff.) 'These scriptures (general ones about Christian commitment), and a hundred others, plainly teach that the only condition of

discipleship permitted by Christ to any believer is complete self-consecration to his service.' Call to the ministry is: 'the relative (question) of his own capacities and the demands of God's cause at that time.'

2. Scripture texts where God defines the qualifications of a minister of the gospel (page 29): 'Let every reader consult, as the fullest specimens, 1 Timothy 3:1 – 7; Titus 1: 6 – 9. The inquirer is to study these passages, seeking the light of God's Spirit to purge his mind from all clouds of vanity, self-love, prejudice, in order to see whether he has or can possibly acquire the qualifications here set down.' (Page 31): 'He must have a hearty and healthy piety, a fair reputation for holiness of life, a respectable force of character, some Christian experience, and aptness to teach.' However with the obvious exception of: 'aptness to teach', and I guess the same could apply to force of character, failure to qualify is not a reason for concluding we have no call to the ministry due to lack of developed Christian character. (Page 32): 'Do not, indeed, enter the ministry with feeble piety, but at once seek and obtain a hearty piety, in order that you may properly enter the ministry, if it is God's will. In one word, the fact that one's piety is low cannot prove it is not his duty to preach, because he knows it is his immediate duty not to let his piety remain low.'

Dabney also argues very forcibly that inward desire for the work doesn't constitute a call and nor does its absence prove there is no call. (Page 34): 'Every true Christian on earth, young and old, male and female, ought to feel, with reference to the work of preaching that he would be glad to preach if God permitted him.' And 'Away with the notion that the young man is not called to preach unless he hath

fallen in love with this special work, in some senseless and unaccountable manner, as though pierced with the invisible arrow of some spiritual Eros, or Cupid!' Dabney also points out that as regards both the ability to speak in public and in regards to the learning and academic skills necessary for the ministry many people could by hard work attain all that is needed.

He makes a point, which looking back to my own college days seems to be justified, that those with the most evident 'preaching' gifts may in the long-term not achieve a great deal whereas those who are not highly thought of in college days may attain very considerable effectiveness as preachers. Some ministers also achieve considerable learning by sheer hard work and surpass those who would have been considered more naturally gifted.

The problem for Dabney is not that this call does not come to people but that people will not seek out God's will for their lives with fervent and incessant prayer and transparency before God. (Page 44): 'Woe to that man who, while he professes to submit the question to God's decision, mocks the Heart-searcher by bringing his own decision to the throne of grace, prejudicated in the secret places of a selfish heart! And the danger is not only on the side of running uncalled, but also of tarrying when he ought to run.'

Re-examining Gary Friessen's: *Decision making and the Will of God* I feel he has a not dissimilar approach. He summarises (page 317): 'According to the New Testament, a church leader must be a spiritually mature Christian man who desires a position of leadership in the church, and is able to lead God's people and teach God's word.' In his

words neither (page 315): 'bright light or mystical call' is required. A criticism I have is that a 'scriptural' call may by its nature and force be a very powerful experience and by the force of appeal to conscience bind one to the Ministry. I think Friessen, though not necessarily Dabney, overlooks this and it makes a weakness in the case he presents. It is important to note that the fact that a strong sense of call, which may sustain prior to a call from a particular church and in the inevitable testing that such a call brings, does not necessitate a doctrine of an 'immediate' call.

Secondly: as regards the approval of the church and its leaders

This creates less of a division although I think there are implications for what the person seeking the Ministry would be asked. I have some recent experience of this. In an interview I was told I wasn't called (to a particular situation) because I was unable to say that I would accept a call without knowing what the details of the call would be. From my perspective, my sense of call was real but I wasn't prepared to use it as a bargaining tool to convince others. Firstly, to my mind, that sense of inward call had to be confirmed by an outward call to the work. Secondly, realities of family situation etc. meant that I had to know what the details of the call involved so I could be sure that I could accept it.

Differences in viewpoint can be unfairly polarised. Thornwell is adamant that (page 35): 'The testimony of conscience, however, is not final and conclusive. We may deceive ourselves as well as be deceived by others; and to fortify our hearts and diminish the dangers of deception, God has appointed

the approbation of His own people and the concurrence of the courts of His house as additional links in the chain of evidence which, in all ordinary cases, is to authenticate a call from him.' He quotes Breckinridge very approvingly when he says that (page 35): 'beyond all controversy, the saints are the best of all judges whether the ministrations on which they wait fructify (meaning 'edify' and 'perfect') them or not.' Someone not called to a congregation may be called of God but: 'they want (lack) and the Church wants (lacks) a very important element of the proof that they are true Ministers'.

Concerning (page 40) 'the relation which the question of any man's call to the pastoral office bears to those who already hold office, of whatever kind in the Church of Christ,' Thornwell agrees with Dr Breckinridge. 'The final testimony that we have been divinely called to preach the everlasting Gospel is that of a divinely constituted spiritual court, met in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and acting by his authority.'

Dabney (page 27): 'A call to preach is not complete until the Holy Spirit has uttered it, not only in the Christian judgement of the candidate himself, but in that of his brethren also. Sometimes, as in the case of Knox, the brethren anticipate the candidate's own conclusion in uttering this call; usually they follow it by uttering it after he has acted so far on the probable evidence of a call found in his own Christian judgment as to prepare himself to preach.'

Concerning the qualities required in one called to preach, Dabney writes (page 32): 'As far as the church and its officers are concerned, it is perfectly just that they should refuse to call or ordain one

whose piety is not hearty.' Again (page 29): 'His brethren, under the influence of the same Spirit, must candidly decide by the same standard (that of the major passages of the ministry – I Timothy 3: 1 – 7 and Titus 1: 6 – 9) whether they shall call him to preach or not.'

Probably then, the major differences for the responses of others to someone's sense of call is whether the call is regarded as separate from the Scriptural qualifications or whether the Scriptural qualifications constitute the call. In other words do we interview someone directly about his sense of call as part of the evidence that he is called to the ministry?

TACKLING THE PROBLEM OF THE SHORTFALL OF MINISTERS

Here we have a plain and evident difference in approach as a consequence of the views outlined above.

Thornwell quotes Breckinridge (page 29): 'It is easy for us to multiply Ministers of the Gospel, but it is impossible for us to multiply such as are called of God.' That is the crux of his argument but he goes on to apply it to argue against the ways in which others (notably Dabney I suspect) are tackling the problem. Particularly he writes forcibly against the idea that the claims of the Ministry are to be presented to young men especially with a view to awakening their conscience as to the need and their duty in relation to it. This is on three grounds:

1. The nature of the call to the Ministry as being sovereign (page 29): 'It is a popular error, proceeding from defective views of a call to the ministry, and indicated in our prayers and our whole

theory of ministerial training, that we must look principally to young men as the persons whom God shall select to become the Pastors and Rulers of his people. These novices, thus early ascertained of their vocation, are to be trained and educated for the profession of a preacher, as other young men are trained and educated for the bar or the forum. We expect them to be called early, that they may go through the discipline which we conceive to be necessary, and hence we limit our prayers to this class of persons. But if the call be Divine, it must be sovereign; and it must impart a peculiar fitness, an unction of the Holy Ghost, which alone can adequately qualify for the duties of the office. If it be sovereign, it may extend to all classes and ages, to young and old, to rich and poor; to all professions and pursuits, to publicans at the receipt of custom, lawyers at the bar, merchants at the desk and physicians in their shops.'

2. The nature of the call to the Ministry as being immediate (page 30): 'To preach the gospel is a privilege, a distinction, and it has consequently claims on no-one until he possesses satisfactory evidence that he is entitled to the honour. It is the call which makes it his duty, and until the call is made known there can be no pressure of conscience about it.'

3. The different means to meeting the problem presented to us in Scripture (page 30/31): 'The effect of just views would be to make us pray more and contrive less, depend upon God and trust nothing in machinery. We should look to the Lord and not to societies, and we might consequently expect a ministry of power and not of caste. What we want is faith in God, and it simply because we are afraid

to confide in the Lord that we resort to manifold expedients of our own devising to supply the waste places of Zion. We apprehend that the ministry will die out unless we recruit it, and in our blindness and weakness and fear we take God's work into our own hands. The direction of our Saviour was plain and pointed: 'PRAY ye therefore the Lord of the harvest.' It was not to seek ministers here and there, to persuade this man, that man or the other to take the subject into serious consideration, not to offer bribes to enter the sacred office; it was not in any wise to look to ourselves or to depend upon man, but 'PRAY ye the LORD of the harvest.' It is His privilege to provide labourers. Our duty is to ask for them; it is His prerogative to give them.'

I rather suspect that this outlook characterises certain groupings amongst us – it certainly seems to be a characteristic of the Martyn Lloyd-Jones school of thought and that has been a very powerful school of thought amongst our brand of evangelicals. Its effect is to call to prayer, which cannot be wrong, but does encourage a kind of passivity as to actually doing anything besides praying. That is not the danger of the Christian world at large, certainly not of evangelicalism in the UK, but it does represent a considerable danger to us.

Dabney inhabits a completely different thought world. The whole tenor of his argument is to persuade young men that they ought to give earnest and prayerful consideration to entering the ministry. The crux of Dabney's thinking is not that: 'It is easy for us to multiply Ministers of the Gospel, but it is impossible for us to multiply such as are called by God.' Rather it is that (page 38): 'If God has made ten openings for useful ministerial labour for every

candidate who presents himself, the inference is very plain that there must be nine men to every ten of these fields, somewhere in the church, whom God calls to preach, but who refuse to go.' Our task is to lay this duty on the consciences of the nine out of ten men who are sinfully reluctant to acknowledge God's call.

Dabney puts forward reasons why people should not excuse themselves from the ministry and addresses these particularly to young men:

1. The excuse that 'I do not feel a call' is unscriptural and foolish (page 33): 'How foolish and mischievous is (it) ... to argue, as some have seemed to do, that, therefore, if a young Christian does not feel an abiding and strong desire for this special work, he ought to conclude that he is not called? It is so, forsooth, that a man, to whom God has given the capacity and opportunities to do a certain laborious work for His glory, feels himself sinfully reluctant to it, because of a selfish and cowardly fear of its toils and self-denials, or because of a false and wicked shame, or because ambition and covetousness rather impel him to a different calling, he may, therefore, conclude that he is exempt to all obligations to it? Nay, verily. It is that man's duty to repent immediately of this his reluctance, and to crucify it, for it is SIN.' (Page 41): 'We hesitate not to say, that while all Christians, of course, are not to be preachers, and while none should preach whom God does not call, in such a time as ours every Christian who can preach, should conclude that the a priori presumption is in favour of his doing so until the contrary is evinced; and he should approach the examination of his duty on this supposition.'

2. This is in line with the means for meeting the

need for Ministers taught by Jesus. It is interesting how Dabney uses the means of prayer taught by the Saviour to draw almost the opposite lesson to Thornwell. (Page 37ff.): 'The young Christian is bound to consider also the present wants of the church, and the relation of supply to demand. The propriety of taking all this into his account is not only obvious to common sense, but asserted by the fact that 'the harvest is plenteous, but the labourers few,' the ground of the prayer that God would 'send forth labourers into his harvest.' How can one answer the question aright, 'Where does God most need me?' without considering the necessities of his church? Christ has made it the duty of every Christian in the world to offer this prayer. Is not the pious young man mocking God when he offers it, if he is not willing that God shall send him into the harvest?'

3. A series of miscellaneous arguments:

From the analogy of the needs of the hour (page 89): If the country was invaded by enemies then every right thinking man would patriotically gird on his sword and fly to her aid. 'So in our generation, Jesus Christ is calling his church by the woes of a perishing world, and by the critical conjuncture of such opportunities for evangelising it as the world never saw before, and may never see again, for ten thousand volunteers; but only a few here and there sluggishly and dubiously respond. Should not every brave man, then, arise and fly to the front, that his gallant example may rebuke the fatal sloth of his comrades and teach them to be ashamed of their hesitation?'

From consideration of the alternatives (page 41): 'all other useful professions ... are full to overflowing. Merchants ... physicians ... lawyers ... Society has

enough of them – too many. But to supply all our home destitutions, to carry the gospel to every one of the eight hundred millions of pagans on our globe, the church needs a hundred times as many ministers. Now, what young Christian, qualified to preach, who asks in the spirit of the true convert, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” can say in view of these facts, that God and his fellow-men have more need for him at the bar, behind the counter, or in the physician’s calling, than in the pulpit? If he cannot, let him beware how he neglects the prayerful examination of the duty of preaching, at the peril of the wrath of his Saviour.’

From the serious danger of backsliding (page 45): ‘The claims of the ministry on Christian young men are so strong that in many cases the head cannot misunderstand them, though the reluctant heart may shrink from them.’ He then writes of the man who delays the decision and enters another profession while promising to look at the matter later: Under this deceitful plea, he plunges unnecessarily into secular business, till its trammels, or the new affections of married life, or some fancied necessity, settle the question and the man never preaches. Show us the case where such a retraction of the better resolution is not evidence of, yea, synonymous with, spiritual decline. ... Look, young, hesitating professor, at the dire fate of Balaam. He professed to seek the Lord’s will, and he received an impression of it which he dared not dispute. Well would it have been for him if he had then ceased enquiring and gone at once to obeying. To say that you will “consider further the matter”, after God has made an end of consideration by giving light enough to settle the question, is but

virtual disobedience. There is no time to consider; it is time to act. If you are prepared at present to preach, and God calls you to preach, then he calls you to preach now. If you have preparation to make, and God calls you to preach, he calls you to begin that preparation now; for a perishing world needs you now; while you causelessly hesitate souls drop into hell. ‘TODAY IF YOU WILL HEAR HIS VOICE, HARDEN NOT YOUR HEARTS’.

SUMMARY QUESTIONS

1. What is the call to the Ministry? Thornwell has it as ‘immediate’ and supported by conscience and the agreement of others. For Dabney it is ‘scriptural’ and expressed through conscience and the agreement of others.
2. What is it that the church is expected to discern in assessing a ‘call’? Is it the ‘call’ itself that is to be discerned or do we look for the Biblical evidence that supports such a claim or in which such a claim consists?
3. What are the Biblical means given to us to deal with a shortfall in the ministry? Are we limited to prayer because we cannot multiply those called to the ministry by any other means? Are we to challenge those who are sinfully ignoring the fact that according to Scripture they are those called to the ministry?
4. How do we counsel those in our churches who we judge have potential for the ministry? Should a man have a bad conscience about ignoring a Scriptural call to the ministry if he has no inward desire for the work?

1. Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches.
2. Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches.