

## Lord, I Have a Burden...

*A letter from Aron Osborne<sup>1</sup>*

Greetings in God's grace to you.

"Lord, I have a burden." If you're reading this, perhaps you have said those words. Perhaps your burden is for full-time ministry, or to plant a church in a particular location. If so, my hope in writing this is to serve you as you seek to discover God's will.

Let me start by giving you a brief snapshot of my experience. In the fall of 1991, I had what I would call a profound encounter with the Lord. I was in a particular city, and while there I happened to see a homeless man fall to the ground with a heart attack. As folks began to attend to him, I felt the Lord speaking (not audibly, but clearly) to my heart, saying, "You will return to this city and reach out to the homeless."

Well, eight months later, in the spring of 1992, I did just that with a few friends. It was a wonderful time of service and encountering God's presence, and yet something seemed to be missing. I wondered, was this really what the Lord had intended? At one point, while I looked over the city and its suburbs from atop a building, it seemed the picture was getting clearer. *Homeless* did not describe merely the guy on the street, but all the people under the rooftops below who knew not the Lord. As we left the city after five days, my heart was full of the burden and desire to someday return.

Also at that time I was involved in a Sovereign Grace church and was beginning to develop a passion for the local church. My burden for that particular area of our country only increased over the years, particularly as most of my extended family lived there and I was thus very familiar with its mindset.

Well, several years later I found myself at the Pastors College, still bursting at the seams with this burden to plant a church in this part of the country. Suffice it to say that my zeal was not necessarily matched with wisdom or maturity. I just combined lots of zeal with a burden and some selfish ambition. (Hint from my life: Where you have an intense burden, look for selfish ambition; you just might find some!) I completed my year at the Pastor's College and returned to my local church for an internship lasting a little more than a year.

---

© 2006 Sovereign Grace Ministries. Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>1</sup> Aron Osborn graduated from the Pastors College in 1998 and is senior pastor of Grace Community Church in Souderton, Pennsylvania.

In 1997, my wife and I had attended the *Small Group Leaders Conference* and had dinner with Dave Harvey (a member of the Sovereign Grace Leadership Team). During that dinner Dave began communicating what he believed was direction from the Lord. Although some things weren't yet clear, that direction possibly involved church planting. ("Great, this must be it," I thought. "After six years this burden will come to fruition.") It was there in that small restaurant that Dave mentioned a particular area for the first time, and it wasn't the area I was burdened for. That night began the process of seeking to discern what the Lord was saying and of examining my own heart.

So where am I now? Am I in full-time ministry? Yes. Have I planted a church? Yes. Is it in the city I have been burdened for? No. And this is where I hope I can be of help to you if you've had, or are having, a similar experience. Let me briefly describe the process and what the Lord, through prayer and counsel from many other men, has revealed to me.

***The need is not the call.***

You may be familiar with those words, written by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. But they take on a whole new meaning when you are seeking God's direction about church planting and pastoral ministry.

During the nearly two-year process of actively praying about the Lord's direction, Dave Harvey's teaching on 1 Timothy 3:1 was invaluable to me. If I may paraphrase this verse, the desire or burden to plant a church in a particular area or city is indeed noble. The need for a church in that city or area may be quite evident. In fact, in my particular situation, the Sovereign Grace Leadership Team wants to plant a church in that area. However, my desire plus the need for a church does not necessarily mean I am the man to go.

This letter is not primarily about whether you are noble, gifted, and called to plant a church; I am assuming for the moment that you may be all of these. I want to examine the picture provided in Scripture of what completes the equation of calling to a particular area.

Please read Acts 16:6–18:28. As a brief summary, Paul desired to go to Bithynia and onward into Asia. But the Holy Spirit would not allow him to go. We need not wonder whether Paul was gifted to go and had the character to go. As an Apostle, he fit the bill in both respects. But his burden to go into Bithynia and Asia was *not* in accordance with God's will. Paul's burden was not authoritative; God's will for him to go to Macedonia was.

How many men have unwisely assumed that because they are intensely burdened for something, it must be wholly from the Lord and His will is to proceed. It gets particularly

hazy when the desire (to preach the gospel in a given place, for example) *seems* good. In a few short months of pastoral ministry, I have encountered various situations that verify what I've been taught: Sometimes a man with a burden becomes certain that his burden equals God's will, and thus becomes unteachable in that area of his life.

But look back at the text in Acts. Look at all the fruit that was borne from Paul's journey to Macedonia. In every city many Jews and Gentiles were saved, and some of Paul's most devoted helpers arose from the region of Macedonia. Would fruit have come from Bithynia? It probably would have because the gospel always bears fruit, but ultimately the Holy Spirit sent Paul elsewhere for specific reasons. Subjectively, armed with a desire, Paul was heading to Asia. But objectively, based on leading from the Holy Spirit and the group Paul was with (Ac 16:10), the call was to Macedonia.

What is the application? Ask yourself, "Have I distinguished between a burden and a call? Have I elevated a burden to the place of authority in my life?" Remember, burden plus what seems to be God's will does not equal "you're the man to go."

Did God want the gospel to go into Asia? Undoubtedly. Did Paul have a burden? Absolutely. But that's all. Paul did not have confirmation, from God or from others, to go. That leads into my next point (again, I am indebted to Dave Harvey's teachings on this).

**The objective call is even more important than the subjective call. The external must confirm the internal.**

This is where a man's heart gets revealed. I can hold on to a burden as if I, and only I, am the one to fulfill it. Do I still have a burden for the place I currently am not serving in? Yes. Do I believe that I must fulfill that burden? No. A burden is simply this: a desire to see something take place (in my case, a church plant). But that does not mean I am the man for it. Let me ask you this: Will you be excited and supportive to see *another* man walk in the calling that you have been burdened for? The answer to that question is absolutely critical.

Let me assure you that just as we "prophesy in part" (1Co 13:9), we are burdened in part; we don't have the full picture. This is why the external, objective call and validation are more significant than the internal, subjective call (although both are necessary). So hold your burden lightly! I do not validate my burden or sense of call to do something. The Lord, through the Holy Spirit and the men over me in the Lord, are the primary agents for this. What are those over you saying? Thank God that we can simply release this sort of burden to those over us and to the Lord, and leave it there. Many of you will probably find that those over you provide external confirmation of your subjective sense of call.

Amen. It has happened in my life. I did sense a call to church planting, and that is what I'm doing. But it is not in the place that I initially thought, motivated by my burden, that it would be. Follow Paul's example: Leave your burden for a particular area in the Lord's hands and go in the direction he calls you.

You may be wondering, "Should I go to an area that I am not burdened for?" Again, I believe the subjective, internal call is very important. Because I believe that, I have no doubt that if God calls you objectively before you have sensed it internally, he will also provide you with the internal, subjective call. I was not immediately burdened for the area I now serve in, but through prayer, repeated trips to the area, and the knowledge that the team of pastors over me believed it might be from the Lord, my heart was drawn to the area. I now love this area, I love this church, and I wouldn't want to be anywhere else right now. And yes, I'm still burdened for the other area because I believe the Lord wants us to plant a church there. I am full of excitement and anticipation for the time God will reveal the man, who most likely is not me!

I hope this letter is helpful. I have tried to keep it brief in the hopes that my experience may be applicable to your own and may come alongside of all you're being taught on church planting, pastoral ministry, and the process of calling.

May God bless you,

Aron Osborne