



SHEPHERDS' SEMINARY
A F R I C A
Training Men to Shepherd God's Flock

AM I CALLED TO PASTORAL MINISTRY?

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Introduction

There is no greater calling than a call to preach God's Word. As Martin Luther famously said, "If I could today become king or emperor, I would not give up my office as preacher." The Reformers were quite correct to dismantle the wall between the so-called secular and sacred vocations, because all occupations are noble in the eyes of God. Nonetheless, we can perhaps be forgiven for considering the vocation of pastor as first among equals, for the simple reason that only the preacher is called the "man of God" (2 Tim 3:17).

In that sense, Luther was right: there is no greater job in the world than that of preacher. First, pastors have the *greatest Boss* in the world, Jesus Christ. The prophet Daniel served as prime minister for a panoply of world rulers, from Nebuchadnezzar to Cyrus the Persian. However, no warlord, CEO, or elected politician could even begin to compare with Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Furthermore, when a man becomes a pastor, he serves the *greatest institution* in human history. The philosophical schools and debating halls of democratic Athens are today nothing more than elegant ruins. The Roman Senate is no more. The Holy Roman Empire of Charlemagne is a dull chapter in seldom-read history books. The British Empire, on which the sun was said never to set, has seen its sun set: it too is only a relic of history. In fact, all human institutions, governments, and business endeavours eventually fade and crumble to dust. The one institution that remains? The church of Jesus Christ.

A third reason one can view pastoral ministry as the greatest calling in the world is preachers have the *greatest commission* in the world: "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Jesus Christ ... Preach the word" (2 Tim 4:1-2). God's word is no a mere volume of ancient history, poetry, and sage human advice. It is a powerful, authoritative, inerrant, infallible message from our Creator. If you were given the responsibility to deliver an important message from the president of your

country to a national television audience, no doubt your hands would shake and your pulse would race as you carried out that weighty responsibility. Every Sunday, preachers deliver a message, not from a human politician, but from God Himself.

The call to pastoral ministry is also a call to the *greatest impact* in the world. Many years ago I baptised a man in our church. After the service was over, he said, "Thank you for coming to Africa, Joel. This church has made such a difference in my family." After he went to change clothes, his wife sidled up to me and shyly said, "Joel, thank you for coming to Africa, the word of God has made such a difference in our family." As the last people left, their son pulled me aside and said (you guessed it): "Thank you for coming to Africa, Joel. Grace Fellowship has made such a difference in my family." By God's grace, no one makes a greater impact in people's lives than a faithful pastor.

A Call To Everyone?

Older preachers sometimes counsel young men aspiring to ministry, "Don't go into ministry if you can do anything else." I understand their point: ministry is difficult and discouragement is easy to come by. However, I am inclined to take a different tack: "If you are gifted to be a preacher, why would you do anything else?" That question appears to throw wide the doors of pastoral ministry to any interested party. But clearly shepherding the flock is not a calling that God extends to all men. How, then, can you know if you are a man whom God has called to lead His church?

There are, of course, different approaches to answering that question. One is to take a mystical view to the whole matter: "I'm called because I had a subjective, emotional, quasi-miraculous experience that I interpret as a divine appointment to gospel ministry." I'll be honest: that's not an adequate way to evaluate whether you are called to be a pastor. That mystical approach is usually derived from the biblical experiences of God's revelatory spokesmen, such as OT prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, and from the calling of the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus. In fact, those are unique experiences not intended by God to be reduplicated. They do not reflect the norm for preachers who will not receive direct revelation. In contrast, I believe that a call to pastoral ministry for a man today finds a much better parallel in the call of Paul's young protégé, Timothy.

A Call Like Timothy's

When Timothy was struggling with the challenges of pastoral ministry, Paul didn't direct his attention to some kind of "Damascus road" experience or to a strong inner, mystical sense of his divine

calling. In fact, based on Paul's comments and commands to Timothy in 1 and 2 Timothy, I believe that a call to pastoral ministry consists of four essential components: *desire, qualification, giftedness, and confirmation.*

1. Desire

A pastor should *want* to be a pastor. God's men should have a bubbling, boiling internal desire to preach the word and to shepherd God's people. Paul said as much when he spelled out for Timothy the qualifications of an elder in 1 Timothy 3.

It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. (1 Tim 3:1, NASB)

The word *aspire* meant "to stretch out the hand for something." Imagine a World Cup soccer match. As time expires, the score is 0-0; therefore, the championship will be decided on penalty kicks. You are the goalie for your team, and the first kick from your opponent is a powerful blast directed at the upper right-hand corner of the net. As the goalie, what do you do? You dive, exerting every particle of your being to stretch out and deflect that ball. If you want to preach and shepherd as badly as a goalie wants to block that penalty kick, then you might be called to pastoral ministry.

A second key word in 1 Timothy 3:1 is the word *desires*: "it is a fine work he *desires* to do." This word is *epithumeo*, the standard NT word for sinful lust; in this case, Paul uses it positively. Note, however, that it is the *work* of an elder or pastor that the man passionately desires, not the title or the salary. A call to ministry is not a call to become a member of a select ecclesiastical aristocracy; rather, it is a call to the sweaty, demanding, (and rewarding!) labour of serving God's people.

In other words, while categorically rejecting all forms selfish ambition, I'm hesitant to identify reluctance as a noble character trait in a potential elder or pastor. In fact, Moses, Jonah, and Jeremiah were all rebuked by God for exhibiting a reluctance to serve. In my experience, reluctant lay elders make very poor lay elders: Paul, it seems, agreed. What the church needs is genuinely humble men, men who feel no need to thrust themselves into leadership, but men who, nonetheless, are eager to perform the spiritually and emotionally exhausting tasks of shepherding. If the truth be known, in a gifted man, reluctance might be a character fault to be overcome, not a trait to be lauded.

But does that mean that any man who has an earnest desire to lead and preach should be ordained as an elder or pastor? Clearly not. Other criteria besides desire must also come into play, including a man's moral qualifications.

2. Qualification

An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach... (1 Tim 3:2)

The list of character qualities in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are what every Christian man wants to be. They are also what every pastor and elder *must* be. In short, a man's inner sense of a divine calling to gospel ministry can never be allowed to overrule his lack of objective moral qualifications. In plain terms, a man who isn't qualified morally doesn't have a call. A man may have been called in the past, but he can also forfeit that call by a significant, disqualifying failure or due to persistent patterns of spiritual immaturity and sin. In other words, vital to a call to pastoral ministry is a life worthy of imitation, because preachers teach at least as much with their lives as they do with their mouths (Heb 13:7).

To the lists of qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, we might also add faithfulness, just as Paul did in 2 Timothy 2:2.

The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

A young man in our congregation once approached me and expressed a desire to be a preacher. Honesty required me to say to him, "If you want to be a pastor, you'll have to find a church that has morning services only twice a month and that has no Sunday night services or mid-week Bible studies, because that's your current level of commitment to our body." He got the message, put off his habit of faithless attendance, and after some maturing, eventually became a very good pastor.

3. Giftedness

Paul said that elders must be "able to teach" (1 Tim 3:2) and that they must be men who "rule well" or lead effectively (1 Tim 5:17). Most of the good preachers I know are intellectually capable, eloquent, and organised. Those things, however, are not the key to their success. In fact, God-

blessed spiritual giftedness is the key (2 Tim 1:6; Eph 4:11). How is a man's giftedness for ministry discerned? Typically, the most telling measure of giftedness is *response*. How do Christ's people respond to a man's leadership and instruction? If you preach like a dead man to dying men, and if you can't lead a children's Sunday School class to ice cream, then you probably aren't pastoral material. Spiritual giftedness and some level of profitable response among God's people tend to go hand in hand.

But who decides if a man is morally qualified and spiritually gifted for gospel ministry?

4. Confirmation

John MacArthur is fond of sharing the story of a brash, boastful young man in the southern United States who believed that he was God's gift to evangelistic crusades. After preaching a cock-sure, conceited sermon in a small local church, the young man descended the pulpit and asked the pastor, "What did you think?" What the elderly pastor's response lacked in grammatical precision, it more than made up for in keen insight: "Son, was you *sent* or did you just *went*?" There is no such thing as a self-identified, self-sent preacher. Confirmation by the spiritual leaders of a man's church is the culminating component of a potential pastor's objective call to the ministry.

In fact, to restore Timothy's flagging spirits, Paul reminded him of Timothy's own public confirmation by his elders.

Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery. (1 Tim 4:14; see also Acts 16:1-3)

Good leaders are first good followers. A man's willingness to submit to the evaluation of his elders displays the humble character that pastoral ministry requires and demonstrates his suitability for serving Christ (1 Peter 5:5).

In other words, a strong sense of a call to the ministry is a fine thing, but by itself, it means very little. The NT emphasises a far more objective process revolving around a man's desires, moral qualifications, demonstrated giftedness, and the affirmation of his spiritual leaders. Where do you fit in that picture?

Conclusion

My parents once owned two horses: one clearly had cowpony bloodlines; the other clearly did not. How could we tell? The pasture that was home to those two horses did not contain any cows; however, it did contain a flock of ducks. One horse loved to spend his days rounding up those wretched waterfowl into a "herd," and then he would tirelessly drive them around the pasture in a compact group until their short little bird legs were exhausted, and they fell to the ground gasping. His field mate possessed no such instincts. On the contrary, the second horse delighted in nothing more than charging right through the middle of that flock of ducks, scattering them in every direction.

Which horse would you choose to herd cattle?

For the most part, men called by God to pastoral ministry are obvious. They love Christ passionately, and strive to grow in daily sanctification. Even as lay men, they always find time in their busy schedules to read theology and to study God's word. Their favourite hobbies are counselling their friends, evangelising the unsaved among their family and co-workers, and caring for hurting people in the church. That's what men called to ministry do—not because they aspire to have a title, but because that's who they *are*.

If God has blessed you with those desires and habits, if your wife (if you're married) is supportive (even if she is understandably a bit apprehensive at the prospect of being a pastor's wife), and if your elders agree, then you should seriously consider seminary training. You might be a man with all the right "cowpony" gifts and instincts for shepherding the flock of God.

In conclusion, then, here are four questions that can help remove the mystery from a call to pastoral ministry:

1. Do you have a strong, persistent *desire* for the work (not the position) of spiritual leadership?
2. Is that desire complemented by the stable wisdom, consistent faithfulness, and essential moral *qualifications* necessary to be an elder and pastor?
3. Has God blessed your current teaching and leading ministries with a level of success that suggests that you have the *giftedness* required for full-time ministry?
4. Have the spiritual leaders of your church *confirmed* all of the above, and are they supportive of your desire to be a full-time, vocational shepherd-preacher?