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# EXPOSITOR

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ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

SPRING 2018

No. 22

## THE CALL TO MINISTRY

SPECIAL FEATURE

### THE HIGHEST CALLING

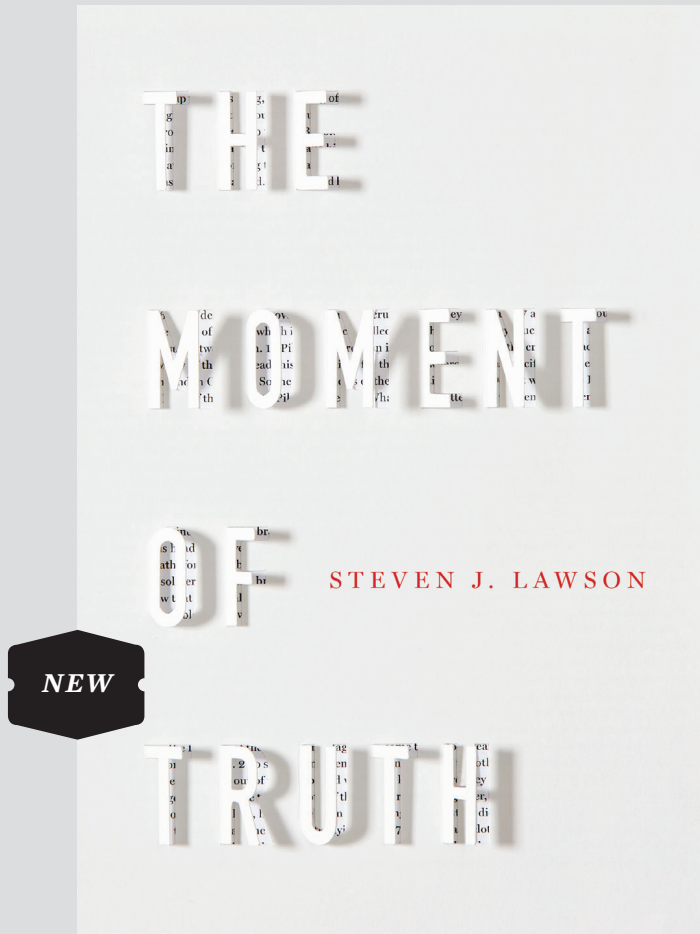
JOHN MACARTHUR

HOW CAN I KNOW IF I AM CALLED TO THE MINISTRY?

KEVIN DEYOUNG

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## WHAT IS TRUTH?

“What is truth?” Pilate turned to Jesus and asked a profound question. It is a question that continues to be debated in our day. But it is one that God has definitively answered in His written Word and ultimately revealed in the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. It has been the duty and privilege of each successive generation of Christians to proclaim the truth of the gospel to a world that desperately needs to hear it. In this collection of sermons, Dr. Steven J. Lawson speaks into our cultural moment, helping Christians and skeptics alike to answer Pilate’s age-old question.

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# THE PURSUIT AND PRIVILEGE OF GOD'S CALLING

DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

Perhaps you can remember when God called you into the gospel ministry. Maybe you are presently struggling with whether or not you have been called into such a vocational ministry.

I can certainly remember the soul-searching time in my own life when I was wrestling with God's call into the ministry. I had already been preaching and teaching for several years. I had planted a ministry while I was in college and knew the joy of teaching the Scripture and seeing the fruit of changed lives. I had been the leader of another ministry, which took me many places to speak, while I was still in college. But I did not know if God had called me into this work on a full-time basis.

At that point, I had never sat under expository preaching in my life. In the providence of God, the Lord led me to sit under strong biblical preaching for the first time in my life. But rather than relieve my inward conflict, such preaching from the Word only intensified my struggle.

As soon as I heard this man preach, it electrified my heart. What I had needed to see, hear, and experience was an incarnation of what God was calling me to do. I sat in the middle of the front row Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night until I could bear it no longer. I began to sense that this is what I was supposed to do.

After several prayer sessions that extended long into the night, I came to the heart realization that this was, in fact, what God had called me to do. I immediately went to the president of the bank where I was working, and I turned in my resignation. I then loaded up everything that I owned in the backseat of my Volkswagen bug and headed to seminary. I had not even filled out an application. I simply knew that this was what I was supposed to do with my life. What peace there was in this surrender of my life to the will of God.

Perhaps you can relate to what I experienced in the



upheaval of my soul. I can honestly say that it was the right decision, and I have been greatly humbled ever since. What a privilege it is to be called by God to preach His Word.

If this is where you find yourself, I would encourage you to be alone with God and to seek His will for your life. This issue is devoted to the pursuit and privilege of such a sovereign summons. ♦

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**STEVEN J. LAWSON**

PRESIDENT OF ONEPASSION MINISTRIES  
PROFESSOR OF PREACHING, THE MASTER'S SEMINARY  
TEACHING FELLOW, LIGONIER MINISTRIES



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# No Higher Calling

**I**n his classic book on preaching, *Preaching and Preachers*, Martyn Lloyd-Jones addressed the vital subject of biblical preaching with his usual penetrating insight. This noted expositor began his argument for the primacy of the pulpit by asserting the lofty privilege of being called by God to preach the Word. In his opening comments, Lloyd-Jones asserted, “The work of preaching is the highest and the greatest and the most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called.” With this emphatic lead statement, Lloyd-Jones underscored the strategic importance of being called by God into gospel ministry. There is no higher calling in serving God, he stressed, than the divine summons to preach the Word.

A century earlier, the Prince of Preachers, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, assigned this same significance to being divinely called for the ministry. He reasoned, “If God has called you to be His servant, why stoop to be a king?” With this sound logic, Spurgeon summarized the vital role of being called into gospel work. He believed that any step away from the pulpit was a step down to a lesser task, even to become the monarch of England. In the seventeenth century, the beloved Puritan Thomas Watson agreed: “The ministry is the most honorable employment in the world. Jesus Christ has graced this calling by His entering into it.”

Simply put, God had only one Son, and He made Him a preacher.

Can the call to the ministry be placed upon such a high pedestal? Can this divine summons actually be of such great importance? Can the mantle that is placed upon a man to enter the ministry truly be described as the most glorious calling?

Before we look at the specific call to vocational ministry, we first need to establish that every Christian is called to ministry. The ascended Christ has given gifts to every believer in order to serve others in the body of Christ. Every disciple has a significant contribution to make to the work of God. This is indisputable. Nevertheless, while every believer is critical to the cause of Christ, there are some who are called by God into a more visible role of vocational ministry. These spiritual leaders are unusually strategic to the health and vitality of any church or ministry. This is because they are called to spread the Word and shepherd the flock. Because of this divine placement, they are uniquely crucial to the spiritual growth of the church.

This raises the question: How would a man know if he were called by God to enter this sacred vocation? How would anyone discern that this holy summons to enter the ministry had been laid at his feet? Knowing that this important assignment must be entered by divine initiative, not self-assertion, it is critical that we understand how to

discern the call of God upon one's life.

Maybe you are beginning to feel your heart stirred concerning whether you are being called into the ministry. Perhaps you are starting to give serious thought to what the future might hold for you as it relates to vocational gospel work. Maybe you need some guideposts to help you discern what God is doing in your life.

The following are nine distinguishing marks of this divine call. These are like signs along the way that bring affirmation that one is being called by God to enter the ministry. Wise is the man who can correctly read these signs along the path that leads into vocational ministry. The following milestones should be detected:

### Mark #1: Compulsion for the Work

First, a call to the ministry is made evident by an overwhelming desire to do the work. In the man summoned, there will be a burning passion-driven compulsion to step out of the daily affairs of this world in order to give himself to the labors of another kingdom. He will feel strongly burdened to be involved more fully in advancing the kingdom of God. Such a man will experience a restlessness with what he is presently employed to do. He will become increasingly discontent with worldly enterprises. What he once pursued so earnestly now seems so empty. He begins to find his mind preoccupied with eternal truths and pursuits. He longs to advance the work of God, whatever it may cost him. He cannot help but be absorbed with gospel work.

#### *"Aspire" and "Desire" the Work*

This intense zeal is what Paul maintains must be present when he writes, "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). The two key words in this verse are "aspire" and "desire," both of which communicate this holy compulsion necessary in order to serve in spiritual leadership. The word "aspire" is translated from a rare Greek word, *oregō*, that means "to reach out after, or to stretch oneself to grasp something." This word describes the one who strongly longs to step forward in order to serve God in the ministry. Whether this passion is to preach in the pulpit or to shepherd the flock of God, whether it is to teach and train the people of God or to work in a Christian institution, the one called by God will ardently yearn to assume this work.

The other critical word that Paul uses in this passage is "desire." It is derived from the Greek word *epithumeō*, which means "a passionate compulsion." The term can be used either positively or negatively, depending upon the context. It can indicate either a wholesome attraction for

what is holy or, conversely, an evil lust for what is forbidden. In this passage, it relates to a call to the ministry. Thus, *epithumeō* describes a strong, inner drive that motivates and moves a person to enter the ministry. The desire is so overwhelming that he will make whatever sacrifice is necessary to answer the call.

#### *Charles Spurgeon: "He Must Preach"*

Spurgeon stressed that this strong desire to preach the Word must be present in the man who is called to preach. In his autobiography *The Early Years*, he stressed this necessity:

If a man be truly called of God to the ministry, I will defy him to withhold himself from it. A man who has really within him the inspiration of the Holy Ghost calling him to preach, cannot help it—he must preach. As fire within the bones, so will that influence be until it blazes forth. Friends may check him, foes criticize him, despisers sneer at him, the man is indomitable; he must preach if he has the call of heaven.

Spurgeon knew that this all-consuming desire for proclaiming the Word is the leading indicator that denotes the call into the ministry. He wrote, "I always say to young fellows who consult me about the ministry, 'Do not be a minister if you can help it,' because if the man can help it, God never called him. But if he cannot help it, and he must preach or die, then he is the man." With those words, Spurgeon maintained that such a man would rather die than not be in gospel ministry. He feels *that* strongly about his involvement in the work of God. Gospel work is not something he merely *wants* to do, but that which he *must* do.

#### *Martyn Lloyd-Jones: "He Cannot Do Anything Else"*

Lloyd-Jones himself experienced this overwhelming desire to enter the ministry in order to preach the Word. While in his twenties, he had already reached a prominent place in the British medical community as a brilliant physician. The future was in his hands for the taking. But God had other plans. The Lord began to stir his soul, and he became increasingly dissatisfied with his medical practice. Despite such an elite position, Lloyd-Jones was restless and unfulfilled. As he treated many of the affluent in British society, he realized that he was only helping unconverted people become well so that they could return to a life of sin. What was the purpose of this?

Though he worked closely alongside Lord Thomas Horder, the eminent physician to His Majesty, King George V, Lloyd-



# A CALL TO THE MINISTRY IS MADE EVIDENT BY AN OVERWHELMING DESIRE TO DO THE WORK.

Jones resolved that he must become a physician of the soul, not the body. He must give his life to treat the deepest needs of men and women. He must invest himself in prescribing the only remedy for sin-plagued lives, namely, the gospel of Jesus Christ. He soberly reasoned:

We spend most of our time rendering people fit to go back to their sin. I want to heal souls. If a man has a diseased body and his soul is all right, he is all right to the end; but a man with a healthy body and a distressed soul is all right for sixty years or so and then he has to face eternity in Hell.

This deep desire to care for the souls of men and women with the Word of God captured the heart of Lloyd-Jones. In like manner, it must be present in the one who is called into ministry. Lloyd-Jones stated: “A man should only enter the Christian ministry if he cannot stay out of it.” This is the counsel that he gave to other men. Those contemplating a call to the ministry, he maintained, must do this work of ministry or they would rather not live.

So strongly did Lloyd-Jones feel about this that he added:

I would say that the only man who is called to preach is the man who cannot do anything else, in the sense that he is not satisfied with anything else. This call to preach is so put upon him, and such pressure comes to bear upon him that he says, “I can do nothing else, I must preach.”

Could this be describing you? Are you experiencing this same longing for gospel ministry? Are you feeling a similar discontent with what you are doing in the world? Are you being ignited with a burning desire to do the work

of the ministry? If so, nothing else that you can do will satisfy you. The only peace you can find is in undertaking this new labor for the gospel. You can find no rest until you begin this new work. You would rather proceed directly to heaven than be denied this inner drive to minister God’s Word. Can you relate to this?

## **Mark #2: Competency to Teach**

Second, a call to the ministry is also discerned by a man who recognizes that he is divinely gifted to do the work. In some capacity, this spiritual gifting is found in the teaching and preaching of the Word. Everything that God is doing in the world in a saving and sanctifying way is connected to the ministry of the Word. No man has anything to say of any eternal value apart from the Word. This is because, when the Bible speaks, God speaks. The call to the ministry involves effectively expounding the Scripture, whether in the church or in the world.

The only ability required to serve as an overseer or elder, Paul states, is he must be “able to teach” (1 Tim 3:2). He must “be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9). If called by God, he has received a God-given capacity to teach the Word and defend it in the face of attack. The Lord equips such a man with the supernatural ability to open up the Scripture and make it plain to others. This is a God-bestowed ability to teach and preach that is granted to the one called into the ministry.

This gift to “be able to teach” and “exhort in sound doctrine” may be carried out in many different arenas. It may be used in the pulpit to preach the Word of God. It may be exercised in a church classroom or small group to teach biblical truth. It may be utilized in counseling to give spiritual guidance. It may be employed in a Christian school to

instruct students. It may be used to lead the church to sing sound doctrine. It may be applied in training the saints to do the work of ministry. It may be put to use in the work of evangelism. In whatever capacity, the call to the ministry involves imparting the Word of God to others.

*George Whitefield: Recognizing His Gift*

The recognition of this gift to preach was what led the great English evangelist George Whitefield to realize he was being set apart unto gospel ministry. After his conversion at age twenty-one, Whitefield soon sensed God's call to preach. Upon graduating from Oxford, Whitefield delivered his first sermon in his hometown of Gloucester. It was a powerful message that created no small stir. He returned to Oxford for further studies, but his compulsion to preach only intensified. Invitations to preach soon came from churches in London. Whitefield realized that God had given him an extraordinary gift to preach. He concluded that he was surely being drawn into this work.

You and I will not be as gifted to preach as Whitefield. But if we are called, there nevertheless will be the recognition of this gifting in our lives. This is why it is critically important that you exercise your gift to teach before there can be a strong assurance that you are being called. To some measure, a person must realize that he has been gifted by God to teach the Word. This gift will also include a fervent desire to read and study the Bible and to grasp theology. A man who is called to ministry will have an inner drive to dig deep into the Scripture and discover its inexhaustible treasures in order to teach it to others.


**Mark #3: Character of Life**

Third, a call to the ministry must also be accompanied by a life of personal godliness. The life of the one who would enter gospel work must be characterized by the pursuit of practical holiness. Such a man must model the message that he teaches. In other words, he must practice what he preaches. Otherwise, he should stay out of the ministry.

This personal spirituality is a non-negotiable priority. To be sure, a man's godliness is more important than his giftedness. His maturity is more urgent than even his ministry. What he *is* is more valuable than what he *does*. His integrity is a leading indicator of his call to the ministry.

These spiritual qualifications are listed in 1 Timothy 3:2-7. Paul writes that an overseer must be "above reproach" (v. 2). That is, there must be no valid moral charge that can be brought against him. He must be "the husband of one wife," loving her with a singular commitment. This man must also be "temperate," meaning under control, not swayed by the impulses of his flesh. He must be "prudent," possessing discernment and wisdom in spiritual matters. The one called to preach must be "respectable," possessing a recognizable dignity and spiritual maturity in how he lives. Further, he must be "hospitable," that is, a lover of people, especially showing Christian love to visitors and strangers.

Further, Paul states in verse 3 that he "must not be addicted to wine." That is, he must be one who is under the control of sound judgment, not intoxicants. Further, he must not be "pugnacious," meaning he cannot be a brawler, nor be needlessly combative with others. He must not be



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one who throws his weight around to get his way by intimidating others. He also must be “gentle” and “peaceable,” conducting himself graciously toward others. He must be “free from the love of all money.” In other words, he should not be greedy or worldly, but be one who freely shares his possessions with others.

In verses 4–5, the one called into the ministry must be one who “manages his own household well.” If he is married, he must love his wife. He must exert a strong influence upon his children. In turn, they must be under his control and live in a manner that reflects his values. He must “not be a new convert” (v. 6), but be one who has noticeably matured in his spiritual life. Moreover, he must “have a good reputation with those outside the church” (v. 7), because he is so closely identified with the church in the community.

The reason that personal godliness is required is quite simple. The pastor will influence others not only by his preaching, but also by his life. Jesus said, “A pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40). This is to say, every disciple must be being conformed into the image of Jesus Christ through the example before him. This is the influence that is being passed down from the pastor to the people.

The one who enters the ministry must live an exemplary life that is worthy of emulation by others. His character, conduct, and conversations must demonstrate the message he preaches. Other believers should be inspired to imitate his spirituality. This does not mean that he is perfect. If that were the requirement, no one would be fit to enter the ministry. But it does mean that he must be “blameless,” one who is growing in grace.

As you examine your life, do you see these character qualities as described in 1 Timothy 3:1–7? Do you see the grace of God shaping your Christian character in this manner? This is a necessary green light in order to proceed forward into ministry.

#### **Mark #4: Confirmation from Others**

Fourth, a call to the ministry will be further confirmed by those who recognize your gifting to handle the Word. Spurgeon reasoned that if God wants you to fly like a bird, He will give you wings. He noted that if God wants you to live underwater like a fish, He will give you gills. Likewise, if God wants you to preach, Spurgeon noted, He will give you the gift to do so. At the same time, this ability will become apparent to others. If a man believes that he has the gift to teach, others should recognize this. As they observe him, they will offer their confirmation. They see the clear

evidence of God’s gifting in this life and will inevitably express this.

In 1 Timothy 3:10, Paul says concerning the deacon, “these men must first be tested.” This means a man must first be given the opportunity to serve and then be examined by others. Only then should he be affirmed to the office. In an argument from the lesser to the greater, the same principle should apply for the one called into the ministry. If a deacon should first be tested before being confirmed, how much more so should the one who is called to teach and preach the Word? He should be watched and, if found to be gifted, only then should he be affirmed. Any matter should be verified by two or three witnesses in the church. The same is true in detecting a man’s call.

What others perceive in a man who believes he is called into ministry is invaluable. This confirmation may be the discerning feedback of a close friend. It could be the objective insight of an older saint. It could be the encouraging word of someone in a class. Those in the church who hear this person teach the Word are often the best discerners if he is called to the ministry. Sometimes spiritually mature people will recognize the hand of God upon a person’s life even before he senses it himself. Their positive affirmation is invaluable in recognizing the call.

#### *John Knox: Recognized by Others*

A noted example of one receiving the confirmation of others was the case of the Scottish Reformer John Knox. After the martyrdom of George Wishart, the man he accompanied and served in ministry, Knox was asked to teach a class of young men in St. Andrews Castle. He expounded the Gospel of John with such noticeable skill that he caught the attention of the other men. When they urged him to preach, Knox adamantly refused. He believed he must not run where God has not called. A short time later, a lay leader, John Rough, preached a sermon, during which he publicly charged Knox to answer the divine call upon his life to preach. Terrified, Knox said that he “burst forth in most abundant tears, and withdrew himself to his chamber.”

While locked in his room, Knox underwent much soul-searching. At last, he came to the realization that he, in fact, was being called by God. Now in agreement with the men, he stepped forward to answer the call to preach. In this response, the decisive factor was the feedback of the others in the church. As a result, he presented himself to be the preacher of this Protestant congregation. In future years, Knox would become one of the most powerful preachers that God ever gave to the church. He would become the trumpet blast that would awaken Scotland from its spiritual slumbering to recognize its need for the gospel.

But the recognition of his calling started with the observation of others.

As others observe and hear you teach or preach, do you receive positive responses from them? Are others blessed under your labors? Are they built up in their faith? Do they recognize the hand of God upon your life for good?

#### **Mark #5: Conversions for Christ**

Fifth, a call to the ministry is further confirmed when a man sees spiritual fruit being produced as he teaches and preaches the gospel. This means that he should have a growing desire to see people won to faith in Jesus Christ. In addition, there should be some evidence of conversions taking place under his ministry. This prerequisite necessitates that a man will already be spreading the gospel, even before he can detect a call to the ministry. His gospel labors will be producing spiritual fruit. He will sow the seed and note souls being harvested. He will cast the net and see fish being caught. That he is leading souls to Christ—or at least attempting to do so—is a confirmation of a call into the ministry.

This burning desire to see men and women converted to Jesus Christ was present in the life of the apostle Paul. He wrote, “I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more” (1 Cor 9:19). This reveals his driving passion to be a witness for Christ. He said, “I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews” (v. 20). Further, he claimed, he became “to those who are without law, as without law...so that I might win those who are without law” (v. 21). Paul then summarized, “I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some” (v. 22). In short, the apostle *must* see souls won to Christ.

In those called into ministry, there must be this same driving desire to win people to faith in Jesus Christ. Granted, only God can save a lost human soul. True, only God can convict, call, and regenerate a spiritually dead soul. But God works through human means to accomplish His eternal purposes. This begins with God calling men to preach the gospel. If one is to discern a call to the ministry, there must be some evidence of the lost being brought to faith in Christ.

*Spurgeon: “My First Convert!”*

Spurgeon claimed that he could not know for certain that he had been called into gospel ministry until he saw his first convert. This came soon after he first began to preach. When he was only seventeen years old, he heard that an older woman had been brought to faith in Christ under his preaching. He leaped for joy, because he was convinced that she was the seal of his divine appointment to preach

the Word of God.

Spurgeon later reflected upon this precious woman as the divine validation upon his call to preach. He expressed:

How my heart leaped for joy when I heard tidings of my first convert! I could never be satisfied with a full congregation, and the kind expressions of friends: I longed to hear that hearts had been broken, that tears had been seen streaming from the eyes of penitents. How I did rejoice, as one that finds great spoil, one Sunday afternoon, when my good deacon said to me, “God has set His seal on your ministry in this place, sir.”

Spurgeon testified that this driving aim to win souls to Jesus Christ dominated his ministry for the rest of his days:

I would rather be the means of saving a soul from death than be the greatest orator on earth. I would rather bring the poorest woman in the world to the feet of Jesus than I would be made Archbishop of Canterbury. I would sooner pluck one single brand from the burning than explain all mysteries. To win a soul from going down into the pit is a more glorious achievement than to be crowned in the arena of theological controversy.

*Lloyd-Jones: “A Concern for Others”*

In like manner, Lloyd-Jones agreed that God gives to those called to the ministry an overwhelming passion to reach lost people with the gospel. In such men, the Holy Spirit ignites a consuming desire for others’ spiritual welfare. Lloyd-Jones wrote, “The true call always includes a concern about others, and interest in them, a realization of their lost estate and condition, and a desire to do something about them, and to tell them the message and point them to the way of salvation.” This love for others includes the clear realization that people are perishing without Christ. The one called to preach feels compelled to awaken them to their need for Christ.

In his own life, Lloyd-Jones experienced this growing concern for others and their eternal destinies. He said, “I used to be struck almost dumb sometimes in London at night when I stood watching the cars passing, taking people to the theaters and other places with all their talk and excitement, as I suddenly realized that what all this meant was that these people were looking for peace, peace for themselves.” This growing concern intensified when he was called into the ministry, and it continued to strengthen throughout his life.

There will be this same desire to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ in those called into the ministry. There must be more than a hunger for learning the truth. There must be a passion for the truth to reach lost souls. To validate this summons, there must be under a man's teaching or preaching some noticeable proof of people being reached for Jesus Christ. There must be some evidence of others being strengthened in their faith. Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruit" (Matt 7:16, 20). This is true not only for the false prophet, but also for the true preacher.

As you evaluate your call to the ministry, can you see any evidence of someone being brought to personal faith in Jesus Christ? Have you heard a testimony of someone becoming a believer through your preaching or teaching? Do you see some measure of spiritual fruit that would allow you to confidently move forward?

#### **Mark #6: Communion with God**

Sixth, a call to the ministry is discerned through spending personal time in communion with God. This requires time alone with Him in the Scripture and prayer. We must draw as close to God as possible in order to rightly discern His leading in our lives. While we are not seeking a mystical experience, nor are we expecting an audible voice, we nevertheless know that the Holy Spirit will be working in the hearts of those who draw near to Him.

Intimacy with God is a decisive and determining factor in discerning God's leadership in our lives. As we study His Word, different passages of Scripture will be impressed upon our hearts in a way that uniquely fits our present life situation. Likewise, as we pray, we seek that the will of God be done on earth as it is in heaven. This includes our own lives. We ask that God will reveal His plan for us and open the way before us that we are to travel.

When we pray, we are humbling ourselves under the

mighty hand of God. We are presenting ourselves to Him as a living and holy sacrifice. On our knees, we are consciously relinquishing the direction of our lives to Him. We are deliberately surrendering our future to God. It is in these times that God chooses to renew our minds and direct our thoughts in the way He desires us to go.

In seeking to detect the call of God, the lower we bow as we present ourselves to God, the higher He will lift us up and the more clearly we will see to move forward into His will. The quieter we are in His presence, the louder His Word will speak to us. Such close communion with God is absolutely essential in discerning any summons into the ministry.

#### *George Whitefield in Prayer*

Shortly after his conversion, George Whitefield sought to "grow in grace and in knowledge." He devoured several works of the Reformers and the Puritans, desiring to obtain a solid doctrinal understanding of the Scriptures. His search for knowledge led him to Gabriel Harris, a book dealer, who would lend Whitefield books and allow him to pay for them later. Whitefield biographer Arnold Dalimore wrote,

We can visualize the great evangelist, George Whitefield, at 5:00 in the morning in his room over Harris's bookstore. He is on his knees with his Bible, his Greek Testament, and a volume of Matthew Henry spread out before him. With intense concentration he reads a portion in English, studies its words and tenses in the Greek, and then considers Matthew Henry's exposition of the whole. Finally comes his unique practice of "praying over every line and every word" in both the English and the Greek, feasting his mind and his heart upon it till its essential



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FACTOR IN DISCERNING GOD'S  
LEADERSHIP IN OUR LIVES.**

# A CALL TO THE MINISTRY IS OFTEN SELF-REALIZED IN A CRISIS MOMENT WITHIN ONE'S SOUL.

meaning has become a part of his very person. When we shortly see him preaching forty and more hours per week with virtually no time whatsoever for preparation, we may look back upon these days and recognize that he was then laying up a store of knowledge on which he was able to draw amidst the tumult and haste of that later ministry.

Whitefield took the time to gain a proper knowledge of Scripture, theology, and history in order to be assured of God's will for his life. However, he knew this was impossible without personal communion with God in prayer. As he sought wisdom, discernment, grace, and knowledge, he sensed God's call upon his life.

## **Mark #7: Crisis within the Heart**

Seventh, a call to the ministry is often self-realized in a crisis moment within one's soul. For Moses, this pivotal instance was when he stood at the burning bush and God called him to go to Pharaoh (Exod 3:1–14). For Isaiah, it was when he entered the temple in the year that King Uzziah died, and he encountered the holiness of God (Isa 6:1–3). For Peter, James, John, and Andrew, it was when Jesus came walking past them and called them to leave their nets and follow Him (Matt 4:18–22). In each of these encounters, the men called into ministry were required to step out by faith and follow His leading in their lives. Each of these were dramatic experiences in the lives of those called. No one yawned or felt apathetic when they were called. This decisive moment was soul-arresting.

Describing this personal crisis, Lloyd-Jones stated that when a man is called, there must be “an awareness of a kind of pressure being brought to bear upon one's spirit.” He identified this as “some disturbance in the realm of the

spirit” in which “your mind is directed to the whole question of preaching.” This strong inner coercion puts one's soul in upheaval as it is being pulled in this new direction. The drive to preach becomes a heavy burden upon the heart that cannot be relieved until one steps forward and surrenders to the divine call.

*Lloyd-Jones: “This Disturbance in Your Spirit”*

Such an internal crisis becomes disruptive within a man. Lloyd-Jones recognized this when he stated:

You do your utmost to push back to rid yourself of this disturbance in your spirit...But you reach the point when you cannot do so any longer. It almost becomes an obsession, and so overwhelming that in the end you say, “I can do nothing else, I cannot resist any longer.”

Such a defining moment came in the life of Lloyd-Jones when he suffered an intense struggle over the call of God upon his life. He lost twenty pounds and endured many sleepless nights. Lloyd-Jones finally came to the tipping point. His personal turmoil reached its zenith one evening when he and his wife Bethan, along with another couple, attended the theater in London. When the play was over, the four exited the theater, and Lloyd-Jones observed a Salvation Army band playing hymns on the street corner. This brave band were giving an open gospel witness to all who were walking by.

Lloyd-Jones was deeply struck by their unashamed witness for the Lord. As he observed this little ministry team proclaiming the message of salvation, this bold act became the defining moment in his life. He said to himself, “These are my people, these are my people I belong to, and I am

going to belong to them.” It was then that Lloyd-Jones crossed the line and answered the call of God upon his life to preach. He chose to walk away from a skyrocketing career in the field of medicine. He knew that God had appointed him to become a doctor of the soul. There would be no turning back.

It is not always in such a dramatic moment that a man discerns he is called. However, he will be confronted with the same overwhelming sense of the call of God upon his life. An enlarged vision of the greatness of God will dominate him. An overpowering sense of humility will grip his soul. He will have such an encounter with the living God that he will rightly perceive that His call is making a claim upon his life.

Can you point to such a pivotal moment in your search to discern the call of God upon your life? Do you know what it is to have your soul put into a vice grip and have the screws tightened? Have you felt such pressure in wrestling with the call of God upon you?

#### **Mark #8: Circumstances along the Way**

Eighth, a call to the ministry will have the path cleared so that the man can providentially move forward to pursue the work of the gospel. God, in His sovereignty, will open the necessary doors for the man He calls to realize the divine summons into ministry. He will pave the way for him to advance into His will. Barriers will be removed. Training will be made available. Resources will be supplied. Certainly, there will be resistance and challenges. But the path will be prepared so that he can move ahead. If necessary, God will move heaven and earth so that the one called will be able to realize this holy summons.

One example of God’s providential dealings in a call to the ministry involved Paul’s young son in the faith, Timothy. God moved the apostle Paul into his life as the chosen means to prepare him for ministry. The itinerant missionary Paul traveled to Timothy’s hometown of Lystra. There, the apostle met young Timothy and invited him to join his second missionary trip (Acts 16:1–3). This was not a chance encounter, but the invisible hand of our sovereign God, who was orchestrating the circumstances in Timothy’s life. This meeting between Timothy and Paul was nothing less than a divine appointment. It was God at work behind the scenes, providing the younger man with the older mentor, who would train him for future ministry.

#### *Knox: Prepared by a Martyr*

This is exactly how God worked in the life of Knox, mentioned earlier, to prepare him for the ministry. The invisible hand of God crossed the path of Knox with a

powerful itinerant preacher, George Wishart. This traveling evangelist with staunch Reformed convictions made such a profound impression upon Knox that he began to accompany Wishart in his preaching journeys throughout East Lothian in Scotland. The younger Knox became so attached to Wishart that he became his personal bodyguard. His responsibility was to protect the older preacher with a broadsword from life-threatening dangers at the hands of enemies of the gospel. Though Wishart was soon martyred, it was not before Knox witnessed firsthand what it looked like to preach the Word. This was God’s sovereign plan to prepare him for a tempestuous lifetime of gospel ministry.

What would an open door look like in your life? It may not be as dramatic as the situation in which Knox found himself. But it will be just as real and formative. It might be a pastor or a spiritual leader whom God has brought into your life to provide the training and counsel to lead you into the ministry. Or, this open door might be your acceptance into a Bible-based seminary in order for you to receive the biblical training needed to carry out effective ministry. It might be an unexpected financial gift or material provision that would allow you to move forward into the will of God.

Whatever the open door before you may be, it has been swung open by the powerful hand of God in order to advance you into what He has prepared for your life. Only God Himself can throw open these doors. He works through His chosen, secondary means to accomplish His greater end. Nevertheless God is the primary Agent who opens the way that leads you to serving Him in the ministry.

#### **Mark #9: Commission by the Church**

Ninth, a call to the ministry should be validated by the spiritual leadership of the church or of a ministry. If a man is confirmed after careful examination, there should be an official recognition of his calling that will often be expressed in a public service. This affirmation involves the laying on of hands by spiritual leaders, whether that be pastors, elders, or those responsible for the oversight of the ministry. This symbolic expression is meant to convey the solidarity of the leaders with this man. They are saying that they believe he is divinely called into ministry.

The New Testament records such a public confirmation in the life of Timothy. His commissioning service was intended to confirm his call into ministry by “the laying on of hands by the presbytery” (1 Tim 4:14). In this passage, Paul pointed back to that time when other godly men in the church laid their hands upon Timothy and affirmed his

call into the ministry. This commissioning service involved other elders, those who were already serving the Lord in spiritual leadership. By identifying themselves with Timothy, the leaders who conducted this public ceremony confirmed before the church that he was indeed called into the work of the Lord. This moment took place sometime shortly after Timothy met Paul on the apostle's second missionary journey (Acts 16:1–3).

This confirmation by other leaders is much like what had occurred earlier in Paul's own experience (Acts 13:1–3). While he was ministering in the congregation at Antioch, the Holy Spirit called him into the work of missions. In recognizing this sovereign call upon his life, the other spiritual leaders in this church—Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, and Manaen—laid hands upon both Paul and Barnabas. This show of confirmation launched their first missionary journey and demonstrated that these two men had been set apart by God to this great work.

*Lloyd-Jones: Preachers Must "Be Sent"*

In like manner, Lloyd-Jones reasoned from Romans 10:13–15 that preachers must be "sent." He understood this to mean a formal commissioning by a sending church. In this passage, the apostle Paul writes:

"Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent?

In sending any preacher, the spiritual leaders of the church must examine the qualifications of this one who is being set apart to enter the ministry. They must apprehend and affirm the validity of his call from God. They must test his life and doctrine. They must determine his giftedness. If he passes their appraisal, their hands should be laid upon him to validate what God is doing in his life. Only then may he be sent in the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If God is setting you apart to this work of gospel ministry, it will be important that the leaders of your local church or ministry recognize that you are called by God to this work. It is critical that you not be self-appointed to the ministry. Those who are spiritually mature and ministry-minded should affirm that God is at work in your life in a special way. Then, and only then, should you be separated to the work of the Lord.

Have you presented yourself to the leaders of your church for their examination of you? Have they evaluated your qualifications for ministry? Have they affirmed you before the church? This step is important for your validation for this sacred calling.

**Are You Called?**

It may be that God is working in your life in just such a real way. He may be calling you into vocational gospel ministry. It may be that God is moving you to step forward to minister His Word to others. It may be that God is pulling on your heart in a manner that is becoming unmistakable. It may be that God is causing a great disturbance within you as you consider how to invest your life with a maximum rate of return for His eternal purposes. It may be that you now recognize that God is calling you into the ministry.

If this is where you find yourself, I urge you to give serious consideration to what has been laid out in this article. Each one of these indicators of the call of God is critically important. No single mark is enough to move forward with confidence. As these multiple evidences are experienced in your life, you may have an assurance to proceed into the work of the ministry.

If this describes you, the Bible says, "To one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin" (James 4:17). While it would be wrong to move ahead where God is not leading, it is also wrong to hesitate to do what you know is right to do. In fact, it would be sin to lag behind after the Lord has revealed His will. If you realize that God is calling you into His ministry, then proceed forward by faith. If this is where you find yourself, may God embolden you to pursue His will into the ministry. ♦

# ARE YOU CALLED? THEN PROCEED FORWARD BY FAITH.





## THE BUSH WAS BURNING, YET IT WAS NOT CONSUMED

How can an unholy people stand before a holy God? Who is God, and what is His relationship to His creation? And how can we know Him? In Exodus 3, Moses saw a bush that was burning yet was not consumed by the flames. When he turned to look at it, God gave him one of the most profound theology lessons recorded in the Bible. There, God revealed Himself in a remarkable way, and as Dr. R.C. Sproul writes, His revelation in the burning bush continues to have relevance for Christians today.

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Union School of Theology



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**JOHN MACARTHUR**

PASTOR-TEACHER, GRACE COMMUNITY CHURCH, SUN VALLEY, CA  
PRESIDENT, THE MASTER'S SEMINARY

**S**everal years ago I had the opportunity to preach at the Southern Baptist Pastors Conference in New Orleans. It was quite an opportunity to stand on the 50-yard line of the Louisiana Superdome, where the New Orleans Saints usually play football, and preach to 25,000 pastors and their wives, seated on three tiers of grandstands. It was a wonderful time to speak and to call them to accountability as those who serve the Lord Jesus Christ by leading His church.

During that meeting, I shared with them a perspective on the ministry that I found stunning; it is a word to one who would be a pastor:

Fling him into his office. Tear the office sign from the door. Nail on the sign, "Study." Take him off the mailing list. Lock him up with his books and his typewriter and his Bible. Slam him down on his knees before texts and broken hearts, and the flip-pant lives of a superficial flock and before a holy God. Force him to be the one man in our surfeited communities who knows about God. Throw him into the ring to box with God until he learns how short his arms are. Engage him to wrestle with God

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**I**

# The Highest Calling

all the night through, and let him come out only when he's bruised and beaten into being a blessing.

Shut his mouth forever spouting remarks, and stop his tongue forever tripping lightly over every nonessential. Require him to have something to say before he dares break the silence, and bend his knees in the lonesome valley. Burn his eyes with weary study. Wreck his emotional poise with worry for God. And make him exchange his pious stance for a humble walk with God and man. Make him spend and be spent for the glory of God. Rip out his telephone. Burn up his ecclesiastical success sheets. Put water in his gas tank. Give him a Bible and tie him to the pulpit and make him preach the Word of the living God.

Test him. Quiz him. Examine him. Humiliate him for his ignorance of things divine. Shame him for his good comprehension of finances, batting averages, and political in-fighting. Laugh at his frustrated effort to play psychiatrist. Form a choir and raise a chant and haunt him with it night and day, "Sir, we would see Jesus."

When at long last he dares assay the pulpit, ask him if he has a word from God. If he does not, then dismiss him. Tell him you can read the morning paper and digest the television commentaries, and

think through the day's superficial problems, and manage the community's weary drives, and bless the sordid baked potatoes and green beans better than he can.

Command him not to come back until he's read and reread, written and rewritten, until he can stand up, worn and forlorn, and say, "Thus saith the Lord."

Break him across the board of his ill-gotten popularity. Smack him hard with his own prestige. Corner him with questions about God. Cover him with demands for celestial wisdom, and give him no escape until he is backed against the wall of the word. And sit down before him and listen to the only word he has left, God's word. Let him be totally ignorant of the down-street gossip, but give him a chapter and order him to walk around it, camp on it, sup with it, and come at last to speak it backward and forward, until all he says about it rings with the truth of eternity.

And when he's burned out by the flaming word, when he's consumed at last by the fiery grace blazing through him, and when he's privileged to translate the truth of God to man, and finally transferred from earth to heaven, then bear him away gently and blow a muted trumpet and lay him down softly. Place a two-edged sword on his coffin and raise the tomb triumphant. For he was a brave soldier of the word and ere he died; he had become a man of God.

That calls us to a fairly formidable task, doesn't it? The calling to which God has called men as shepherds of His flock is a serious one.

And I would like to draw your attention to one verse in 1 Timothy 3, just to note the seriousness of it. 1 Timothy 3:1 reads, "It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do." An overseer, then, must be above reproach.

Now in these very few words at the outset of this wonderful chapter, I believe we have something of the essential quality of the calling of God into ministry outlined. I just want to draw out several thoughts.

### **An Important Calling**

First of all, being called to pastor, being called into the ministry of the church, is an important calling. That is noted in the very way the chapter begins. "It is a trustworthy statement," or "This is a true saying." Now that little phrase was a formula used in the early church. In fact, sometimes you know it as "this is a faithful saying."

This phrase is used five times by Paul in the Pastoral

Epistles. It is used only by Paul and only in the Pastorals. Unquestionably, this little saying was a formula used in those early years to identify some common axiom. An axiom is a self-evident truth. The church had come to the conviction that there were a number of self-evident truths. They became almost like by-words, common sayings, sayings that were so well developed and so often given in the early church that they were a common expression.

Paul is saying that this matter of a man aspiring to the office of overseer, aspiring to a very fine work, is a common saying, one that has been repeated oft and again. It has become one of the maxims, one of the self-evident truths, commonly expressed in the early church.

If the church was constantly repeating this phrase, so much so that it became a common expression, it is evidently a very important statement. This leads us to conclude that the call to leadership in the church's life was an utterly essential thing. The church was always talking about it. Being called to the ministry is an important calling.

Were we to take the time to go through the Book of Acts, we might stop at Acts 14, especially verse 23, and Acts 15 to see the importance of spiritual leadership in the church. We might also assess that theme in Acts 20. We might be reminded of it in Philippians 1:1, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13. We might again stop long enough to look at Hebrews 13:7 and 17, to see again how utterly essential to the life of the church leadership is. And then we wouldn't forget, would we, 1 Peter 5, how important it is to shepherd the flock.

In some ways, apart from the very work of God Himself in an individual's life, spiritual leadership is the most essential element of church structure. There is really no more important calling than this.

The Lord has always sought for leaders. You can go all the way back into the Old Testament, 1 Samuel 13:14, and you read there, "The Lord has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart." You find again the words of Ezekiel 22:30, "I searched for a man among them who would... stand in the gap before Me for the land." God has always looked for leaders. There is a great need in the church for spiritual leadership.

George Liddell wrote years ago:

Give me a man of God, one man  
Whose faith is master of his mind,  
And I will right all wrongs  
And bless the name of all mankind.  
Give me a man of God, one man,  
Whose tongue is touched with heaven's fire,  
And I will flame the darkest hearts  
With high resolve and clean desire.

# THIS IS A LIMITED CALLING. IT IS A CALLING FOR GODLY MEN. IT IS A CALLING FOR MEN ONLY.

Give me a man of God, one man,  
 One mighty prophet of the Lord,  
 And I will give you peace on earth  
 Brought with a prayer and not a sword.  
 Give me a man of God, one man,  
 True to the vision that he sees,  
 And I will build your broken shrines  
 And bring the nations to their knees.

The church needs spiritual leaders, leaders who are willing to endure and suffer for the sake of objectives great enough to demand their wholehearted obedience.

Samuel Logan Brengle was one of the truly great leaders of the Salvation Army, a man of scholarship as well as singular spiritual power. He outlined the road to spiritual authority and leadership in very challenging words. Listen to his words:

Leadership is not won by promotion, but by many prayers and tears. It is attained by confessions of sin and much heart-searching and humbling before God, by self-surrender, a courageous sacrifice of every idol, a bold, deathless, uncompromising, and uncomplaining embracing of the cross, and by an eternal, unfaltering looking unto Jesus crucified. It is not gained by seeking great things for ourselves, but rather, like Paul, by counting those things that are gained to us as loss for Christ. That is a great price, but it must be unflinchingly paid by him who would not be merely a nominal but a real spiritual leader of men, a leader whose power is recognized and felt in heaven, on earth and in hell.

God is looking for the noblest of men, because of the importance of that calling.

## A Limited Calling

Secondly, it is not only an important calling, but it is a limited calling. The verse reads, “If any man aspires.” Here we have a word in the masculine form, and I believe there is a limitation to men here.

It must be noted, by the way, that all the descriptive adjectives through verse 6 are in the masculine form. The point has already been made back in 2:11–15 that women are to receive instruction with submissiveness, and not to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet, and then there is reason given for that. This is a limited calling. It is a calling for godly men. It is a calling for men only.

No Old Testament priest was a woman. No Old Testament prophet with an ongoing prophetic office was a woman. Though a few women did speak for God occasionally, they had no ongoing prophetic ministry.

In the New Testament, there was no woman apostle, no woman elder, no woman evangelist identified. No book of Scripture was written by a woman. That is not to say women are inferior. That is not true, not true at all. They have a different role. They are equal in spiritual privilege. They are equal in spiritual capacity. They are equal in spiritual blessing and blessedness. They are equal in spiritual promise. They are, in many cases, equal in spiritual effectiveness if not, in many cases, even more effective.

But when it comes to the teaching and the ruling office, that is limited. It is a limited calling. So, God is looking for some men to fill a very important calling, the most important calling in the world.

## A Compelling Calling

There’s a third thought that comes out of this verse. Not only is this calling important, not only is it limited to men, which narrows, as it were, the pool of available resources, but

thirdly it is a compelling calling. He says, “If any man aspires,” or, “If any man desires, he then desires a fine work.” Two times in this verse a word for desire is used.

These words emphasize the compulsion that is involved in the heart of a man. This calling is for those who are compelled. The first word means to reach out after, *oregō*, to stretch oneself to grasp something. It’s used here a couple of times in Hebrews.

The second word is the word *epithumeō*, which is often used in a negative sense for a wrongful passion, but here for a rightful desire, a passionate desire. This is a calling that belongs to men of passion, who stretch out because they’re passionately driven to this.

Earlier, I gave a description of how a pastor ought to act, and some of you might be saying, “That kind of exhortation is too demanding for me to deal with.” Others might be saying, “Let me have at that. In the power of the Spirit of God, that would be what I would like to be.” The difference between these two is the compelling of the heart.

When men come to me for counsel about going into the ministry or the pastorate, I never compel them to make that choice. If ministry is not an all-consuming desire of the heart, then either the call of God is not there or sin is there, which means the call of God is muffled. Either way, they aren’t fit for ministry. If the call isn’t there or if the sin is there muffling the call, then who am I to call them to ministry?

Patrick Fairbairn said, “Such desire is not the prompting of a carnal ambition, but the aspiration of a heart which has itself experienced the grace of God, and which longs to see others coming to participate in the heavenly gift.”

Jeremiah 45:5 says, “Are you seeking great things for

yourself? Seek them not.” I fear there might be some people today seeking church leadership for themselves. I doubt if that would be the case in Paul’s time as often as it is today. Oh, there was always some Diotrephes who rose to leadership because they sought the pre-eminence. But it would seem to me that because of the risks associated with the ministry in Paul’s day, self-seeking people might have been a little more hesitant to pursue it. After all, there was risk, the danger of death, great difficulty, hard work, little pay, lots of trouble, and desire in those days might have been more generally the result of Christ-created motives.

But let me hasten to add, too, that even then the desire was not for the office, and the desire was not for the place, and the desire was not for the title. The desire was for the work. Please note verse 1, “It is a fine work he desires to do.” If you aspire to the office, that’s a perverted desire. So also if you aspire to the place, to the title. If you aspire to the work, that’s right.

Samuel Brengle once said, “The final estimate of men shows that history cares not for the rank or title a man has borne or the office he has held, but only the quality of his deeds and the character of his mind and heart.” Ambition for office corrupts, but compulsion to do God’s work for the welfare of His church and the glory of His name is worthy of commendation. Paul was such a compelled man who said, “Woe is unto me I preach not the gospel.”

Other men were equally compelled, I suppose. Hugh Latimer, the popular preacher of the English Reformation in the sixteenth century, was compelled to preach because of the lostness of the people, because of the emptiness of the clergy in the dead church of the dark ages. His famous “Sermon of the Plow” was given, and he called for men

**THIS IS A CALLING THAT  
BELONGS TO MEN OF PASSION,  
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who would be true leaders of the church. Here's what he said way back then.

And now I would ask you a strange question: Who is the most diligent bishop and prelate in all England, that passes all the rest in doing his office? I can tell, for I know who it is. I know him well. But now I think I see you listening and harkening that I should name him. There is one that passes all the others and is the most diligent prelate and preacher in all England. And will you know who it is? I will tell you. It is the devil.

He is the most diligent preacher of all others. He is never out of his diocese. He is never from his cure. You shall never find him unoccupied. He is ever in his parish. He keeps residence at all times. You shall never find him out of the way. Call for him when you will, he is ever at home.

He is the most diligent preacher in all the realm. He is ever at his plow. No lording nor loitering can hinder him. He is ever applying his business. You shall never find him idle, I warrant you. Where the devil is resident and has his plow going, there away with books and up with candles, away with Bibles and up with beads, away with the light of the gospel and up with the light of candles, yea, at noon day, up with man's traditions and his laws, down with God's traditions and His most holy word. Oh that our preachers would be as diligent to sow the corn of good doctrine as Satan is to sow darnel or cares. There was never such a preacher in England as he.

Latimer concluded, "The prelates or preachers are lords and not laborers, but the devil is diligent at his plow. He is no unpreaching prelate. He is no lordly loiterer, but a busy plowman. Therefore, you unpreaching prelates, learn of the devil to be diligent in doing of your office. If you will not learn from God nor good men to be diligent in your office, learn from the devil." Now *there* is a passionate man.

Only men who are compelled to do the work should be in the ministry. The call might be a strong desire expressed in these words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: "The heights by great men reached and kept were not attained by sudden flight, but they while their companions slept were toiling upward in the night." It is an essential call, an important call. It is a limited call. It is a compelling call.

### A Responsible Calling

Fourthly, it is a responsible call. He says, "If any man aspires to the office of overseer or bishop." *Episkopos*, one

who looks over. Bishop has become a term so covered with ecclesiastical trappings that it might be better just to use the term overseer, as the NAS does, but the term describes a spiritual leader, a pastor and a shepherd. It is a responsible calling. The responsibility is the oversight of the church.

In Acts 20, the overseers are reminded that they have to take care of the church, which God has purchased with His own blood. It's a very wide range of responsibility. There is preaching. There is teaching, presiding, exercising care, wielding authority, discipline. That's the overseer.

Probably the closest thing to this concept, in the time in which this text was written, would have been the overseers of the Qumran community, the heterodox Jewish sect of Essenes. These overseers in the Qumran community had the duty of commanding, instructing, receiving alms and accusations, examining people to determine their spiritual condition, dealing with sins, and generally shepherding the people.

Overseers had a wide range of responsibilities, and one should not pursue such responsibility apart from an understanding of its breadth. To rule clearly, to preach, to teach, to lay hands on and pray, to care for and love, to establish in the doctrine, to build up leadership and ordain them to set the pattern by example, and it goes on and on. Very, very serious.

In fact, the responsibility is so serious that Hebrews 13 says we have to give an account to God for everything we do, and so serious that if a leader falls into sin he needs to be publicly rebuked before everyone. It's an essential and important calling. It's limited to men. It should come from a compelling passion, and one should understand the responsibility involved.

### A Worthy Calling

Fifthly, it's a worthy calling. Paul says, "It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do," a good work, *kalos*, a noble work, an excellent work, an honorable work. Here is the high estimate of the pastorate.

In the seventeenth century, Cotton Mather, that American Puritan, was having a powerful ministry in Boston. And in his directions for a candidate of the ministry he wrote these words:

The office of the Christian ministry, rightly understood, is the most honorable and important that any man in the whole world could ever sustain, and it will be one of the wonders and employments of eternity. Consider the reasons why the wisdom and goodness of God assigned this office to imperfect

# SO NOBLE A CALLING IS IT THAT TO HINDER IT IS TO BE AS GUILTY AS THOSE WHO KILLED CHRIST.

and guilty men. The great design and intention of the office of a Christian preacher is to restore the throne and dominion of God in the souls of men, to display in the most lively colors and proclaim in the clearest language the wonderful perfections, offices, and grace of the Son of God, and to attract the souls of men into a state of everlasting friendship with Him.

It is a work which an angel might wish for as an honor to his character, yea, an office which every angel in heaven might covet to be employed in for a thousand years to come. It is such an honorable, important, and useful office that if a man be put into it by God and made faithful and successful through life, he may look down with disdain upon a crown and shed a tear of pity on the brightest monarch on earth.

One of my spiritual heroes, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in *Preachers & Preaching* wrote, “To me, the work of preaching is the highest, and the greatest, and the most gracious calling, glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called.”

Will Sangster of Westminster Central Hall in London wrote during the days of World War II, “Called to preach, commissioned by God to teach the word, a herald of the Great King, a witness of the eternal gospel. Could any work be more high and holy?” It is a worthy calling.

Way back in the fourteenth century, John Wycliffe wrote, “The highest service that men may attain to on earth is to preach the word of God. This service falls peculiarly to priests, and therefore God more straightly demands it of

them. And for this cause Jesus Christ left other works and occupied Himself mostly in preaching, and thus did His apostles, and for this God loved Him. The church, however, is honored most by the preaching of God’s word, and hence this is the best service that priests may render unto God. And thus if our bishops preach not in their own persons and hinder true priests from preaching, they are in the sins of the bishops who killed the Lord Jesus Christ.” So noble a calling is it that to hinder it is to be as guilty as those who killed Christ. It is a noble, worthy calling.

## **A Demanding Calling**

Sixthly, this verse tells us this is a demanding calling. He says it is a noble, fine, honorable work. It is a work. It is not just an honored position. It is a lifelong task.

Paul said to Timothy, “Do the work of an evangelist.” To the Thessalonians Paul wrote, “Honor those over you for their position,” no, “for their work’s sake.” Paul in Ephesians 4:12 talks about the work of the ministry. It is a demanding calling. It is diligent, hard work.

## **A Holy Calling**

And then, finally, it is a holy calling. Verse 2, an overseer, then, takes us back, because it is an essential calling, because it is a limited calling, because it is such a compelling calling, because it is such a responsible calling, because it is such a noble calling, because it is such a worthy calling—not only a worthy calling, but a hard calling, a demanding calling. An overseer, then, must be above reproach. He must understand it’s a holy calling, because only a holy man could approach such a formidable task. ♦

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HAS  
GOD  
CALLED  
YOU?

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**R. ALBERT MOHLER, JR.**

PRESIDENT, THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
TEACHING FELLOW, LIGONIER MINISTRIES

Has God called you to ministry? Though all Christians are called to serve the cause of Christ, God calls certain persons to serve the church as pastors and other ministers. Writing to young Timothy, the apostle Paul confirmed that if a man aspires to be a pastor, “it is a fine work he aspires to do” (1 Tim 3:1). Likewise, it is a high honor to be called of God into the ministry of the church. How do you know if God is calling you?

First, there is an inward call. Through His Spirit, God speaks to those persons He has called to serve as pastors and ministers of His church. The great Reformer Martin Luther described this inward call as “God’s voice heard by faith.” Those whom God has called know this call by a sense of leading, purpose, and growing commitment.

Charles Spurgeon identified the first sign of God’s call to the ministry as “an intense, all-absorbing desire for the work.” Those called by God sense a growing compulsion to preach and teach the Word, and to minister to the people of God.

This sense of compulsion should prompt the believer to consider whether God may be calling him to the ministry. Has God gifted you with the fervent desire to preach? Has He equipped you with the gifts necessary for ministry? Do you love God’s Word and feel called to teach? Spurgeon warned those who sought his counsel not to preach if they could help it. “But,” Spurgeon continued, “if he cannot help it, and he must preach or die, then he is the man.” That sense of urgent commission is one of the

central marks of an authentic call.

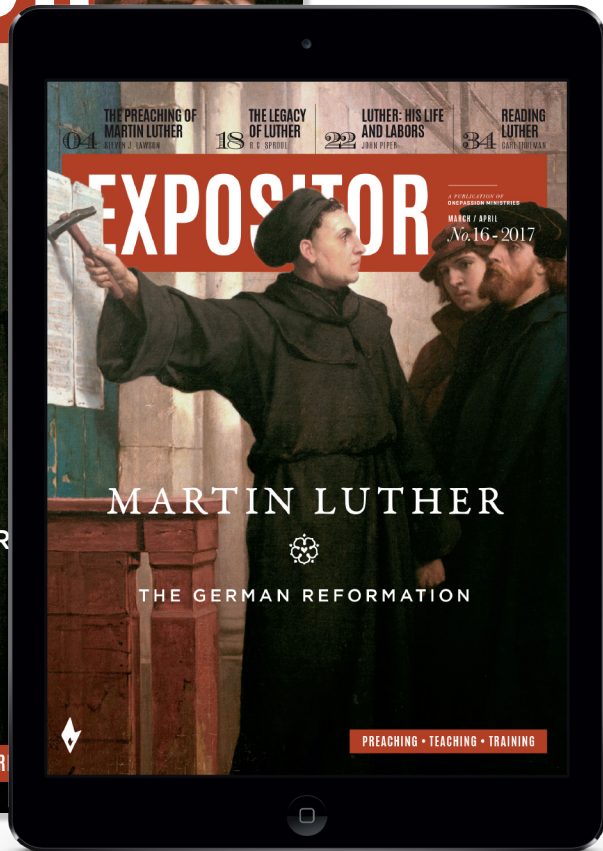
Second, there is the external call. Baptists believe that God uses the congregation to “call the called” to ministry. The congregation must evaluate and affirm the calling and gifts of the believer who feels called to the ministry. As a family of faith, the congregation should recognize and celebrate the gifts of ministry given to its members and take responsibility to encourage those whom God has called to respond to that call with joy and submission.

These days, many persons think of careers rather than callings. The biblical challenge to “consider your call” should be extended from the call to salvation to the call to the ministry.

John Newton, famous for writing “Amazing Grace,” once remarked that “None but He who made the world can make a Minister of the Gospel.” Only God can call a true minister, and only He can grant the minister the gifts necessary for service. But the great promise of Scripture is that God *does* call ministers and presents these servants as gifts to the church.

Consider your calling. Do you sense that God is calling you to ministry, whether as pastor or another servant of the church? Do you burn with a compulsion to proclaim the Word, share the gospel, and care for God’s flock? Has this call been confirmed and encouraged by those Christians who know you best?

God still calls . . . has He called you? ♦



# EXPOSITOR

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**SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON**

TEACHING FELLOW, LIGONIER MINISTRIES  
CHANCELLOR'S PROFESSOR OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY,  
REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Some years ago, I watched a BBC documentary about a longtime friend who was also a member of the congregation I served. A distinguished microbiologist, she had devoted her professional life to the study of a mutation of a single virus. Because of her research, the U.K. government granted permission for “experimental” treatment to be given to patients with a life expectancy of only a few weeks. The results in some cases seemed miraculous. I congratulated her on the documentary (which was both thrilling and deeply moving) and said how gratifying it must be to have devoted her life to such important work. Her response was telling: “What I do isn’t really all that important. But what *you* do—that is *really important*.”

The pastoral call—*really important*? More important than prolonging life? Yes, for if you are called to be an *episkopos* (“watchman”), then “if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took a warning, and you will have delivered your soul” (Ezek 3:21).

### **The Pastoral Calling**

No one can write about the pastoral calling under the illusion

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**I**

# Called to Pastor: Some Reflections

he has been a model pastor. We share James’s confession: “we all stumble in many ways” (3:2). Furthermore, the models for ministry set before us are almost always the outstanding *preachers*. The interviews and comments that excite us in journals, blog sites, and books are usually focused on the pulpit, not on the pastor’s calling as a whole. Probably like most readers of *Expositor*, for each book I own on the work of the pastor, I have ten to fifteen on preaching. Where, then, are models to be found?

The entire New Testament is our pastoral manual. Each of its 27 books was written with a pastoral intention. They are all “profitable for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). This is true for believers in general. But in this context Paul’s focus seems to be the pastoral calling specifically: “that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:17); “man of God” here is virtually a technical term for Timothy as a gospel minister (cf. 1 Tim 6:11). In a quite specific sense, the New Testament contains 21 “pastoral epistles.” Delete everything that has pastoral intent in it, and little remains!

Module one, therefore, to understand and prepare for the pastor’s calling is: absorb the New Testament, be absorbed in it, and be absorbed by it. It is the pharmaceutical manual of the spiritual physician.

No doubt the best and most biblical *practical* way to

# IT IS THOSE WHO LOVE CHRIST WHO LOVE HIS SHEEP AND LAMBS.

learn what the pastoral calling looks like is close association with a pastor. Such relationships constitute one of the great needs of our time. When I have asked seminary students “what pastor invested himself in you?” too often the answer has been “none.” Granted, there are exceptions, but are we not inclined to echo Paul’s *mē genoito*—this ought not to be!

Yet all is not lost. For if we are rooted in module number one, we will discover that the apostles have allowed us to get near to them. Peter and Paul especially speak directly to the pastoral calling.

## **Peter: Deconstructed and Reconstructed Fellow Pastor**

The very fact that Peter addresses the work of pastors should itself be a huge encouragement to us. He was once (as one of the best-known pastors in the United States described his earlier Christian life to me) “a basket case.” But Peter was wonderfully “reconverted” (Luke 22:32).

We are all familiar with the way triple-denying Simon Peter was deconstructed and reconstructed piece by piece at the lake side:

Do you, who said “Even though they all fall away, I will not . . . If I must die with you, I will not deny you” (Mark 14:29, 31) and then denied me three times. . . do you love me more than these? Then feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep (cf. John 21:15–17).

Jesus was not asking Peter if he loved Him more than he loved fishing, but if he loved Him more than the other disciples. His reply? “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you” (John 21:15–16). There is no room for comparison now in his mind. He had experienced a satanic deconstruction (Luke 22:51). But Christ’s deconstruction always has reconstruction in view. He does not break bruised reeds or

extinguish faintly burning wicks (Isa 42:3).

Notice the two priorities Jesus sets for the pastoral calling. In one form or another these ought to shape the first two questions asked of a candidate for pastoral ministry (yes, following the opening “getting to know you” conversation).

**1: As to the heart.** “Do you *love* Jesus Christ?” That is a “yes or no” question. William Cowper rightly taught us to sing:

Hark, my soul, it is the Lord!  
'Tis thy Savior, hear His Word;  
Jesus speaks, and speaks to thee,  
“Say, poor, sinner, lovest thou Me?”  
Lord, it is my chief complaint  
That my love is weak and faint;  
Yet I love Thee, and adore:  
O for grace to love Thee more!

But unless my answer is, fundamentally, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,” the essential ingredient in pastoral ministry is missing. It is those who love Christ who *love* His sheep and lambs. Others *use* them.

The second question follows on with all the interconnectedness of the *Shorter Catechism*:

**2: As to the task.** “What do you see as the central task of the pastor?” Imagine a young man being asked this question. His desire to become a minister is altogether appropriate. “If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task” (1 Tim 3:1). But what does he want to be and do in that office?

What if our candidate responds, “I want to teach the Bible. I love doing that”? He needs to be asked a follow-up question, doesn’t he? “Take a minute or two to tell us briefly why you love to teach the Bible—but don’t rush; take your time.”

What if he answers now, “because I love to study the Bible myself” or “because I feel that most Christians don’t know the Bible very well” or “because I love expounding the Scriptures” or even “because I feel I come alive when I am teaching people from the Bible”?

Something is still missing. But what? Part of the answer lies in the fact that neither *studying* nor *teaching* the Bible is necessarily the same thing as *feeding* or *tending* the sheep and the lambs.

The significance of this distinction was brought home to me once by a deeply committed, highly intelligent, and ministry-supportive Christian couple I occasionally met. Describing a decade-long ministry they had recently experienced, they commented, “We were *well instructed*, but we do not feel we were *well nourished*.” Therein lies the difference between being a teacher and being a pastor.

Instruction of the mind is an essential ingredient in the pastor’s calling (Romans 12:1–2 makes that crystal clear). But our people are not detached minds. They are people the Lord calls to love Him, yes, with the mind, but also with all the heart and soul. Our sheep are thinking people, but they are also physical, spiritual, volitional, and affectional. They need to be *fed* and *nourished* as whole people, not just instructed as intellects.

This perhaps explains why the Bible’s metaphors for the pastoral calling are a summons to care for and to love the church family. Hence Peter’s words, “shepherd the flock of God that is among you” (1 Pet 5:2), echo the Chief Shepherd’s words to him: “Feed my lambs . . . tend my sheep . . . feed my sheep” (John 21:15–17). The same emphasis is found in Paul’s exhortation to the elders of the church in Ephesus, “Pay careful attention . . . to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to *care for* the church of God which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). There is something of the oxymoron about us referring to “my ministry” or “my congregation/flock.” They are His, not mine. Love for Him means love for them, not ownership of them. Well did Bernard of Clairvaux say, “Had I some of that blood poured forth on the cross, how carefully would I carry it; and ought I not to be as careful of those souls that it was shed for!”

So, the task is *feeding* and *tending*. Of course, the food that is needed is the Word of God. Peter hinted at this when he urged his readers to “long for the pure spiritual milk” that would enable them to grow (1 Pet 2:2). Paul makes it even clearer.

### Paul—Local Pastor

For an extended period of almost three years (the length of the average first pastorate in the U.S.), Paul served as

the pastor of the church in Ephesus. His ministry there comes to expression in several different places in the New Testament. Luke records the story of his ministry in Acts 19:1–20:1 and 20:17–38; two of the Pastoral Epistles had Ephesus as their destination (1 Tim 1:3).

While Revelation 2:1–7 underlines for us that having Paul as your pastor is no guarantee of future faithfulness, he provides us with vital insights into the pastoral calling. For here it becomes clear that feeding the flock involves not only the *act* of preaching and teaching but also the *style* of ministry and the *disposition* that suffuses it.

At the heart of this ministry lay the regular preaching and teaching of the Word of God. Two details are worth noting:

(1): *Paul taught the Word “daily”* (Acts 19:9). The Western manuscript tradition adds: *from the fifth hour to the tenth* (i.e. 10 a.m. until 3 p.m.). Whether or not this phrasing is original, it probably points to the reality. These were the hours when a philosopher’s lecture room would have been available (even a professor named “Tyrannus” knew that Plato and Aristotle are not best studied during the siesta hours!). Some New Testament scholars (who in any case doubt Luke’s historical reliability) dismiss the intensity here out of hand. But they have probably never heard of the labors of a George Whitefield, nor read Richard Baxter’s *Reformed Pastor*. The latter tells us:

We [Baxter plus the two helpers he employed from his own stipend] spend Monday and Tuesday from morning almost to night in the work, taking about fifteen or sixteen families in a week, that we may go through the parish, in which there are upwards of eight hundred families, in a year . . .

Given all the other occasions in the week he was engaged in the direct ministry of the Word of God, Baxter was approximating to the workload of Paul (as Calvin and others had done in the previous century).

The point here is not to demean present-day ministers for falling short of Paul’s thirty-five-hour-a-week preaching schedule (!). Nor is it to raise the question of what our contemporary churches are doing to pour the Word with similar intensity into the hearts of our people. But it certainly underlines how central to the pastoral calling is the teaching of the Word of God. This helps to explain the wider impact of Paul’s pastorate: “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:9).

The pastor’s calling is to “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort”

(2 Tim 4:2—Timothy’s preaching is to echo the ways in which Scripture is “profitable,” 2 Tim 3:16).

But this is not done in isolation. There is an additional factor:

(2): *Paul visited the flock in Ephesus domestically* (“from house to house,” Acts 20:20). Again, we may recall Baxter’s comments:

For my part, I study to speak as plainly and as movingly as I can . . . I have found by experience that some ignorant persons, who have been so long unprofitable hearers, have got more knowledge and remorse of conscience in half an hour’s close discourse, than they did from ten years’ public preaching.

How we transpose this apostolic and Puritan pattern into our very different societal lifestyle and diverse congregations presents an ongoing challenge. But the chief point here is Paul’s personal contact with his flock, his individual care for them.

It is one of the most humbling things about pastoral ministry that it is so often the small things said or done *personally* that linger in people’s memories. The reason? Because it was their pastor who said or did them. They saw then that all our preaching and teaching was because we loved them and cared about them. Therein they saw the love of the Lord. As the elderly John Newton once wrote, “I believe my people would take anything from me now, *because they know I mean to do them good.*”

This loving care expresses the fact that the goal of pastoral ministry is not limited to understanding the gospel. That is a means to an end.

What, then, is this “end” or goal? Ultimately, of course, it is the glory of God. But what fruit most glorifies God in this context? Paul answers this question in two ways, one general the other more specific.

### The Goal of the Pastoral Calling

(1): *The goal of pastoral ministry is maturity.* When Paul lists the foundational ministries of the Word (apostle, prophet, evangelist) and the regular ministry (pastors and teachers, Eph 4:11), he describes the goal as bringing believers to the “unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, *to mature manhood*, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children” but rather “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph 4:13–15). Thus, the body of Christ begins to function well “when each part is working properly,” for then “it builds itself up in love” (Eph 4:16).

The goal of pastors and teachers in their ministry of the

Word is mature stability expressed in the transformation of the church family. The ministries of the Word are to “*equip the saints*” for service. Paul’s verb (*katartizō*) is used in the Gospels of the disciples mending their nets in preparation for the following night’s fishing (Matt 4:21; Mark 1:19). This is what the ministry of the Word accomplishes. It brings illumination, but it also mends! Minds are clarified, but in addition, affections are cleansed and refreshed, wills are subdued, and hearts are redirected in love towards the Lord Jesus. This is not accomplished by biblical teaching in an *ex opere operato* fashion, but by truth communicated in the power and grace of the Spirit of truth through the affection and self-giving of the pastor. However indefinable this may seem to be, we all recognize it when we are on the receiving end of it. Two men may preach the same sermon in completely different ways and with very different effects!

This leads to a second goal that Paul stresses:

(2): *“The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith”* (1 Tim 1:5). In my own (Presbyterian) tradition, three messages are characteristically given at ordination or induction services: a sermon and then two “charges,” the first to the pastor and the second to the congregation. In my experience, charges to evangelical pastors usually major on preaching.

But this is only part of our charge, albeit an essential one. The other part is love. For the pastor’s love for the people, expressed in both the matter and the manner of his preaching, tends to permeate the life of a congregation. It is a daunting thought that, over the long haul, churches often mirror in significant ways the character and ethos of the ministry of the Word they receive, and of their minister. Whether this is *like creating like* or *like attracting like* is a question—there is probably an element of both! But it happens frequently.

So, while the character of the ministry of the Word is not the only means of effecting mutual love in the church family, over the long haul, exposition of the Word that is lacking in love can easily thwart it. And in a loveless day of alienation, dysfunctional relationships, and family disintegration, there is great need for churches to be marked by Christ-like, Spirit-infused, Word-fed love. Such a church family bears powerful testimony to the gospel, because then what is expressed in words amplified from the pulpit becomes audible in the “surround sound” heard in the fellowship of the congregation.

There is another important aspect of this. We have underlined that pastors are to feed Christ’s sheep from the Word. But this assertion needs to be fine-tuned. For it is still possible to “search the Scriptures . . . that bear witness about [Christ], yet . . . [never] come to [Christ] that

you may have life” (John 5:39–40). Pastors are to explain the text, but always with a view to preaching Jesus Christ Himself. They must not make the mistake of simply assuming that they are doing this because they engage in “systematic Bible exposition.”

Herein lies one difference between the man who loves teaching the Bible and the man who, because he loves the sheep of Christ’s flock, teaches the Bible in order to show them Christ Himself, “clothed in the gospel” (to use Calvin’s lovely description). For “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:53). These are not the words of Thomas Aquinas about participating in the Mass; they are the words of the Lord Jesus about trusting, receiving, knowing, and loving Him as He is fed to us in “the words that . . . are spirit and life” (John 6:63).

Paul brings all this together in a single sentence that sums up his ministry: “*Him we proclaim*, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, *that we may present everyone mature in Christ*” (Col 1:27). What could be more arduous than this? No wonder he uses such strong verbs: “For this *I toil, struggling* with all *his energy* that he *powerfully works* in me” (Col 1:28). It is a remarkable testimony to the arduous nature of the pastoral calling. It is not for wimps!

What, then, does this kind of pastoral ministry look like? Here we must limit ourselves to two passages:

**2 Corinthians 4:5:** “What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.” Isn’t there something surprising about Paul writing about proclaiming Jesus as Lord and adding himself into the same sentence? But, in fact, he is taking us here to the heartbeat of his ministry, and the way it contrasts with that of the super-apostles (2 Cor 11:5). He is a servant of Jesus Christ (Rom 1:1; Phil 1:1; Titus 1:1); but he is also the

servant (*doulos*, bond slave) of the Corinthians. The pastor stands—on his knees!—to proclaim Christ. Jesus-like, he kneels to wash dirty feet to bring cleansing through the Word.

There may be occasions when a pastor needs to tell those he shepherds that this is how he sees his role (just as Paul did): “Christ is my Lord, but I want to be your servant for his sake.”

**1 Thessalonians 2:1–12.** In some ways this passage is even more remarkable because of the brevity of Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–9). He had been prevented from seeing them again (1 Thess 2:17–18). But the array of the features of his pastoral care for them is impressive:

- His self-forgetfulness: “nor did we seek glory...” (vv. 5–6).
- His willingness to give up his rights: “we could have made demands as apostles of Christ” (v. 6).
- His gentleness: “like a nursing mother taking care of her own children” (v. 7).
- His affection for them and self-giving to them: “being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us” (v. 8).
- His willingness to work to the point of exhaustion for their sake: “For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil (*ton kopon...kai ton mochthon*): we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God” (v. 9).
- His consistent Christian walk before them: “You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers” (v. 10).

**PASTORS ARE TO EXPLAIN  
THE TEXT, BUT ALWAYS  
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And lest we think that such a man would be unapproachable:

- His paternal love for them: “For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory” (vv. 11–12).
- His gratitude for them: “And we also thank God continually for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God which is at work in you believers” (v. 13).

This is the kind of pastoral ministry that can say in the presence of God: “The aim of our charge is love” (1 Tim 1:5). True, it comes to expression most publicly in the manner of our preaching. But here too, as Baxter shrewdly notes: “In preaching, there is a communion of souls, and a communication of somewhat from ours to theirs.” And that will be a communication of the pastor’s love, care, and devotion only if it is a leading characteristic of his life.

Such love is not a virtue we possess by nature. One man is more of a “people person” than another; some are wired to express love in more obvious ways than others are. But the love of which Paul speaks is the fruit of the Spirit of God, not of our natural spirit. It is created in us, not by us. Yes, there is a concurrence here as in other areas (Paul worked harder than anyone, but it was the grace of God that was with him, 1 Cor 15:11). Similarly, love for the flock is both gift and task. The pastor cannot but love his people; this is Christ’s gift *to him*, and it is also his gift *to them* in Him. He loves his people—even those who give him the most hassle (if only they knew it!). It both oils the wheels of his pastoral care and may also break his heart. C. S. Lewis’ words are true of pastoral ministry in a special way:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give it to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.

Being “vulnerable” must not be reduced to the psycho-babble of some pastoral theories that equate it with our failures. The Latin *vulnus* means a wound. And the love which Christ creates in the pastor for the flock inevitably exposes him to being wounded. Like the Good Shepherd, he is called to give his life for the sheep (John 10:11). He gives his life for his flock (as well as, if required, giving it for them in death).

Thus, the ultimate model for pastoral ministry is found in the Good Shepherd. He knows the needs of his sheep and supplies them; he understands their spiritual hunger and feeds them; he sees their sin and failure and restores them; he observes them walking into valleys of deep darkness and goes with them; he knows they have enemies and spreads a well-provided table before them; he sees ways of expressing God’s goodness and mercy to them; he watches them growing ill and old, and walks beside them to the gates of glory (Ps 23:1–6; John 10:1–18; 1 Pet 5:4; Heb 13:20). What could be more important than this?

### **Tempted to Idolatry?**

This article touches only the edges of the pastoral calling. But having begun it with a personal reflection, perhaps it is fitting to draw it together with one. I am a member of St. Peter’s Free Church of Scotland in Dundee. The name will ring a bell with many readers of *Expositor*. Robert Murray M’Cheyne was our church’s first minister. I often sit in the building and say silently to the walls, “Would that you could communicate what it was like to be in this packed building night after night when the people experienced an overwhelming sense of the presence of God.”

A remarkable awakening took place here when Robert M’Cheyne was pastor. *But it happened when he was not here*. In 1839, he had been sent on a church deputation to investigate the condition of the Jewish people. In his absence, the awakening came under the ministry of his locum, William Chalmers Burns. Despite M’Cheyne’s return, some of his people were so impressed by Burns that they would have preferred him to continue as their pastor. This, M’Cheyne said, broke his idolatry of St. Peter’s. His love for the people, his delight in God’s blessings in the church, had become tinged with the fact that they were *his* people, the fruit of *his* ministry.

I wonder whether one of the marks of a pastor after God’s own heart might be that the idolatry to which he is most prone is the idolatry of the congregation he serves—for they are his “joy and crown” (Phil 4:1). Perhaps if there is no danger of idolatry, there is no presence of love?

We look at great preachers and sometimes (perhaps too

often) make them the benchmark of our aspirations. Perhaps we look less at seasoned pastors and make them either our model or our benchmark. In either case, we need to remember that other men may be our examples, but they should never be our standard. We each stand or fall before our own Master (Rom 14:4). Christ does not give each of us identical gifts, or the same opportunities, or energy levels. But he does call us all to love and faithfulness. Let that be our ambition. John Flavel says it with wisdom and balance:

I would discourage none that appear to have pious inclinations, matched with competent qualifications. Many be useful that cannot be excellent. Weaker gifts, rooted in a gracious heart, will grow by using; but nothing grows without a root. I think the plainest men have done the greatest service in the church of Christ; as tender-eyed Leah brought forth more children than beautiful Rachel. But still fidelity and prudence are indispensable qualifications.

If, indeed, we have received this ministry from the Lord,

we will not lose heart (2 Cor 4:1, 16). For our calling as pastors is, at the end of the day, to be able to echo Paul's words to the flock that the Lord Jesus has called us to shepherd:

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant (2 Cor 3:1–6).

Perhaps your flock is not an easy one to pastor. But then, neither was the church in Corinth. ⚡



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HOW CAN  
I TELL  
IF I'M  
CALLED  
TO  
PASTORAL  
MINISTRY?



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**KEVIN DEYOUNG**

SENIOR PASTOR, CHRIST COVENANT CHURCH, MATTHEWS, NC

I've been asked the question many times, and I'm not sure I agree with it. The question often assumes that pastors, unique among all the vocations of the world, will (and sometimes *must*) have a powerful, divine, subjective call to ministry that overwhelmingly points them in their God-ordained direction. I don't see support for that sort of normative experience in Scripture.

But I understand what young men are looking for. They understand that pastoral ministry is weighty work, not to be entered into lightly. So, naturally, they want to know that their inclinations are not self-serving and their direction is not a fool's errand. They are looking for a few signposts along the way to show them that they're not obviously on the wrong road. That's a commendable impulse.

Here are several questions you should ask yourself as you ponder a call to pastoral ministry.

**1. Do I meet the qualifications laid out in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1?** This is the place to start. If your character is not mature, stable, and (in a non-perfectionist way) exemplary, then you are not ready to be a pastor. This does not necessarily mean you are on the wrong path if you don't yet have victory over certain sins, but it means you won't be ready until you meet the Scriptural standards.

**2. Do the Christians who know me best consistently affirm my gifts for ministry?** The most important call is the objective call of your church encouraging you to pursue pastoral ministry.

**3. Do I like to teach all kinds of people in all kinds of settings?** Most people thinking of pastoral ministry are excited to preach. I want to know if they are also excited to preach at the Rescue Mission and excited to teach catechism to five-year-olds.

**4. Do I find myself stirred by good preaching?** If a man is called to preach the gospel, he should be thrilled to hear it preached. The content should move him, and he

should find himself thinking, "Oh, that I could proclaim this good news."

**5. Do I find myself stirred by bad preaching?** The last point was obvious. This one is less so, but just as important. I think there ought to be a fire in a man's bones when he hears the Word of God handled badly.

**6. Do I enjoy being around people?** Some pastors are extroverts; many are not. I'm sort of the middle. I look forward to being with people more than some pastors I know, but not nearly as much as many men I admire. But whatever your personality, you won't be a good pastor if you don't like people and recoil from them as much as possible.

**7. Do I make friends easily?** This is a subjective test (like so many of these questions), but a lack of meaningful friendships is not a good sign. It could be an indication that you are too harsh, too much a loner, or frankly too awkward to be effective in pastoral ministry.

**8. Do I like to read?** Thankfully there is no GPA or SAT requirement for pastoral ministry. And yet, if we are to be "apt to teach," we must be eager to learn. Preaching grows thin and ministry get stale without time in the Book and the books.

**9. Have I thought about doing this for more than a few months?** Often when students or adults come to Christ, they quickly assume that because they are zealous for the Lord they ought to go seminary and prepare for the ministry. This is usually misguided, sometimes because of pride and sometimes due to misplaced zeal. There's a reason the Bible insists that church leaders not be recent converts.

**10. Do I still want to be a pastor if I never write a book, never speak at a conference, and never have a big church?** Our passion must be to feed the flock, not feed our egos. ♦

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“

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”



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## DEREK W. H. THOMAS

SENIOR MINISTER, FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, COLUMBIA, SC  
TEACHING FELLOW, LIGONIER MINISTRIES  
CHANCELLOR'S PROFESSOR OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY,  
REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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# Walking Worthy

The key to an effective ministry lies in the preacher's personal walk with the Lord. Preachers who are not personally progressing in holiness (Christ-likeness, see Romans 8:29) are what Jesus called "whitewashed tombs" (Matt 23:27). It is not so much ability and giftedness that the Lord blesses; it is sincerity, authenticity, and transparent godliness. A pastor-preacher with no "back doors" (to cite a favorite metaphor of John Calvin) is a blessing indeed. The old adage "what you see is what you get" should characterize every servant of the gospel.

There is an urgency about what I write. Almost monthly, I hear stories of those who have given up on "full-time" ministry. They are burnt out and cannot carry on. Guilt-ridden and crippled, they try other vocations, often with both relief from the stress and guilt at their inability to persevere. The redoubtable Charles Simeon, after a quarter century of ministry in Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge, wrote in 1807 that after a sermon he would "feel more dead than alive." Christopher Ash writes candidly and most helpfully on this condition in his book *Zeal Without Burnout: Seven Keys to a Lifelong Ministry of Sustainable Sacrifice* (The Good Book Company, 2016).

Another equally helpful treatment is by David Murray, *Reset: Living a Grace-Paced Life in a Burnout Culture* (Crossway, 2017). Included among the keys in Christopher Ash's book are chapters on such things as the need for sleep, the role of friends, and Sabbath rests. Those who experience burnout deserve our sympathy and prayers, for theirs is a path they would never choose without the most intense pain and distress.

Others have given up on pursuing the real goal of ministry—the glory of God—because they have instead fallen into the sin of self-glorification. Like the Jewish opponents of Jesus in John 5, they live for the buzz of receiving glory from one another (John 5:44), despite Jesus' clear objective to "not receive glory from people" (John 5:41). His was the path of self-denial, "empt[ying] himself" (Phil 2:7) and taking the form of a servant. In our world of celebrity preachers, we are often hoodwinked into concluding that blessing chiefly attends those who have the biggest churches and the most published books or the most Facebook friends or Twitter followers. But that is horribly distorted and shamefully crippling to the quiet but faithful preacher whose ministry radically shapes lives and rekindles life and vitality in a community of tens rather than thousands.

Preachers are not immune to the lust for recognition and importance. Whether they preach in a robe behind a marble pulpit or use a Perspex podium with the freedom to

pace back and forth, preachers experience many moments when they are the center of attention. People hang on their words as though their lives depended on it—for their lives *do* depend on it! A speaker’s insights into Scripture and the “control” over people’s behavior it suggests can be a powerful drug. It is one of the reasons why a degree of maturity is required for those in ministry, not “a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil” (1 Tim 3:6). Pride, so Augustine suggested, is of the essence of sin. It is essentially self-seeking and vainglorious—and preachers are not immune to its allurements. Addiction to this drug is deadly.

Walking worthy of the gospel is therefore a calling that requires effort and concentration. Is it ever the right thing to draw attention to oneself in ministry? Several considerations suggest that there are times when looking to ourselves is exactly what we need to do.

### Looking after Number One

Few scenes are more expressive of Paul’s heart for ministry, and those who engage in it, than his charge to the Ephesian elders at Miletus. Fearful that they would not see each other again, he exhorted them (with tears), “[p]ay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). Those involved in pastoral care were to take heed of *themselves* first of all. The verb (*prosechō*) is an interesting one. The ESV translates the same verb in 1 Timothy 3:8 (a warning about alcohol abuse) as “addicted.” As bizarre as it might sound to modern ears, Paul is exhorting the Ephesian elders to be addicted to themselves—there are occasions when looking after number one is the ethically right thing to do!

It stands to reason, of course, that someone whose task is to exhort others to a life of godliness in response to the gospel of grace should himself reflect that holiness. To do otherwise would be hypocrisy, as Jesus warned: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matt 23:27–28). The mask of feigned godliness and the impiety of public pretense cannot withstand the scrutiny of God’s all-seeing, all-knowing examination of our hearts as ministers of the gospel. There is no hoodwinking the Almighty as to gossamer holiness on our part.

The author of Hebrews exhorts, “Strive. . . for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14).

The exhortation is a general one, valid for every Christian, but its demand is especially needful for those whose lives are spent proclaiming the gospel.

### The Right to be Heard

The Bible insists that “leaders” deserve respect. Hebrews is explicit on the matter: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. . . [o]bey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Heb 13:17). But this demand for submission is not without qualification. Heretics deserve no respect and are to be shunned: “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned” (Tit 3:10–11; cf. Rom 16:17; 2 Pet 3:17). The phrase “stirs up division” is an attempt to translate the Greek word *hairesitikos*, though the idea associated with the term “heretic” is of later origin. In view here is not bad theology so much as bad character. The preacher Paul has in mind is predisposed to contentiousness.

The point here is that preachers and teachers cannot demand respect—a hearing, if you like—without any qualification. There must be a resonant godliness that accompanies what they say, and even precedes it. Consider the oft-cited sayings of Robert Murray M’Cheyne, the nineteenth-century minister of St. Peter’s, Dundee, in Scotland, who died shortly before his thirtieth birthday.

“A man is what he is on his knees before God, and nothing more.”

“Study universal holiness of life. Your whole usefulness depends on this, for your sermons last but an hour or two; your life preaches all the week. If Satan can only make a covetous minister a lover of praise, of pleasure, of good eating, he has ruined your ministry. Give yourself to prayer, and get your texts, your thoughts, your words from God.”

“Lord, make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be.”

“The greatest need of my people is my personal holiness.”

These are very familiar quotations from a young man

# WHO IS EQUIPPED FOR SUCH A TASK AS MINISTRY? THE HIGH CALLING OF OFFICE IN THE CHURCH OF CHRIST SHOULD MAKE US NERVOUS.

whose ministry barely lasted seven years. Each statement is a powerful call to Christ-likeness as our chief aim and concern. Without this holiness, the task of ministry is futile and worse, destructive. Without godliness, we will sow the seeds of hypocrisy. As M'Cheyne also suggested, each time we enter a pulpit (or stand behind a podium, or pace frenetically up and down, gesticulating wildly for emphasis), a shadow is cast on the wall behind us that says, "This man is a clown, a charlatan, a pretender, an actor" (the root meaning of "hypocrite").

## **Sin is never greater than at the point of greatest usefulness**

If pride and vainglory are powerful combatants to faithful ministry, something far subtler lurks to bring us down. The failure is not so much what lies secretly hidden in private life; the failure lies in the very acts of holiness itself. For in our most holy moments—in public prayer or preaching or counseling—sin lies on the very surface. It often stares at us while we engage in the task of ministry.

It is at one level utterly astonishing and unexpected that Isaiah utters his "woe is me" statement. Following the magnificent *Trisagion*—the three-fold utterance of God's holiness in Isaiah 6—the prophet becomes excruciatingly aware of his own personal sin and ungodliness.

"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (Isa 6:5).

Isaiah saw the Lord "high and lifted up and seated upon a

throne." He glimpsed the spectacular sovereignty and majesty of God. And the sight of it undid him.

From one point of view, Isaiah had the cleanest lips in Israel! He was a prophet, one anointed of the Lord to speak God's Word in proclamation and prophecy. His life, by all accounts, seemed outwardly impeccable. Wasn't he one of the greatest of all the prophets that ever lived? And yet, at the point of his greatest usefulness—the use of his lips in declaring the Word of God—he utters his most intense conviction of shortcoming. It is here, in his mouth, that he feels his sin the most. It is not so much what he does in secret that offends him—and *that* most assuredly does offend him; it is what he is in public, at the point where others see and hear him, that offends him the most. Our greatest sins are not necessarily in the dark and unseen areas of our life. They are in the pulpit, when God's Word is uttered without faith, His gospel handled without care, His Son described without passion, His promises uttered without joy, His threats expressed without conviction.

Who is equipped for such a task as ministry? The high calling of office in the church of Christ should make us nervous. At one point, the Lord told Jeremiah not to be "dismayed" at the thought of public ministry (Jer 1:17). The Hebrew word suggests something like "to be shattered, or filled with terror." It is a feeling all preachers have had at some point in their ministry. Facing a hostile church, a tense meeting of the deacons or elders, preaching on a topic that is counter-cultural (like, for instance, the issue of complementarity in male-female roles in marriage and the barring of women from the eldership)—these can make the strongest knees shake. And in these cases, the promise

given to Jeremiah is welcome indeed: “And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls...” (Jer 1:18).

Or take Ezekiel, God’s “watchman” (Ezek 3:16–21). Failure to warn “the wicked” or “the righteous...[who] turns from his righteousness and commits injustice” (Ezek 3:20) brings guilt—“his blood I will require at your hands” (Ezek 3:18). This is a fearful responsibility. A failure to preach about hell—its reality and awfulness—is an act of cowardice and culpability. No preacher should fail to see the balance of Scripture, offering heaven for those who repent and trust in Jesus Christ as He is offered in the gospel, and warning of hell for those who refuse the gospel. And it is tempting, all too tempting, to be drawn to emphasize one more than the other.

I have known preachers who never speak of hell, even though I am certain they believed in its existence. And I have known preachers who seemed always to be angry and threatening, and I fear that something of their own personal struggles emerged in the pulpit in the guise of “faithfulness” to Scripture. Getting the balance right is difficult, and only a close familiarity with the Scriptures will ensure a clear and undivided path.

#### A Servant

Returning to Isaiah and his vision in chapter 6, perhaps the most astonishing aspect of this vision is the task he was asked to perform. He must preach to deaf ears!

“Go, and say to this people:

‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand;

keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’

Make the heart of this people dull,  
and their ears heavy,  
and blind their eyes;  
lest they see with their eyes,  
and hear with their ears,  
and understand with their hearts,  
and turn and be healed.” (Isa 6:9–10)

God commands Isaiah to preach a message that will harden the hearts of those who hear it. It is one thing to be asked to do a difficult task in expectation of great reward and gain (thousands of converts!); it is another to be asked to be faithful to a task that will reap only rebuttal and disdain. God calls all preachers to be *faithful*, and he calls some preachers to be faithful rather than *successful*.

Walking worthy (to cite Paul’s general exhortation to all Christians in Ephesians 4:1) of the calling we have received is costly. Compliance with “demand” and “law” should not be viewed as a lapse into legalism, for all Scripture’s exhortations to holiness are gospel based. We obey *because* we have been saved from any suggestion that obedience will save us. Our obedience is a response to grace received. It is a way of saying “thank you.”

But what does *ministerial* holiness look like?

#### An Example to Follow

I am frequently taken aback by Paul’s insistence that Christians he knew (and who knew him) follow his example. He writes to the Thessalonians saying that the gospel had come to them “in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” and adds “[y]ou know what kind of men

**NO PREACHER SHOULD FAIL  
TO SEE THE BALANCE OF  
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we proved to be among you for your sake” (1 Thess 1:5). The power of the preached Word was in direct proportion to the character of those who proclaimed it.

In the following chapter, he adds another reference to the same effect: “You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers” (1 Thess 2:10). Similarly, Paul exhorts Titus to “[s]how yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity” (Titus 2:7). Likewise, he exhorts young Timothy, “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim 4:16).

Of all Paul’s exhortations to godliness in ministry, none are more startling than those he makes to the Corinthians:

“I urge you, then, be imitators of me” (1 Cor 4:16).

“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1).

These urgings to imitate the apostle appear counterintuitive. Our reflex is to say, “Whatever you do, don’t follow my example! I’m a failure like everyone else.” Indeed, there are those who seem to highlight a “celebratory failurism” so that the focus is entirely on the gospel. Paul approves the inclination. He cites a saying that was already circulating among early Christians: “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost” (1 Tim 1:15). Whether or not the final statement was part of the saying or something Paul adds is unclear. In any case, Paul is drawing attention to his sin and thereby puts emphasis on the fact that Jesus *saves*—it is *all* of Him, from beginning to end. We contribute nothing. Even our faith is a gift of God, “not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:9). As C. H. Spurgeon said, “Our prayers have stains in them, our faith is mixed with unbelief, our repentance is not so tender as it should be, our communion is distant and interrupted. We cannot pray without sinning, and there is filth even in our tears.”

If all we do (and all the apostle does) is sinful, how can Paul ask his readers to follow his example? The answer seems to lie in Paul’s equal insistence on measureable, discernible, progressive sanctification as a mark of what the gospel produces in us. This line of thinking requires a little conjugation.

- Nothing we do can make us more justified than we already are in Christ. Forensically and legally, we (Christians in union with Jesus Christ) are as righteous as Christ Himself. His spotless robe of

obedience is credited to our account. When God looks at us, He sees the purity of His Son reflecting back. This is why Paul moves inexorably from justification to glorification in the *Golden Chain* (to cite what the Puritan William Perkins called it) of Romans 8: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (vv. 29–30). Once God decides on a course of action, there is no stopping Him!

- All growth in sanctification is impossible apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Think of Philippians 2:12–13, where we are told to “work out our salvation,” but this working is God’s working in us. And there is little point in drawing attention to the synergy of God’s action and ours, as though a fair comparison is being made. What, after all, are our puny efforts compared to the actions and determination of a sovereign, omnipotent God?
- This indubitable fact that we have just mentioned—that God is at work in us accomplishing His purposes of grace and salvation—does not lessen the demand for effort on our part. Salvation is not a “let go and let God” affair. We must engage in purposeful effort and sweat. We are to pursue it with effort and grit. We must entertain the idea that apart from it, we can drift away, slip our moorings (cf. Heb 2:1), and possibly discover that our profession of faith was a mere sham. There are those who professed much and fell away, unable to be restored again to repentance (Heb 6:6). We have known some, and the thought of it should make us tremble.
- Every act of obedience on our part is imperfect. This side of heaven, the “good” we would do is never good. “Nothing good dwells in me” (Rom 7:18–19).
- The gospel urges us to aim for the good—holiness, which is Jesus-likeness. Our faith-union with Christ is “we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4).

These are points that all Christians who believe what the Bible says should agree upon. Some, however, recoil if the latter point is pressed a little further. Should Christians try to “please God,” or is this essentially legalistic? Paul answers the question simply when he tells the Corinthians

that he made it his aim “to please” Christ (2 Cor 5:9). It is therefore appropriate to ask, is the degree of my holiness such that it would encourage others to follow?

The soil out of which powerful preaching grows is the godliness of the preacher. Preaching doesn’t merely “happen.” It is shaped by what we as preachers *are*—in the totality of who we are in public and private. Actors are different. They can be Mephistopheles or Hamlet on the stage or in a movie and convince us that they really are the person they portray. Gary Oldman has been nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actor for his recent portrayal of Churchill in the movie *The Darkest Hour*. But he also portrayed James Gordon, the police commissioner of Gotham City, with equal credibility in the *Batman* trilogy. In real life, he is an entirely different person.

Preachers dare not be one thing in the pulpit and another in private. But such disparity does exist. At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns of those who possess gifts for ministry who are devoid of holiness (Matt 7:21–23). There have been, of course, examples of preachers whom the Lord has used to great effect, but who turned out to be scoundrels leading a double life. Why would the Lord use a hypocrite to further His kingdom? It is profoundly disturbing to contemplate, and when exposed does great harm to the kingdom of God. It breeds cynicism and distrust of other preachers and the gospel itself. This is a mystery. But it is also a fact. And we who preach and teach must face the awful possibility that great deeds may be accomplished in Jesus’ name, even though, at the end, Jesus will say, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matt 7:23). There will be preachers in hell. That thought should make us tremble.

### **This could not happen to me!**

David was Israel’s greatest king. He was “a man after God’s own heart” because of his extraordinary devotion to the Lord (1 Sam 13:14). David was a poet, musician, and warrior—a Renaissance man. And for all that, he is also known as the greatest sinner in the Bible. His adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and the consequent cover-up that led to the killing of Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband, is wicked and shameful in the extreme. And the note that closes the chapter that tells the sordid story rings like a tolling bell: “the thing that David had done displeased the Lord” (2 Sam 11:27). The progression in David’s sin reveals a hardening of his heart. Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, David would not have repented and given us Psalm 51, which records the trajectory from despair to gratitude for gospel grace.

Of some significance in David’s fall is the fact that David

was neglecting his duty as king. When his men were at war in the spring of the year, David remained in Jerusalem (2 Sam 11:1).

Duty! Yes, it is an appropriate word for “ministers of a new covenant” (2 Cor 3:6). Preachers and teachers of the gospel are under obligation to obey God’s commands. Was David’s infidelity the result of a belief that he was somehow invincible? Had David gained such a familiarity with grace that he believed he could skate on the thin ice of temptation and not fall through it? Was David suddenly tempted to believe that a little flirtatiousness wasn’t such a great sin and that he knew when to stop it? Or was David’s sinning the inevitable consequence of a pattern of laziness toward maintaining his relationship with the Lord, a laziness that sowed the seed of habit and a pattern of response? It certainly looks this way.

As James points out, there is a morphology to temptation: “each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:14–15). Temptation begins with desire. It is a thought, a fantasy, that unless checked inevitably grows and matures into a full-blown act. David’s sin probably began a long time before he first caught sight of Bathsheba bathing on a nearby rooftop. David was a long way past voyeurism. His mind was already dulled to the consequence of illicit sex. Inviting her to the palace would end in only one way.

The passage has “warning” written all over it. Those involved in ministry at the highest level should never presume “this could never happen to me.” No life is immune from temptation, and given the right circumstances—neglect of one’s devotional life, occasional flirtation based on the false belief that we can stop the trajectory any moment we please—the best can fall. As the sixteenth-century Puritan John Bradford allegedly commented when seeing a group of prisoners pass by, “There go I but for the grace of God” (cf. 1 Cor 15:10).

Gospel ministry is an inestimable privilege. To spend one’s days, even the worst of them, in a calling that coincides with our inclination, is an opportunity not granted to all Christians. For many (Christians and unbelievers), work “under the sun” amounts to misery and fruitless toil (cf. Eccl 2:18). Martyn Lloyd-Jones put it this way: “What is the chief end of preaching? I like to think it is this: it is to give men and women a sense of God and His presence.” And if we are to do that—give men and women a sense of God and His presence—we will need to walk worthy, reflecting the beauty of the gospel that we proclaim. God give us grace to do so. ♦





# EXPOSITOR

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# Richard Sibbes

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