

SOVEREIGN GRACE

PERSPECTIVES

Reflections on Doctrine and Practice in the Local Church

Am I Called?

Discerning the Summons to Ministry

Dave Harvey



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Each issue of *Sovereign Grace Perspectives* attempts to communicate our current understanding of the topic addressed. Our theology continues to develop as we seek to grow in our understanding of Scripture.

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Am I Called?

Discerning the Summons to Ministry

Dave Harvey

How does he do that?

It's a question that makes sense at a magic show, or when watching a guy free-climb a cliff face or stick a 3-iron pin-high in a golf championship. But it can seem out of place at a typical Sunday-morning church meeting.

The minister steps up to the pulpit to lead the church into the glories of God's Word. Across the sanctuary is heard the rustling of Bibles and the muffled sounds of a congregation preparing to listen. Some lean forward, eager for a choice helping from Scripture. Others are almost fearful, coming this Sunday with a desperate sense of need which they hope the minister's words will comfort. Still others sit back, ready to evaluate, or daydream, or enjoy a good story or clever joke.

But on any given week, some guy looks up at a man not much different than himself and ponders: *How does he do that?*

The Summons—Exploring the Call to Ministry

Nearly every man who has set his course to follow the Savior has sat in this seat, at least for a moment. Watching men in ministry

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ably functioning in their gifts, they have mentally projected themselves into that place and thought....How?

It is the question of men who wonder if they might be called to serve the Lord as a vocation. For some it is a vague and occasional musing, while others are fixed on a seemingly clear vision. The prospect terrifies many, exhilarates a few, and tests the humility of each. But for all, the distance between pulpit and pew is never greater than when weighing that question of calling, for underlying it is the real question: *How could I do that?*

Is the answer to be found in some irrefutable Damascus Road experience? Will Bible college or seminary settle the matter? Is getting into ministry like applying for a job, matching qualifications with the right opportunity? Or does it “just happen,” with everything falling into place like a giant spiritual slot machine?

What, really, is the process that gets a man into ministry? More to the point: *How could you do that?*

Perhaps the question of calling is quite real for you. If so, you may have noticed that, while there is much material on how to be a fruitful Christian, and nearly as much on how to be effective in ministry, there isn't much on how to get from the one to the other. This booklet is not intended as a road map, but as an aid to help guide your steps and your thinking along biblical lines as you wrestle with what is truly an awesome and mysterious question: *Am I Called?*

Introducing the Caller

Telephone calls detonate my kids. Whether sleeping, playing, or mesmerized by a book, the familiar ring from our kitchen jolts them into gear and catapults them toward the source. Collisions are common. After all, who knows what fun may be unleashed, what intrigue may await? This call could alter the entire evening,

This booklet was prepared to address issues of calling and leadership in the local church. In keeping with what we believe to be clear biblical teaching, pastoral leadership within Sovereign Grace Ministries is reserved for men. Yet it is important to note that men and women are created equally in the image of God and are therefore equal in personhood, importance, and dignity before God. As believers saved by the grace of God through the gospel, men and women are co-heirs of the grace of life, and neither can claim special status or privilege in the church. For further discussion of this subject, please see our website, specifically our Statement of Faith and FAQ sections.

maybe even the distant future. It could bring vital information, ecstatic joy, perhaps an unanticipated adventure.

Maybe we just need to get out more.

In any case, my kids have recognized something important. Calls come from callers. A ringing phone is proof-positive that someone from outside has turned his or her attention toward us. Wise and insightful children that they are, they realize they cannot conjure up a call. No amount of concentration or desire will induce a phone to ring. The caller's initiative is everything.

The Ultimate Caller, of course, is God.¹ To fully understand a call to ministry, we must first occupy ourselves with the Caller and the nature of his calls. As the Apostle Paul writes, God has "called us to a holy calling" (2Ti 1:9). Our self-understanding as believers is fundamentally wrapped up in the idea that we are called by the one who calls.

God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1Co 1:9)

And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Ro 8:30)

But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2Th 2:13-14)

Pastor and theologian Sinclair Ferguson writes, "One of the New Testament's most frequent one-word descriptions of the Christian is that he is 'called.'"²

The calling referenced in these passages is not a call to vocational ministry. It is something much more profound and fundamental, what theologians refer to as the effective (or effectual) call. Wayne Grudem defines it as follows, "Effective calling is an act of God the Father, speaking through the human proclamation of the gospel, in which he summons people to himself in such a way that they respond in saving faith."³

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If we are going to truly understand the importance of calling, we need to grasp that the impetus to call us originates within the mind and intention of a wise, loving, and sovereign God. And before he calls us to ministry, he calls us to himself.

The Instrument of the Call—The Gospel

As Dr. Grudem mentions above, the gospel call comes through the agency of the gospel. The Apostle Paul gives a number of exhilarating encapsulations of the gospel in his epistles. To the Ephesian church he writes,

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph 2:1–10)

This densely rich discourse encapsulates the wonderful good news which comes from the Caller to the called. But the gospel isn't just good news. It is the only message that matters to us who are "dead in trespasses and sins" and who in ourselves are the rightful inheritors of God's wrath. Furthermore, our actions, while not exclusively evil, have no value to gain God's approval. In fact, we relish the very pursuits that would hasten our ultimate destruction. Absent the gospel, the Caller is our enemy and we live hostile to what he has to say.

Yet it was into this very state that the Caller spoke and the call

of the gospel came. This call came not as an audible voice or angelic vision. It came in a personal visitation—the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14). But you won’t find the call of God solely in the teachings of Jesus Christ or his sinless life. Jesus came ultimately to yield his life on the cross in ransom for ours—to restore by his own sinless blood the lines of communication and fellowship that were severed because of our sin. It is through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ that a connection to the Caller is established. And by that connection our eyes and ears are opened and the ongoing callings of God are heard and heeded.

The gospel is a call out of something: the bondage and blindness of sin. And it is a call into something: renewed fellowship with the God who created us. It is the instrument by which God issues his effective call to us and we are brought to new life and into union with Christ by grace (Eph 2:5). Nineteenth-century pastor Charles Spurgeon discovered this grace of God’s call in a memorable manner. He writes,

One week-night, when I was sitting in the house of God, I was not thinking much about the preacher’s sermon, for I did not believe it. The thought struck me, *How did you come to be a Christian?* I sought the Lord. *But how did you come to seek the Lord?* The truth flashed across my mind in a moment—I should not have sought him unless there had been some previous influence in my mind to make me seek him. *I prayed*, thought I, but then I asked myself, *How came I to pray?* I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. *How came I to read the Scriptures?* I did read them, but what led me to do so? Then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that he was the Author of my faith, and so the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day, and I desire to make this my constant confession, “I ascribe my change wholly to God.”⁴

Spurgeon’s biblically informed thought process led him to a staggering conclusion. God is “at the bottom of it all.” While the immediate intent of the gospel is to rescue us, the gospel is not ultimately about us. It is about God and his glory. After setting forth

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the wonders of the gospel, Paul did not focus the amazement of his Ephesian readership on their own change in status due to God's effective calling, but rather on the glory of the Caller: "so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:7, emphasis added).

Called Through the Gospel

The Gospel Has the Cross at Its Core. The Caller's summons is simultaneously for the sake of his glory and our salvation. What joins the glory of the Caller and the need of the called is the cross of Christ. In the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ, the sin which stood as enmity between Caller and called was forever removed by (and this is amazing grace!) the unilateral and uninvited action of the Caller. That's what Spurgeon meant by "the doctrine of grace"—God glorifying himself through saving us.

As the cross is central to the gospel, the gospel is central to our calling. The gospel establishes a relationship—an unbreakable line of communication—between Caller and called, as well as an ability to respond to future callings. For the man pondering a call to ministry, a firm grip on the gospel is vital. Edmund Clowney gets it right:

There is no call to the ministry that is not first a call to Christ. You dare not lift your hands to place God's name in blessing on his people until you have first clasped them in penitent petition for his saving grace. Until you have done that the issue you face is not really your call to the ministry. It is your call to Christ.⁵

Your question of calling is not merely subsequent to the call to Christ. It is essentially tied to it. Because our primary call is secured through the gospel by the cross, we can rejoice in the exploration of a ministry call.

The Gospel Establishes the Caller as the Focus of Any Sense of Calling. Does your sense of call orbit around your abilities, vision, or performance? The gospel call says more about the glory and grace of God than it does about us. When God calls a man to ministry, the man will do well to remember that both his salvation and his service come from God and are aimed at returning us to

God. As Os Guinness says, “First and foremost we are called to Someone (God), not to something (such as motherhood, politics, or teaching) or to somewhere (such as the inner city or Outer Mongolia).”⁶

I know someone who once received a phone call in the middle of the night from the President of the United States. This man was working for the President and had become ill. The President discovered he was sick and called to inquire how he was doing. The gesture was deeply touching to the man, for while it said little about himself, it said much about the caller.

In far more profound fashion our call, too, says little about us, but much about the Caller.

The Gospel Fixes Our Identity in Christ, Not in a Call to Ministry. John Calvin wrote, “Nobody may be called to the office of teaching except those God has already chosen in some way.”⁷ All the things we are universally called to be as Christians—holy and loving servants, disciples, brothers, sufferers, witnesses, etc.—are rooted in our being chosen by God and united with Christ. Callings such as these, which we could not fulfill in the natural, become possible when we are united with Christ through the cross. I am one with Christ, and no matter what happens with any specific sense of calling I may have, the most important and meaningful thing about me is the essential reality of my union with Christ.

The Gospel Promises Sufficient Grace to Hear and Respond to Any Call to Ministry. If God was able to reach a blind fool, is it hard for him to communicate his will to one whose heart he has opened to his voice? If God was able to bring saving power to bear on a sin-dead soul, is it difficult for him to equip and empower his servant for the work of ministry? If God was inclined to extend mercy to an evil and rebellious sinner, will he not faithfully lead his precious child into that role in the Kingdom of God which is best for him?

The Gospel Becomes the Message of Ministry. Leaders are given to ensure the gospel is preached and applied in the daily life of the church. The purpose of ministry proceeds from and orbits around the *evangelion*, the gospel. Remove the gospel, and authentic biblical ministry disappears. D.A. Carson writes,

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It is now commonplace to confess that evangelicalism is fragmenting. To the extent that this is true, it is utterly imperative that we self-consciously focus on what is central—on the gospel of Jesus Christ. That means we must resolve “to know nothing ... except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1Co 2:2) in exactly the same way that Paul made that resolution. This will shape our vision of ministry as much as it will shape our grasp of the centrality of the gospel.⁸

The Gospel Secures a Place for Us in God’s Plan, Regardless of Role. Are you wondering when you’ll get off the bench and into the big game? Do you realize that the works of ministry (loving God and others, witnessing, serving in the local church, discipleship, etc.) are all expressions of the work of the cross in our lives, not a specific ministry call? As a believer, you already have a full-time ministry: to have an impact in this world. As we will see, the call to ministry does contain unique features, but those features are an enhancement of a life already transformed by the gospel of Christ.

To enter the process of exploring a ministry call is not to pine away in despair as you watch your biological clock of ministry ticking down. It is to rejoice in the cross and live a life that proclaims the gospel. The gospel is the message of every Christian’s calling, but it is far more. It is the key, the heart, the essence, of the one call that really matters: the Caller calling sinners to himself. Whatever the Caller speaks to you in the future, he has, in the cross, already spoken the most important thing he could say to you.

In light of the undeserved gospel call to sinners such as you and me, the question that should most intrigue us is a question about God himself:

How did he do that?



The Church—The Context of the Call

We have seen that the effective call of God to saving faith through the instrument of the gospel is the foundation of any call of God on a man's life. Keeping this "first thing first" ensures the emphasis is always on the Caller, not the one being called. A gospel-centered view of any call to ministry provides security not only when exploring a call, but in the trials of ministry itself.

"Ministry itself." The phrase presupposes some common understanding of what ministry is and how it takes place. Thus, our next task is to establish such an understanding.

The Caller Invites All Believers Into Ministry

Throughout our history, we humans have proven quite adept at finding any presumed needle of superiority—whether race, class, income, education, position, or something else—in our haystack of similarities. Yet into this menagerie of competing classes, the Caller introduced a revolutionary idea: leaders and followers who, though called to different roles, are equally loved and equally valued by the Caller.

One of the great doctrines recovered during the Reformation was the priesthood of all believers. Passages such as 1 Peter 2:9 ("you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood") and 1 Corinthians 12:12–27 (Paul's analogy of Christians as members of one body, each being essential to the whole) break down sacred/secular distinctions. Because all ministry callings are equally rooted in the call to Christ, formal or vocational ministry is not more sacred than other ministry. A. W. Tozer hits the mark: "It is not what a man does that determines whether his work is sacred or secular, it is why he does it."⁹

The Caller Sets Ministry in the Local Church

But this wonderful vision of multifarious ministry becomes seriously flawed if not located in the proper biblical context for ministry: the local church. The Caller doesn't call men to ministry in isolation. The need for ministry exists because there is a context for ministry: the church.

In the individualistic culture of Western Christianity, in particular, the institution of the church is being replaced by the institu-

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tion of the self-contained believer. There is even a doctrine emerging that sees Christian leadership as entirely divorced from the local church.

Any notion that the Christian journey can be reduced to “me and Jesus walking alone” ignores both the explicit teaching of Scripture (Jn 13:34–35; Col 3:12–17; 1Pe 2:1–12; 1Jn 4:7–12) and the magnificent tide of redemptive history. God established the local church near the very heart of all he is doing through the gospel in the world.

Consider these words from notable men of God. Dr. R.C. Sproul has called the church “the most important institution on this planet.”¹⁰ A century earlier, Charles Spurgeon called her “the dearest place on earth.”¹¹ John Stott warns, “More than ever we need to catch the biblical vision of the church.”¹² Elton Trueblood wrote, “Perhaps the greatest single weakness of the contemporary Christian Church is that millions of supposed members are not really involved at all and, what is worse, do not think it strange that they are not.”¹³

What place does the local church hold in your sense of call? Where do you see it in relation to your ministry future? As essential?...optional?...irrelevant? Is a local church, to you, more than just a logical place to send your resume? What does your present involvement with the local church say about your biblical priorities? Is the church, in your eyes, “the most important institution on this planet”?

In his classic text, *The Reformed Pastor*, Puritan divine Richard Baxter issues this challenge.

Nor is a man fitted to be a minister of Christ who does not have the proper public spirit towards the Church. He needs to delight in its beauty, long for its happiness, seek for its good, and rejoice in its welfare. He must be willing to spend and to be spent for the sake of the Church.¹⁴

(Here, suffice it to say that all mentions in this booklet of the Church are made in light of the biblical expectation that each member of the *universal* Church is to be joined to and actively participating in a *particular* church, a local expression of the Church, the Bride of Christ.)

When a passion for the church is added to a grounding in the gospel, a proper understanding of ministry “calling” begins to form. *Every call to ministry must have at its core a passion for the furtherance of the gospel through the primary means of the local church.*

The Caller Establishes Leaders Within This Priesthood of Believers

With a wisdom that defies our analysis, God has chosen to lead his Church through limited and fallible men. God’s plan of redemption, beginning in the Old Testament, has always involved raising up leaders for his people. From the twelve Apostles to the pastor of the church down the street, God’s children have always functioned under the delegated leadership of called men. An understanding of the church that does not presume it is led by men called to the task of leadership is foreign to Scripture.

We can be thankful that the Caller has not left it to the Church to determine how church leaders are to function or be selected. From examples in the Old Testament, through the experience of the Apostolic Church, to explicit teachings on church leadership in the pastoral epistles, the Bible is clear on God’s standards for the ministry of leadership. Without over-simplifying, there are two bright cords of truth that run through the fabric of teaching on leadership in the New Testament.

It Is a Leadership of Grace. God’s treasury of grace is discovered in the most extraordinary places. One place grace shines through is in the gift of church leadership. Within some men, God deposits grace in the form of a gift to lead the church.

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Ro 12:6–8, emphasis added)

God has broadly spread his gifts throughout the church, not merely among a few key individuals. Yet for some there is a particular gift of leadership that is not given to all. Those with this gift are to be identified, and encouraged to express and exercise that gift.

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The “priesthood of all believers” includes some “priests” who lead.

Note also that our gifts are based upon a prior grace, a “grace given to us.” One way God bestows his grace is through particular gifts, and we are called to “use them.” The gift of leadership can be understood as a particular grace to lead, and to lead “with zeal.” But as a prior grace, it is identifiable before a man steps into ministry. That is, the church is to select leaders not from among the merely willing, or experienced, or trained, or faithful, as valuable as these traits are. The church selects its leaders based upon evident grace, a grace present *prior to a formal call to the ministry*.

So often, leadership identification or training begins with education, charisma, or need. But the call to lead is God’s to give. While we are called to participate in its identification and development, it is not ours to manufacture or impose. Bringing men into ministry is not about reviewing GPAs, interviewing candidates, or filling pulpits. It is a glorious process of discovering a deposit of grace, a grace that empowers men to manifest compelling evidence of the call to lead.

One church I greatly respect was ably led by a man who had pastored the flock faithfully for years. But within the church was another man whose leadership gifting was obviously more suited to lead the church...and he just happened to be the pastor’s son. Because the father’s passion for the church is greater than his passion for his call, he gladly turned the leadership over to his son and now serves as an assistant pastor, led by the man whose diapers he once changed.

This is holy ground, for it brings us into the realm of the sovereign Caller, the One whose summons is never barren, but always delivers the necessary grace. The Caller bids, and then empowers. He does it for his glory and for his passion, the Church. In this holy realm we find security—no need to strive, prove our talent, or protect our position.¹⁵ We can trust the giver of gifts to place us according to our gifts. As Edmund Clowney puts it, “Your sphere of action, your ministry in the service of Christ, is marked out by the gifts Christ has given you.”¹⁶

It Is a Leadership of Servanthood. Leadership is a mandate to serve (Mk 10:42–45). A leader is a Christian who has been summoned to serve God’s people. This is his highest privilege and the

entire point of his calling. It keeps him from becoming merely a “professional,” and moves him away from assuming that his leadership begins with his rights. Few things are more grievous than leaders who drift from the nobility of their call into self-promotion, self-preservation, or self-indulgence in the ministry.

Consider the following perspective from D.A. Carson:

As someone who has taught seminary students for more than 15 years, I worry about the rising number of seminarians who, when asked where and how they think they might best serve, respond with something like this: “Well, I think I would like to teach somewhere. Every time I have taught, people have told me I have done a pretty good job. I get a tremendous sense of fulfillment out of teaching the Bible. I think I could be satisfied teaching Scripture.”

How pathetic. I know pagans who find satisfaction and fulfillment by teaching nuclear physics. In any Christian view of life, self-fulfillment must never be permitted to become the controlling issue. The issue is service, the service of real people. The question is, “How can I be most useful?”, not, “How can I feel most useful?”¹⁷

Dr. Carson has invested much of his life in training men for the ministry. His perspective should sober us all. Often we say we want to serve God, when the way we live reveals that we expect him to serve us. What is the antidote for self-serving ministry? To live as a slave of Christ.

Slavery is one of the most pronounced and striking New Testament metaphors describing the identity of a Christian. We are slaves of God (1Pe 2:16), of Christ (1Co 7:22), and of one another (2Co 4:5). Jesus set slavery as the standard for all greatness in ministry.

You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mk 10:42–45)

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In his book, *Slave of Christ*, New Testament scholar Murray J. Harris gets at what the proper perspective of all Christians should be, particularly if they are cultivating a sense of calling to serve God's church.

How, then, could ordinary first-century Christians who held no positions of leadership in the church have found pleasure in being called the "slaves of Christ," especially since Christ himself had taught that to be a "slave" was the opposite of being "first," of having a position of dignity and honour (Mt 20:26–27)? Why did that title seem sweet, not sour, and dignified, not demeaning? The answer, I suggest, lies in the nature of the Master they were serving and in the example of slavery to God that he himself afforded.

The nature of any slavery is determined by the nature of the master. Who and what the master is, determines the status of the slave, the attitude of the slave, and the significance of the slave's work.... While for Christian leaders *doulos* was already a title of honour, it gained its positive connotations in the ears of all Christians because the divine Master they were serving was kind and generous and himself had blazed an exemplary trail of lowly service. What all the *douloi* of this *Kyrios* gained through being associated with him was not so much authority and power as unparalleled honour and the assurance that their service, whatever its nature, was of supreme value, simply because it was done for *him*.¹⁸

No wonder that various writers of the New Testament so often chose in their letters to refer to themselves as servants rather than Apostles, when in fact they were both. If the common first-century believer and the Apostle of the Lamb can both embrace servanthood as greatness, certainly you and I can.

Within God's priesthood of believers, how is the one who is called to lead called to serve? The Bible's teaching on humble servanthood suggests a profile that runs counter to worldly leadership. The called man:

- Serves where there is need, not just where he can express his gifts
- Serves to make those above him a success, not to develop his own success

- Is just as happy to use service to address his weaknesses as hone his strengths
- Seeks, by his own joy, to make the service of those around him a joy
- Uses the influence of his leadership gift to promote godliness in service, not his own agenda
- Serves with excellence, diligence, and faithfulness for the attention of Christ, not others
- Walks boldly on the path of sacrifice and treads cautiously on the path of promotion
- Will joyfully step back in order to let another man step forward

Does this reflect your approach to serving? Your approach to your call? Leadership is not first about me. It's about God. The goal is never personal success, but serving God's chosen ones. People are not the tools of our ministry or the means to our vision. Rather, "the people and their spiritual growth are God's purpose."¹⁹ Church leadership is not about opportunity, or advancement, or privilege, or platform. It is about following the example of the Savior, who laid down his life for the sheep.

The cords of grace and servanthood secure a man in his call, as well as in the season of exploration that leads up to it. Wherever you are in the process, these cords are meant to secure you.



Called to What?—The Content of the Call

Meet Reverend Cassidy, or Sisco to his friends. A newly licensed minister, Sisco is now qualified to officiate at weddings, conduct funerals, and perform baptisms.

Baptisms, however, are going to be tricky, given the Reverend's life-long fear of water. Prayer with Scripture meditation can do nothing to alleviate such a deep-seated condition. Fasting, repentance, and biblical counseling can't touch it.

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After all, Sisco Cassidy is a cat.

Apparently, Sisco's owner—maybe bored, cynical, and/or a fan of the absurd—submitted his name to some easy-ordination service. And one day, as Sisco stalked a bit of carpet fuzz, he was mysteriously transformed into an ordained minister, with all the rights pertaining thereunto. How long, I wonder, until he takes up golf?

While the specifics of this tale are fictional, more than one person has claimed to own an ordained pet. Certainly, ordination mills (intended for humans) abound. The Universal Life Church, for example, boasts more than 20 million ministers worldwide. Their website offers, "Free online ordinations. Just three minutes. Click here."²⁰

Even within Christianity, where the process of ordination is generally a bit more rigorous, there exists a great deal of confusion about what qualifies someone to be in church leadership. Is it training? Gifting? Character? Drive? No better way to make a living? Consider these realistic scenarios.²¹

- Lamont was raised a preacher's kid. While in college, he led the campus Christian fellowship and went on short-term missions trips. In seminary, he led Bible studies, taught the youth Sunday-school class at the church he attended, and still graduated with honors. Does Lamont's education, intellect, and experience now qualify him for local-church leadership?
- Stewart never graduated from high school. He left to enter the lucrative family business—dealing drugs. His father started it, and later his brother joined in, but neither of them had Stewart's particular talent. Then came an unexpected encounter with Christ, and Stewart was dramatically converted. The depth of his transformation produced an evangelistic zeal to reach out to the world of drugs and crime. Stewart became a favorite speaker among church groups. They loved to hear about his conversion and subsequent exploits for Christ. Wherever Stewart spoke, people were saved. Does his remarkable conversion, seemingly endless zeal, and obvious evangelistic effectiveness qualify Stewart for church leadership?

- Bob knows he's called. Someone once told him that the evidence of a divine calling to vocational ministry is that you can't be satisfied doing anything else. Bob has never liked his job, and he's thankful the Lord has used that outward confirmation to authenticate his call. The problem is that his call is not recognized by the leadership of the church he's attending. Is Bob called because he believes God has called him? Does Bob need to search until he finds a place where leaders will recognize his call?

We probably all know somebody who's a lot like one of these guys. Certainly there are many Christians who would look at lives such as theirs and happily affirm a call to vocational ministry.

For the Apostles, however, the goal was not simply to appoint leaders. It was to identify and appoint *qualified* leaders. The disaster of unqualified leadership (and disaster is not too strong a word) has hindered the church throughout its history. Nothing stifles the health of a local church or sidetracks its effectiveness more than the wrong man in the lead.

This raises three inseparable questions. What roles are leaders called to fill? What qualifications are leaders called to possess? What tasks are qualified men expected to perform?

Elders and Deacons

The Bible presents two clearly identifiable and distinct leadership roles in the local church: elder and deacon. While qualifications for both roles are found in Scripture, this booklet will give predominant attention to the role of eldership. This is the primary and determinative leadership role in the church, with deacons subordinate to and functioning in the service of elders (See Acts 6 for the genesis of the diaconate in the early church).²² While both roles must adhere to high standards of qualification and both find fulfillment in the service of the church (not in career development),²³ it appears that Scripture has left the specific functions of the diaconate to be defined by the elders.

What is an elder? When I was a kid with a robust imagination, elders were mysterious, gray-haired beings who lived in the basement of our church building. If church kids were bad, the elders

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would snatch them away to their concrete lair. Forced to sit quietly and read old, dusty, boring books, the kids would eventually morph into gray-headed elders largely indistinguishable from their captors. Given the behavior of the kids in our church, I surmised there would always be plenty of elders. So as a child, my one goal for church was clear: *Stay out of the basement.*

Fortunately, Scripture is less frightful and far more specific when it comes to elders. In the New Testament, “elder” is a category of office to which a gifted man is appointed based on evident character qualities. Although several descriptive role references are used for this office (bishop, overseer, pastor, etc), Scripture and church history seem to agree that they can all be used interchangeably to denote church leaders. (Note the differing use of these words by Paul, Peter, and Luke in Titus 1:5–7, 1Pe 5:1–2, Ac 20:28). In other words, “elder” refers to the office, while “pastor” and “overseer” (sometimes translated “bishop”) describe a particular expression of eldership—the role of a particular officeholder/elder.

The practicalities of church organization may allow for a range

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ²Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, ³sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? ⁶He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

1 Timothy 3:1–7

of vocational ministries within a specific church. But a biblical understanding of the divine call to ministry has as its clear focus the ministry of eldership. In principle and practice, eldership is where the call to lead is most solidly grounded in Scripture. Therefore, we must consider it the primary expression of any man’s call to ministry.

Noble Requirements for a Noble Task

The desire for eldership begins with setting the heart on “a noble task” (1Ti 3:1). But according to Paul, this noble task of eldership demands noble requirements. The qualifications for eldership in the church are most directly set forth in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9.

In practice, eldership evaluation often begins and ends with a kind of litmus test, a point-by-point application of the specific qualifications listed in these passages. While

each of these qualifications is necessary, such a rote approach misses the fact that nearly every page of the New Testament has implications for the qualifications of a leader. Beyond this, the overall tenor of the New Testament points to a central element that will be present in every man called to church leadership: a prior grace.

We discussed the prior grace of leadership at page 12. In 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 we again see clear references to the evidence of God's activity preceding any clear sense of call to vocational ministry. Look at 1 Timothy 3:2 and Paul's use of the present tense controlling verb "must be" (literally, "it is necessary to be") that is carried through this passage. Paul portrays these qualities as necessary prerequisites for the elder, not ones yet to be achieved.

In a stroke of inspiration, he draws together the specific evidences of grace found in a member who is called to eldership. But how do we know whether a man is just a solid disciple, or something more?

This, too, is simply a matter of grace. All men should function in the church by using the gifts God has given them. But the way those gifts bear fruit and serve God's people will differ. All men should have godly aspirations to serve God's church at the highest capacity of their gifting. But for most that capacity will not mean a full step into eldership-level ministry. Eldership, in a fundamental way, means that the grace on a man's life is expressing itself to such a degree that it elevates his call to the highest responsibilities of church leadership.²⁴ As one scholar notes, "For the [leader] today is really nothing more than an ordinary member of the church of Jesus Christ who is called to express his nature as 'man of God' in an especially high degree."²⁵

To rely on future possibilities is to ordain good and gifted men in the hope that before too long they will, perhaps, rise to the eldership standards of Scripture. This is both shortsighted and extremely dangerous. While we will never see the qualities of a called man *perfected* in anyone, they should be *presently residing* in a

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

Titus 1:5–9

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man who desires the noble task of eldership. As Charles Bridges reminds us, “The greatest and hardest preparation is within.”²⁶ The Caller reminds us that this preparation within is a work of grace that begins with him.

The qualifications for eldership cover who the man is and what the man can do. Both are essential in the call to lead the church as an elder. Some men of extraordinary character are simply not gifted in ways necessary to lead the church. Some men of incredible gifting possess character deficiencies that become evident through the inevitable testings that God brings to all his people. Neither a man’s character nor his gifting can be so strong as to compensate for a lack of the other. Both must be present and growing for a man to function in the call of church leadership. One experienced trainer and evaluator of leaders puts it simply, “God’s work in a man demonstrates God’s call of a man.”²⁷

So what does this biblically qualified elder do? Iron his robes? Rearrange his books? Make sure he gets a little “elding” in along the way? Thankfully, Scripture also provides a clear eldership job description, which can be broken down into five essential tasks.

Task 1—Lead the Church. Leading the church is a multifaceted responsibility.

- To lead means to govern: to make decisions that will shape the future of the church.
- To lead means to apply the gospel: to help unbelievers and believers see how the gospel speaks to their lives.
- To lead means to plan: to corral the vision into workable strategies that can make it a reality.
- To lead means to administrate: to turn strategies into plans that generally work as intended.
- To lead means to model: to set the example of what you want others to aspire to.

Specific leaders are always replaceable. Indeed, the wise elder will spend considerable time looking for and training his eventual replacement in ministry. He will also be willing to cede his leadership position to someone more qualified. So, while individual elders are changeable, God-ordained leadership is not. Thus, a man

who is walking out his eldership call with humility, integrity, and wisdom should receive the enthusiastic support of the people he leads. The fruit of godly leadership is vision, purpose, and vitality in the church. These things do not come any other way.

Task 2—Teach the Church.²⁸ One “non-character” qualification of this elder that sets him apart from other Christians is that he be “able to teach” (1Ti 3:2). The charge issued to every elder is splendidly summarized in the words of Paul to Timothy.

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. (2Ti 4:1–2)

Church leaders must teach and preach relentlessly, courageously, and patiently, executing their charge as ones who steward the very words of God. It is difficult to overstate the role of preaching in leading the church. Perhaps John MacArthur gets at this as well as anyone:

The God-ordained means to save, sanctify, and strengthen his church is preaching. The proclamation of the gospel is what elicits saving faith in those whom God has chosen (Ro 10:14). Through the preaching of the Word comes the knowledge of the truth that results in godliness (Jn 17:17; Ro 16:25; Eph 5:26). Preaching also encourages believers to live in the hope of eternal life, enabling them to endure suffering (Ac 14:21–22). The faithful preaching of the Word is the most important element of pastoral ministry.²⁹

While the New Testament cites no specific gift of preaching,³⁰ the prominence of preaching is unquestionable,³¹ clearly placing this noble duty at the heart of pastoral ministry. But having great ideas doesn’t make one a teacher. Nor does being a great speaker. The Bible understands preaching/teaching as a leadership function. Being *able* to teach is a qualification of eldership, and being an elder gives one the *right* to teach.

Leaders have both the privilege and duty to teach their people. To teach a congregation is to take hold of great authority. It is a solemn responsibility whose weight should humble

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all who presume they have something to say.

Task 3—Equip the Church. The Apostle Paul wrote,

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers,¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,¹³ until we all attain 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.

Ephesians 4:11–13

Here we see the elder/pastor in one of his most explicit roles, that of *equiper*. According to Paul, the leaders of the church exist for the express purpose of training others. The goal of this equipping is for the body to be built up (4:12b) and the unity of the faith to be advanced (4:13). In this way, the church is strengthened and unified in its gospel mission. In a healthy local church, leaders train people to minister! While every pastor wears multiple hats, the health and future of the church depend upon him transmitting sound doctrine and practice to others, who then impart them to yet others. “Pastoral care is the loving concern of Christ for his flock which he shows them by providing under-shepherds whose duty it is to equip the saints to minister care to each other.”³²

The old axiom, “every-member involvement,” is not simply a great goal. It is the basic definition of the church as the body of Christ (1Co 12:27; Ro 12:4–5).

Task 4—Protect the Church. The magnificent letter to the Ephesians is not a grand elaboration of pure doctrine. It is a pastoral, practical antidote for serious problems. We get insight into this local church’s struggles in the Pastoral Epistles, also written to the Ephesians. In that local church, a lack of godly leadership created a breeding ground for false teachers and bizarre doctrines (1Ti 1:3–7). This produced meaningless controversies, a devotion to myths, the obscuring of gender roles, and declining membership. Paul’s solution was straightforward: appoint elders and let them do their job. If church chaos is the problem and strength is the goal, local-church leadership is Paul’s solution.

Darius Salter once observed, “Just about any brand of heresy can be marketed in America if it is rightly packaged by the highly

committed.”³³ Thus, church leaders stand vigil to ensure that trends in the culture don’t displace truth in the church. Standing on the walls of the church to discern influences from within and without (Ac 20:29–30), the church leader is called to a delicate task. When a negative influence is detected, the ideology, error, or gimmick must be carefully exposed, but without stumbling those who have given in to its seductive appeals.

Heresy, factions from within, and oppression and temptation from without are the stuff of an elder’s inbox—and his prayer closet.

Task 5—Care for the Church. Though the church leader is called by God, he is called (in his capacity as a leader) to *people*. He must never forget that the church is not simply programs and problems, but the very objects of Christ’s love and redemption. A true leader loves both programs and people.

It is this task to care that gives rise to the image of the leader as pastor—shepherd of the sheep. One of the most helpful descriptions of the leader’s role as shepherd comes from Alexander Strauch’s book, *Biblical Eldership*.

The shepherd imagery blends the ideas of authority and leadership with self-sacrifice, tenderness, wisdom, hard work, loving care, and constant watchfulness. Shepherding requires long hours of work and complete attention—the shepherd must always be with the sheep. It demands knowledge of the sheep, good management skills, and courage in the face of danger. Most important, it demands love for the sheep. Thus, “to shepherd” means to govern the church of God, to provide leadership and guidance for the church, to teach and correct from God’s Word, and to provide protection from all dangers that threaten the life of the church.³⁴

Consider the mysteries of human experience: the childless couple who just experienced their third miscarriage; the aging single who still dreams of marriage; the hard-working provider who just lost a job; or the dying sinner confronting the certainty of judgment. Leadership immerses elders in the stuff of life. In those despairing moments, who is appointed to guide us through the inexplicable valleys to drink in the streams of God’s providence and goodness? The shepherds of the church. What a glorious

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display of God’s grace to create a special office for our help and care during times of trial!

If a man believes he is called to the ministry, he must see his potential calling in the context of the local church, where ministry is shaped and defined by Scripture. The call to ministry is a call to accountable servant-leadership, expressed most prominently in the office of church elder. It comes with specific tasks and real costs. We now turn our attention to the essential question of how to evaluate a man’s call.



The Calling Equation—Elements of the Call

I remember reading that the first computers used by NASA to put men on the moon were about as powerful as today’s pocket calculators. The idea of engineers standing around with slide rules calculating re-entry trajectories, while three guys sitting in a tin can equipped with booster rockets stared into the dark void of space, is unnerving. But it worked! Such is the predictive power of a good equation.

In guiding men through the exploration of a call, it can likewise be quite helpful to use an equation of sorts. The “Calling Equation” presented here is neither mathematically rigorous nor guaranteed to deliver unerringly accurate results; the glorious mystery of a man’s call precludes any formulaic, litmus-test process of decision-making.

Instead, the Calling Equation attempts to bring together the explicit and implicit criteria for ministry call as revealed in Scripture. It is meant to help objectively evaluate the subjective impressions, comparative talents, and varieties of experience that make each man’s journey of calling unique. Most importantly, as previously discussed, the Calling Equation points to how the grace of God is at work in a man to bring him into fruitful ministry. It is a quantifier of grace.

The Calling Equation is set out as follows:

The Grace of God will be seen in

CHARACTER
+
CAPABILITIES
+
CONDUCT IN THE HOME
+
CONFIRMATION IN THE CHURCH

This section is devoted to unpacking the Calling Equation.

Grace in Character

All Christians are called to live a holy life. This is an absolute and universal call. We are called to flee sin, resist the devil, and love God and others with all our hearts. If every believer is called to holiness, why is it necessary to spell out character qualifications for leaders? For several reasons.

- A leader specifically represents Christ before the world and before the church. A leader sets the standard of maturity and conduct in the church, a standard that must be “above reproach.”
- Paul called Timothy to guard his life and doctrine (1Ti 4:16), so the credibility of both could be passed to others through his ministry.
- The presence of indwelling sin presents an ongoing challenge to leaders in the form of selfish ambition and pride. No leader is exempt from the danger of these snares, or the various other temptations and trials that come in the service of God.
- Scripture provides for a leader’s disqualification based on character deficiencies. The potentially tragic impact of disqualification on a man’s life, family, and church, and on the witness of that church to the world, demands that a leader’s character be demonstrated in an ongoing way in the life of the church.
- Leadership is a taxing and often discouraging labor, and should not be thrust upon a man of immature character. As one writer has aptly put it,

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The Bible says much about a leader's character. It is interesting that it says more about what a leader is to be than it does about what he is to do. This is a good clue as to what God thinks about this important prerequisite. It does not matter how much education or how much experience a person has. If he does not meet qualifications of biblical morality, he is unfit to be a leader in God's church.³⁵

At pages 18–20 we highlighted the qualifications for eldership set out in 1 Timothy and Titus. Consider the priority God places on character in these key passages.

- 1) Above reproach and blameless (1Ti 3:2; Titus 1:6)
- 2) Sober-minded (1Ti 3:2)
- 3) Self-controlled (1Ti 3:2)
- 4) Respectable (1Ti 3:2)
- 5) Hospitable (1Ti 3:2; Titus 1:8)
- 6) Not given to drunkenness (1Ti 3:3, Titus 1:7)
- 7) Not violent (1Ti 3:3; Titus 1:7)
- 8) Gentle (1Ti 3:3)
- 9) Not quarrelsome (1Ti 3:3)
- 10) Not a lover of money or greedy for gain (1Ti 3:3; Titus 1:7)
- 11) Good reputation with outsiders (1Ti 3:7)
- 12) Not arrogant (Titus 1:7)
- 13) Not quick-tempered (Titus 1:7)
- 14) A lover of good (Titus 1:8)
- 15) Upright (Titus 1:8)
- 16) Holy (Titus 1:8)
- 17) Disciplined (Titus 1:8)
- 18) Possessing an exemplary lifestyle (1Ti 4:12)

The list is daunting. It's also non-negotiable. These passages vividly illustrate the scope of God's scrutiny for anyone aspiring to leadership within the local church.

There is an inescapable implication to these qualifications: true leadership models its message; biblical leadership is authenticated through character. A leader proclaims with two voices: one through lips, the other through life. (The epitome of this model is

Jesus Christ, the incarnated Word of God.) Together, these messages converge to create a solid platform of credibility and stature.

A second reason for character-driven leadership was summarized by Christ: “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher” (Lk 6:40). That is, the leader typically represents the high-water mark for the maturity that can be expected among the people of the church. Moreover, his strengths will become their strengths, his weaknesses their weaknesses. As John MacArthur has observed, “Whatever the leaders are, the people will become.”³⁶

Gentlemen, if you were in ministry, what would a church of people modeling your character look like? Would it look like the church God is building?

Grace in Capabilities

God’s grace in capabilities is revealed in both the desire to oversee God’s church and the demonstrated aptitude to tasks essential to governing responsibly. Alexander Strauch writes, “Desire alone is not enough; it must be matched by good character and spiritual capability.”³⁷ At a minimum, the following two capabilities are vital.

The Capability to Lead Through Teaching and Preaching Sound Doctrine. This involves both the gift of teaching and the grit of doctrinal study. The capacity to teach is the one clear distinction between the office of deacon and elder. But teaching isn’t simply about Bible knowledge or oratorical skill. To teach and to preach is to bring the expounded Word of God and sound doctrine to bear in compelling ways upon a congregation.

God’s people are led in a primary way through public ministry. It’s that simple. Many men love God’s Word, can lead effective discussions, can articulate clear doctrine, or are compelling speakers. But the grace of God to lead is expressed through the power of preaching that convicts hearts and provokes the faith of the congregation to unity in the mission of the church. Regarding the necessity of public gifts, Charles Spurgeon didn’t mince words: “Gentlemen, if you cannot preach, God did not call you to preach.”³⁸

Paul’s pastoral letters are written to churches battered and

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dizzied by the whirlwind of false teaching, faddish religion, and divisive controversies—churches in many ways not unlike those we all attend. So his essential instruction to church leaders is, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2Ti 2:15). This is a great summary of the leader’s responsibility toward teaching sound doctrine. It is hard work. It demands our best. And there is precious little room for error.

All too often, the study of doctrine is treated as an “I did that in seminary” credential for ministry rather than an essential ongoing task. Churches typically drift into error not because leaders pursue bad doctrine but because they neglect the regular pursuit of sound doctrine. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has observed that “those who are driven with every wind of doctrine are those who are too lazy to study doctrine.”³⁹

The Capability to Lead Through Applied Discernment. The church must not be served pastorally, however, by theological contemplators, lest an otherwise admirable love of God and of learning detract from a focus on the flock. The study of doctrine must always flow through the leader into his care for the church.

This is the capability to lead through what might be called applied discernment: the grace to apply the fruit of personal doctrinal study and discernment, resulting in wisdom and vision that bring real maturity, first in a man’s own life and then in the life of the church. Such discernment-in-action knows when to express faith through bold initiatives, and when to express faith through patience and perseverance. It can distinguish between church issues that are critical and those that are nuisances. It can keep things simple without being simplistic. It knows how to be innovative rather than merely novel. It knows how to administrate the labors of the church without becoming bogged down in reactive maintenance. It knows where the church should be pliable and where it should stand strong.

Both of these capabilities must be present in the form of demonstrated fruit over time for a calling to be confirmed. As a leader matures, these capabilities will result in well-built and fruitful churches. And the man of God will know the experience of being a worker approved by God.

Grace for Conduct in the Home

A few summers back, I met with a man with formal theological training and experience who was attending our church. Interested in pursuing leadership opportunities within our church, he had called me to discover how to get involved. Over the course of our lunch, he mentioned that his wife attended another church. This was curious to me, in part because the church she attended taught doctrines contradictory to some he was espousing. Toward the conclusion of our time, I casually mentioned that any evaluation of his leadership suitability for our church would involve an inquiry into his leadership at home, specifically what his wife's choice of churches may reveal about his own leadership.

I haven't seen him since.

One of the most striking things about the biblical qualifications for leaders is how Scripture centers leadership validation in the home. Paul highlights this emphasis with a question that doesn't offer multiple-choice answers. "For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?" (1Ti 3:5). As a unique window into the life and character of a man, the home reveals, validates, and substantiates the evidence of a grace for leadership, in both an initial and an ongoing way.

Marriage and the family are biblically fashioned crucibles of sanctification for all men, whether they aspire to leadership or not. These things are meant by God to shape and reveal character. Also, the trappings and stature of ministry don't typically carry weight around the house. Teens don't care too much that you're a hero to many if you are a heel to them. And home is, in a sense, a miniature church, a laboratory where the values and ministry of a leader are tested. If they don't work at home, they won't work in the church.

Recently, I was part of an ordination service where a wife of a new pastor joyfully testified that her husband lives a consistent life; he is the same at home as he appears at church. No double standards, no duplicity. This spoke volumes to the church. It said even more about the God this man was ordained to represent. Perhaps this is why Paul is so specific about the leader's home:

- The husband of one wife (1Ti 3:2; Titus 1:6)
- Not a lover of money or greedy for gain (1Ti 3:3; Titus 1:7)

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- Manages his own household well (1Ti 3:4)
- Keeps his children submissive (1Ti 3:4)
- Is well thought of by outsiders (1Ti 3:7)
- Is upright (Titus 1:8)
- His children believe; are not open to charges of debauchery or insubordination (Titus 1:6)
- Is hospitable (1Ti 3:2; Titus 1:8)

Even a quick scan of this list reinforces the proposition that the quickest way to determine whether a man is qualified to lead a church is to assess how effectively he is leading his chief member (his wife) and his principal congregation (his kids). If led well, these voices will rise to confirm his selection and testify to his credibility. If led poorly, they will shadow his candidacy with gnawing questions and contradictory messages. In punctuating this point, John MacArthur says,

If you want to know whether a man lives an exemplary life, whether he is consistent, whether he can teach and model the truth, and whether he can lead people to salvation, to holiness, and to serve God, then look at the most intimate relationships in this life and see if he can do it there. Look at his family and you will find the people who know him best, who scrutinize him most closely. Ask them about the kind of man he is.⁴⁰

Grace in Confirmation

In his unsurpassed book on church leadership, *The Christian Ministry*, Charles Bridges offers this wise observation: “We may sometimes trace ministerial failure to the very threshold of the entrance into the work. Was the call to the sacred office clear in the order of the church, and according to the will of God?”⁴¹

Confirmation is the process by which a man’s subjective sense of call is objectively validated by biblically sanctioned authority using biblically appropriate criteria. Confirmation is not simply the personal conviction that one is called, but a *process of evaluation whereby God’s call is revealed to the man and made evident to those around him and over him.*

Bridges sees this dual aspect of confirmation as “a desire

[subjective], and fitness [objective], for the office.”⁴² John Piper has termed it “compulsion and qualification.”⁴³ I will continue to stand on Charles Bridges’ broad shoulders and address confirmation as both internal and external.⁴⁴ No matter how it’s described, though, the idea is the same: a personal sense is never enough to propel a man into ministry. There must be confirmation by those who have the responsibility and authority to render it.

So how should a man interpret an abiding desire for leadership in the church? First, he should celebrate its presence, for the Caller may indeed be speaking to his heart. Second, he should equally value both the internal and external manifestations of the call as expressions of God’s grace. Third, he should view the sense of call as *a mandate to prepare*, not as an authoritative summons. We can learn a lot from the example of George Whitefield.

From the time I first entered the University, especially from the time I knew what was true and undefiled Christianity, I entertained high thoughts of the importance of the ministerial office, and was not solicitous of what place should be prepared for me, but how I should be prepared for a place (emphasis added).⁴⁵

The life of Paul, of course, exemplifies this process of an internal call, followed by preparation, followed by an external confirmation. First, Paul encounters Christ in a spectacular way on the road to Damascus, and God speaks to him about his call and future (Ac 9:6, 15–16). Yet we don’t see Paul sent out until four chapters later, when considerable time has passed (Ac 13:1–3). When Paul is confirmed into ministry, it is by the Holy Spirit at work through the local eldership to which Paul was submitted. “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Ac 13:2).

Note two things in this seminal example. First, neither Saul nor Barnabas sent themselves. Their ministry was set apart, not personally launched. Second, both Saul and Barnabas positioned themselves to be known, evaluated, and equipped under God-ordained leadership. They weren’t free-agent apostles looking for sponsors or “ministry partners.” Their prior activity was largely in preparation and in service to the church where they belonged. When confirmed to ministry it was as “known men.” Their emer-

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gence into ministry was a holy setting-apart, not an ambitious stepping-out. God was honored and the church was served through an internal call confirmed externally.

Sad to say, it wasn't that way for Armand.

Armand's conversion was so dramatic that he naturally assumed God had big plans for him. Being a strong man with a strong personality, he was surely capable of being as productive in vocational ministry as he was in the law firm. Or so he thought. Armand's outspoken manner and crisply expressed opinions were regularly mistaken for evidence of leadership gifting. No wonder that the less discerning began encouraging him to plant a church.

Time passed and Armand, incredulous over the fact that he had not yet been formally approached to plant a church, became frustrated with the lack of opportunities available in his denomination. The leadership just didn't seem to appreciate his gift or know how to utilize his style of leadership. Meanwhile, Armand's pastors, noticing significant deficiencies in his marriage, were becoming concerned for his family. Yet their appeals fell on deaf ears. Armand just thought they were into conformity and wanted to create "cookie cutter" leaders. Armand wanted *impact*; they were appealing for process.

Eventually Armand left the church and enrolled in Bible school, completing the program in record time. After graduation, he started a church in the city where he had grown up. The church grew quickly under his aggressive leadership, but the unique pressures of church planting soon revealed the cracks in himself and his family. Conflict in the home became more frequent and intense. His wife showed signs of emotional withdrawal.

Soon the gossip started, church members took sides, people left, and finally Armand fled. He was exhausted, angry, and just wanted out. Now he is selling insurance and refuses to attend church at all.

There are hundreds of tragic stories like this, legacies of unchecked ambition. The drive of men like Armand downgrades the input of others. It claims the right to self-appointment and self-anointing, the unilateral definition of one's own call. Armed with desire, intelligence, and drive, too many people leap to the self-serving conclusion that these are the only

attributes God requires. The Bible teaches otherwise.

Oswald Sanders asked, “Should it not be the office that seeks the man, rather than the man the office?”⁴⁶

The church’s role in confirming the call protects the office of ministry from the ambitions of men. But it is meant to do more than that. External confirmation gives a man confidence that he is not deceiving himself regarding his qualifications for ministry. It allows him to step into the authority of his office having already proved himself, thus freeing him to do the work of ministry rather than the work of campaigning for the allegiance of the people. And it establishes a secure relationship between the people and the leader. Both know there is external evaluation and oversight to a man’s leadership and the church’s response to that leadership. This is a grace many pastors long to experience.

The Calling Equation is meant to serve a man looking into the dark void of the future, wondering if his little vessel of calling could really make it into the atmosphere of ministry without burning up or skipping off into oblivion. It’s not rocket science, but it might just get you home.



Heart Check—Ambition and the Call

Ambition, in one sense of the word, is darkly epitomized by dictators, former corporate titans serving time, and the pastor who splits his church to expand his empire. Shakespeare’s stark admonition captures this negative perspective: “I charge thee, fling away ambition: By that sin fell the angels.”⁴⁷

Now consider Stanley, a young, eager servant of the Lord. Since the day he was saved, Stanley has had great aspirations for God. He wants to develop his gifts, help to spread the gospel to the far nations of the world, and see God glorified through his life. He attends a church, leads a small group well, and loves to study God’s Word and read biographies of Christians. His pastor likes to say he steers Stanley clear of all flammables, for “Stanley is on fire for God!”

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Is Stanley ambitious? You bet he is, and we should thank God for it.

What, then, is this thing called ambition? Surely it is a powerful force, able even to topple Cherubim and level churches. But is it by definition unholy? Is it to be flung away as something unclean? Such a view confuses many a man truly called to ministry, and hinders him from openly discussing his sense of calling.

Far better to see ambition as somewhat like dynamite, capable of great good or great evil, and thus to be handled with caution, wisdom, and a regimen of safeguards. For the man sensing a call should seek an understanding of godly ambition, which may be defined as the desire to use one's gifts for God's will and glory. Without godly ambition, men like Stanley don't move forward, churches aren't planted, and nations aren't reached. Godly ambition has always been central to the furtherance of the gospel.

The Gospel clarifies the relationship between humility and ambition

When Paul wanted to help Timothy discover men called to be overseers, he began with the ambition of the man. "The saying is trustworthy: if anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task" (1Ti 3:1).

This verse suggests that such an aspiration and desire, when pure, is as noble as the task itself. Yet it is the very nobility of the task that compels us to examine the desire. For regarding our self-estimation, Paul tells us in Romans 12:3, not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought, but to think with sober judgment. Yet at the same time, much of the New Testament celebrates the fruit of men clearly ambitious for God's glory through the gospel.

How do we reconcile the call to be humble with legitimate ambitions for vocational ministry?

First, we need to recognize that the desire to exercise initiative is placed in all of us by God as his image-bearers. The desire to lead flows out of the dominion call given to Adam by God. Humans are to subdue the earth and exercise dominion as stewards of God's creation (Gen 1:28). It is godly ambition that motivates a man to bring order and direction to life, and to use the gifts God has given him for that purpose. This is a holy call because it reflects our Creator and works to express his rule and glory. Brothers, please

see your sense of call as good and holy, and worship God for it.

But, of course, something happened in Eden. Sin corrupted the call. Adam's desire to serve God was replaced by Adam's desire to replace God. A desire that was once exclusively Godward turned inward, and selfish ambition was born in man.

Selfish ambition places ourselves at the center of our drives and dreams. Rather than promoting God's order and glory, it breeds corruption and confusion. As Jonathan Edwards describes it,

The ruin that the fall brought upon the soul of man consists very much in his losing the nobler and more benevolent principles of his nature, and falling wholly under the power and government of self-love. Before, and as God created him, he was exalted, and noble, and generous; but now he is debased, and ignoble, and selfish. Immediately upon the fall, the mind of man shrank from its primitive greatness and expandedness, to an exceeding smallness and contractedness.⁴⁸

James describes how selfish ambition spins our lives into an ever-tightening orbit of sin. "But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice" (Jas 3:14–16). E. Stanley Jones provides, in effect, an abridged version: "We grow small trying to be great."⁴⁹

Take Rocco and Norm, for example. Rocco just found out that Norm was asked to lead a small group. Rather than rejoicing in his friend's faithfulness and seizing the opportunity to honor him in this important role, Rocco is struggling. *Don't the pastors know I've been around longer? Do they really understand Norm's weaknesses? Is this best for the church? In other words, Why Norm and not me?!*

Jealousy is simply selfish ambition frustrated. It affects what we want and think, and what we say and do. No called man—indeed, no sinner—is immune from the temptation of selfish ambition. Its roots snake deep into each of our hearts.

But thanks be to God, that's not the end of the story! The gospel is "folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1Co 1:18). The gospel can redeem ambition

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and move God back to the center of our desire. How does the gospel give us confidence for godly ambition?

The Gospel reminds us that God controls all those in positions of power

“The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will” (Pro 21:1). The gospel celebrates the fact that the fall of man did not lead to the fall of God. In our battle with selfish ambition, the truth of God’s sovereignty is constantly under attack. The great deception born of selfish ambition is that we can achieve ministry position and success by our own politicking, cleverness, and strength, or that the absence of ministry or changes in ministry are the result of some disruption in God’s control.

Not true. The Sovereign One oversees everything, from sparrows in flight to the execution of his own Son. All promotions or pauses in ministry are the direct and inevitable result of his choice. This was wonderfully expressed by Charles Spurgeon upon accepting the call to the pastorate of New Park Street Church in London (at 20 years old!).

I sought not to come to you, for I was a minister of an obscure but affectionate people. I never solicited advancement. The first note of invitation from your deacons came quite unlooked-for, and I trembled at the idea of preaching in London. I could not understand how it had come about, and even now I am filled with astonishment at the wondrous Providence. I would wish to give myself into the hands of our covenant God, whose wisdom directs all things. He shall choose for me; and so far as I can judge, this is his choice.⁵⁰

The Gospel reminds us that the path to greatness is not in ascending, but descending

In saving us, Christ emptied himself for us. The humility of Christ is not only a model for ministry. It exposes and shames any selfish ambition as a motivation for calling. The humility of Christ is the basis for our patience and contentment with the process of confirming a call. The gospel tells us that obscurity is an opportunity to grow character and deepen faith. In emptying himself, Christ pointed to the path of eternal greatness. It is not the way of ascending and self-promotion, but the way of descending and self-emptying. This is the path our Savior walked, and calls us to follow.

In following the Savior we come, invariably and repeatedly, to the cross. There, we are stripped of any pretext of self. There, because of him and his finished work, we find not simply a career path, or gift identification, or success strategy. We find peace with God.

The Gospel reminds us that we can be content with God's approval

Have your dreams for ministry been fulfilled? Or do you feel like you're once again sitting on the bench as another season slips by? Do you find yourself, even if it's just in your heart, pressing or contending for a place or position?

Remember, at this moment, you possess the only thing that can be brought before the Father to satisfy his holy and unchanging demands. The gospel announces the amazing transfer of Christ's righteousness for your sin, and with that transfer, God's approval. Is not the certainty of God's ultimate approval of you far more glorious than any ministry position anyone could ever hold? If you find yourself discontent due to unmet expectations or unsatisfied ambitions, take heart from the words of Thomas Watson: "If we have not what we desire, we have more than we deserve."⁵¹

Ministry is so very temporary. The gift of righteousness is eternal! Spend your days mining the glories of that reality and you will find your soul growing large with God. And listen to Charles Spurgeon, who "had it all" in ministry, but was able to weigh it in light of eternity.

If you happen to have lived in obscurity, and have never entered the lists for honors among your fellow-men, be content to run well your own course and fulfill truly your own vocation. To lack fame is not the most grievous of ills; it is worse to have it like the snow, that whitens the ground in the morning, and disappears in the heat of the day. What matters it to a dead man that men are talking of him?⁵²

Brothers, the gospel imparts to us the miracle of contented ambition. While the man called to ministry must ever contend against selfish ambition, he need not fear the genuine desires God has placed in his heart. And while he may not have all he wants in ministry, he can rest in the wise and kind providence of God, who has already given him more than he deserves.

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What Do I Do Now?—Preparation for the Call

When you think of Olympic competition, what comes to mind? Gold medals and world records? The fresh minting of overnight sports celebrities? Is it a singular memory—Franz Klammer careening all over a ski slope in an epic downhill run...Michael Johnson blistering the field and the world record in the 200 meters...the USA hockey team upsetting the Soviet Union? Or is it something more obscure—perhaps a dramatic comeback in curling, or a marathon battle in badminton? For most of us, the Olympics represent a chance to become instant experts in sports we've never heard of, and to live and die with heroes who come out of nowhere to capture our attention and affection.

What we don't see, of course, is the preparation it took simply to become Olympians, and *this* is the true story of Olympic success. These athletes hardly come out of nowhere. A three-minute filler video about the newest Olympic phenom can't begin to communicate the long years of devotion, discipline, patience, training, preparation, and vision that went before. Indeed, for most Olympians, simply having done the work necessary to qualify for the Games—never mind the medal stand, the Wheaties box, or the lucrative endorsement contract—represents the achievement of a lifetime.

An athlete's preparation in the past makes possible his exceptional performance in the present. In this regard, what is true for the athlete is true for the elder.

Before effectiveness in ministry come devotion, discipline, patience, training, preparation, and vision. There are no shortcuts. A man becomes a pastor through the grace of God's calling and gifting and the diligent appropriation of that grace over time. When a pastor stands at the pulpit, trains men to come alongside him in ministry, or counsels a couple in need, success will depend on the man he has become.

This closing section is for men who remain uncertain about a call to vocational ministry and want to use this season of exploration—of *preparation*—to maximum possible advantage.

What Do I Do with My Heart?—A High View of Humility

We have seen how the gospel helps us *understand* ambition. Here, we will find out what to *do* about the ever-present and intertwined issues of ambition and humility.

If you've read this far, you probably have some level of desire to pursue a ministry call. Desires, of course, are an expression of our hearts which, as Christians, are pliable to God yet tainted with remaining sin. We can only trust our desires as far as we can trust our hearts, which is not far. So a called man will possess, in addition to desire, a desire to examine that desire.

John Owen wrote, "How few truly seek to know themselves, or possess the courage to do so."⁵³ A called man must be among those that not only possess that courage, but use it regularly. Let's use it now.

When James speaks of the chaos that flows from pride and selfish ambition, he also offers the antidote: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (Jas 4:6). The often intense desires of calling must be governed by the damper of humility. Humility in regard to our desires is expressed in several ways.

Humility Expresses Itself in Regular Evaluation of Our Desires and the Hold They Have on Our Life. We tend to think of desires as essentially benign, rating their "goodness" or "badness" on the basis of the subject matter. If I want to be powerful, that's bad. If I want to preach the gospel, that's good. Yet the moral standing of desires does not lie in what they leap *toward*, but what they spring *from*. It's not a matter of intended destination (which is future and merely potential), but actual origin (which is immediate and factual). Desires are not evaluated by goal, but by motivation.

As with all things involving the human heart, of course, vigilance is vital. The tenacity of indwelling sin requires us to reassess our desires on a regular basis. Desires have a way of expanding and drifting beyond their proper bounds. They may increase in intensity, or shift focus gradually and almost imperceptibly. Secondary desires that are not so honorable can spring up alongside honorable ones, like tares among the wheat. Because of indwelling sin, the most God-focused desires, if not regularly reassessed, will always tend to become self-focused.

This is how godly ambition becomes tainted by selfish ambition. A man's desires come to possess their possessor. Indeed, the prob-

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lem for most Christians is not that they want bad things, but that they want good things more than they should, or for the wrong reasons. As David Powlison writes,

Natural desires for good things are meant to exist subordinate to our desire to please the Giver of gifts. Grasping that the evil lies in the ruling status of the desire, not the object, is frequently a turning point in self-understanding, in seeing the need for Christ's mercies, and in changing.... The moral issue always turns on whether the desire takes on a ruling status.⁵⁴

I have wrestled with this reality both in exploring my call and walking it out in ministry. People would say I'm highly motivated, having always had a deep desire to develop my talents and gifts. When I was growing up, I did it with sports. After I became a Christian, I did it with kingdom pursuits, seeking to explore and develop the gifts and callings God has given me by grace. But alongside this desire are other desires: to ascend in ministry rank, hold that position, and be applauded for my efforts. Even the desire to develop my gifts and calling has been mixed with self-dependence and pride. Like many called men, I live in a daily battle with selfish ambition.

Because of God's mercy and the faithful care of the men around me, selfish ambition is being thwarted in my life. The drive to elevate selfish desires and cravings to ruling status is being held at bay. But I know the battle is a daily one, that these wicked desires will not give up as long as I am here on earth. If we are to keep desires for ministry from becoming idols in our lives, humility is essential. As Jonathan Edwards put it,

[Humility] tends, in the first place, to prevent an *aspiring and ambitious behavior* amongst men. The man that is under the influence of an humble spirit, is content with such a situation amongst men as God is pleased to allot him, and is not greedy of honour, and does not affect to appear uppermost and exalted above his neighbors. He acts on the principle of that saying of the prophet (Jer 45:5) "Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not;" and also the injunction of the apostle (Ro 12:16), "Mind not high things."⁵⁵

Humility Expresses Itself by Making Our Desires Known and Accountable to Others. Men who sense a call to ministry often assume it is prideful to reveal that fact. While we don't want to be launching blog sites with our latest musings on why we think we're called, telling those who care for us and know us best often expresses and promotes humility, not pride. Wise and selective sharing protects us from the self-righteousness that could tempt us to think, "If you were really discerning I wouldn't need to tell you—you'd hear it from God." It also turns a season of desire into one of fellowship and discipleship, as conversations and accountability prevent our holy desires from devolving into self-absorption.

There is no identifiable pattern of desire that separates a true call from a presumptive call. I know pastors who count a sense of calling among their earliest memories. I know others whose "desire meter" had never risen above zero, and had to be exhorted to consider a calling. The men I'm thinking of, in both these categories, are on the pastoral team at our church. You'd be hard-pressed to identify which was which.

Humility Expresses Itself by Interpreting Our Desires as a Mandate to Prepare, Not a License to Launch. This gets at the difference between desires and leadings. Many men have seized ministry opportunities that seem to fit their desires only to find they are unprepared for the challenges. Such men place a desire to do above a desire to become.

At a key point in my calling journey, just as I was about to self-launch into ministry, God interrupted me by way of some very clear adjustment—first from timely input from men around and above me, but also from providential exposure to material that altered my course and thinking. I'll never forget the impact of reading Dr. Robert Clinton's book, *The Making of a Leader*, which details five developmental phases in a ministerial calling. One point in particular arrested me: God's approach is to work in you, and then through you.⁵⁶

Through Dr. Clinton's book, I saw that I had been trying to circumvent a process of preparation that God thought suitable for men like Moses, David, and Peter, but somehow didn't seem necessary for me. My drive for ministry decelerated like an F-16 when its

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tailhook catches the runway cable on an aircraft carrier. And for that, I will always be thankful.

Serving God is a holy calling. The wise servant recognizes that preparation is neither a waste of time nor a threshold to be crossed. It's a way of life, no matter where we are in the process.

Western culture emphasizes impact over maturity, a fact particularly relevant to younger men. We are right to rejoice when a young man wants to serve God in vocational ministry. But to launch anyone into ministry based on a church's need or an individual's potential, absent sufficient preparation of the man, is to render a significant disservice to all involved. Young men, be wary of any ministry opportunity that doesn't challenge you to prepare before you launch. Don't worry about time passing you by—our Sovereign God will not forget or neglect the work he is doing in you, or the place he's carving out for you. Remember the words of John Calvin: "In short, he prepares and fits us to enter on our course, and by his power leads us on to the end of the race."⁵⁷

Humility keeps the desires of our hearts from becoming sinful demands. It sets the priorities of God first in our lives. It brings our desires under the glaring light of Scripture and displays them before those who care for us. That's where those desires need to stay.

What Do I Do with My Experiences?—Providence and Process

Rarely does a man carry a sense of call without having some experience that validates that inner sense. It may be a level of satisfaction or fruitfulness in a particular sphere of ministry. It may be the encouragement of others. It may be a desire to do ministry or a lack of desire to do anything but ministry. It may be a series of events with God where there seems to be an imparting of tangible faith and vision. Taken together, these events and impressions produce a discernable "burden," a seemingly divine impression that motivates you in a certain direction.

Experience, of course, can be a fallible guide, subject to the same limited perspective and sinful propensities as all our motivations. Yet without some confirming experiences, a man won't seriously embrace the challenge of ministry. There are two important tests in stewarding the experiences, or burdens, that shape calling: the tests of *providence* and of *process*.

The Tests of Providence. A theological term for God’s active and benevolent sovereignty in the affairs of man, providence brings together the character of God and our life experiences under the banner of Romans 8:28: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

- Do you recognize the hand of God the Caller in placing the burden of calling in your life?
- Do you trust that where you are in life today—no matter how far it is from where you think you should be—does not limit God’s ability to accomplish his will in your life?
- Are you responding to your present situation with faith?
- Would you be known as a grateful man?
- Do you trust God to both clarify your call and confirm his direction?
- Are you content with the process you are in?
- Are you watching your doctrine and life closely (1Ti 4:16), making the kinds of investments in both the process of sanctification and the deepening of your doctrine that would testify that you are using this season of your life to its maximum benefit?

These are the tests of providence. They help teach us to love God more than we love what we do for God. They discourage selfish ambition, promote humility and faith, and position us to receive grace.

The Tests of Process. It’s so easy for us to assign to our experiences and burdens an authority that renders them untouchable and above evaluation. Not that we should ignore or reject these things, for they may well be an important means by which God directs us. But they are not the only means, nor are they authoritative.

Experiences and burdens must be subordinated to an objective process of evaluation and qualification based upon God’s Word. Wisdom sees experiences and burdens as invitations to do the following things:

- *Pray.* Do you consistently pray about your calling? A practical step: Schedule regular personal retreats where you are

able to both stoke your sense of call and lay it on the altar before the Lord.

- *Pursue counsel and evaluation.* Are you actively and consistently pursuing wisdom through the counsel of men who know you and your sense of call? A practical step: Develop regular times with your pastor where you take initiative to disclose weaknesses and sins, and invite his critique and insight into your personal life.
- *Study.* Are you deepening your theological well through a systematic study of sound doctrine and biblical theology? A practical step: Ask your pastor for a book list to study, and submit to a plan to complete that study over time.
- *Mature.* Would your life actually model, in an ongoing way, the qualities we discussed from 1 Timothy and Titus? A practical step: Seek regular accountability and correction with those closest to you, beginning with your spouse (if applicable). As Wayne Grudem says, “It is not optional that their lives be examples for others to follow; it is a requirement.”⁵⁸
- *Get your house in order.* Often the path into calling is a sacrificial one, where a man must live lean and flexible. Are you positioned in life to sacrifice to pursue your call? I know a number of men, for example, whose ability to act on an opportunity has been blocked by excessive debt. A practical step: Get rid of all the debt you can, and stay that way.
- *Patiently persevere.* Are you committed to waiting for God to bring you into ministry rather than you seizing the next reasonable opportunity? A practical step: Develop success in a vocation so you won’t be looking to the ministry to survive in life.

These tests of process are born of biblical wisdom and experience. At bottom, they do one simple thing. They keep us on the path of righteousness, so we can leave the destination to God. A calling to ministry is funny that way. You arrive there by pursuing other, more important goals. Just ask Andy.

Andy never felt called to do anything more than serve. When I first met him, he was setting up and tearing down for our Sunday-morning meetings in a rented high-school auditorium. Actually,

those first eight years, he filled more roles than I can remember. But as one year passed to the next, Andy labored on in faithful obscurity.

Over time, he began to occupy roles of greater responsibility. He had no sense of call to vocational ministry, but simply to serve his local church. He led a small group, and his effectiveness there led to other leadership responsibilities. He became a man who others, myself included, would seek out for wisdom. Yet his service to the church never compromised the priority of his marriage or family. Andy loved his wife and led his kids.

When the idea of ministry was introduced to Andy, he was visibly surprised. After all, his “desires” were simply to serve; he never imagined that his service might press this question forward. Andy didn’t yet understand that although he had not been preparing himself for ministry, God had.

Andy spent time considering his calling to pastoral ministry. In the meantime, a chorus of others weighed in, encouraging him toward this noble task. Then God met him as he prayed, thus linking the internal call to the external confirmation.

That was eleven years ago. Today, Andy is well known both inside and outside of our church for his ability to think, talk, and write in ways that provide genuine pastoral care. Yet Andy didn’t come into ministry by striving after it. He simply served where he was, completely unaware that God was about the business of constructing a pastor.

For some, their calling feels full and certain, an ever-present pulse that influences dreams and choices. For others, it is a slow dawning, as God works in the man before he reveals his intention to the man. But in each case the process is the same. No man achieves ministry by pursuing his ambition. He achieves it by pursuing God’s glory.

That’s what Andy did, and I’m very grateful. Not just because Andy is a pastor in our church. But because Andy is my pastor.

What Do I Do While I Wait?—Perseverance and Faith

In preparing this booklet, I have been sobered to realize that it will undoubtedly, to some extent, be an instrument of sorrow. For some men will read this and realize with sadness that they have not

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received the summons to vocational ministry. Others, who had thought they were within grasp of a long-desired call, will discover a gulf of inexperience, character deficiency, or independence. And some of you will recognize that God in his providence has, for you, made that gulf permanently uncrossable. To you, gentlemen, I say thank you for loving God enough to pursue calling this far. There is much fruit for you to bear in the callings God has placed in you. Pursue them with faith, diligence, and humility, and your life will bring much glory to God.

Yet I trust there is joy and hope for some of you here, as well. Because for every man who is truly called, the gulf will eventually be crossed. I have tried to give you some ways to work on that bridge, but only God can determine the timing of its completion. Until then, love God. Serve others. Deepen your doctrine. Invest in your local church. Grow in grace. And leave the rest to God. The ultimate test of a called man is whether he desires the advancement of the gospel more than the advancement of his own ministry. This is the constant, daily test for the called man. He will only pass it, one last and final time, when he passes from this earth to be with the Savior, who called him and made him faithful to that call.

A humble man is willing to have his name and gifts eclipsed, so that God's glory may be increased. He is content to be outshone by others in gifts and esteem, so that the crown of Christ may shine the brighter. This is the humble man's motto: "Let me decrease; let Christ increase." It is his desire that Christ should be exalted, and if this is effected, whoever is the instrument, he rejoices. "Some preach Christ of envy" (Php 1:15). They preached to take away some of Paul's hearers. "Well," says he, "Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice" (v 18). A humble Christian is content to be laid aside if God has any other tools to work with which may bring him more glory.⁵⁹

The Caller has spoken. His call rings clear. May this small contribution assist the Church in bringing forth those who will employ the call to exalt the Caller.

Endnotes

1. I am indebted for the concept of the Caller to Os Guinness, who makes a passing reference to God as “Caller” in his book, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville, TN: Word, 1998) p 93.
2. Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life: A Doctrinal Introduction* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1997) p 33
3. Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999) p 296
4. Charles Spurgeon quoted in John Piper, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God’s Delight in Being God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1991) pp 125–126.
5. Edmund P. Clowney, *Called to the Ministry* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1964) p 5
6. Os Guinness, *The Call*, p 31
7. John Calvin, *Acts*, The Crossway Classic Commentaries; Alister McGrath and J.I. Packer, eds. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1995) p 208
8. D.A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: An Exposition of Passages from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993) p 10
9. A.W. Tozer, quoted in *God’s Little Instruction Book for Dad* (Colorado Springs, CO: Honor Books, 1994) p 31.
10. R.C. Sproul, “Running the Race Before Us,” *Tabletalk* (date uncertain) p 7
11. Charles Spurgeon quoted in *Spurgeon at His Best*, compiled by Tom Carter (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988) p 32
12. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1979) pp 26–27
13. Elton Trueblood quoted in Bill Hull, *The Disciple-Making Pastor* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1988) p 19
14. Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1982) p 69
15. “George Barna conducted a survey of senior pastors from across various denominations. When asked if they believed they had the spiritual gift of leadership, only 6 percent responded yes. The fact that 94 percent of the senior pastors surveyed did not believe they were gifted to be leaders may explain the sense of desperation many church leaders express as they examine their ministry and its current effectiveness.” Henry and Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2001) p 31
16. Edmund P. Clowney, *Called to the Ministry*, p 28
17. D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992) pp 82–83

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18. Murray J. Harris, *Slave of Christ* (Leicester, England; Apollos, 1999) pp 135, 138
19. Henry and Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership*, p 273
20. Quoted language appeared at www.ulc.org as of 3/21/05.
21. Lamont, Stewart, and Bob, as well as Armand, Stanely, Rocco, and Norm, all of whom appear later in this booklet, are fictional characters. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental and unintentional.
22. In the church where I serve, the diaconate releases apostolic and pastoral ministry into more strategic tasks (prayer and ministry of the Word) by serving and caring for the church. Deacons are assistants to, not replacements for, the elders.
23. "We have a tendency to think that the biblical standards for deacons require less enforcement than the biblical standards for elders. But that is a serious mistake." Alexander Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 1992) p 104
24. See 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12:3–8
25. Joel Nederhood, "The Minister's Call," *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1986) p 39
26. George Herbert quoted in Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry: With an Inquiry into the Causes of its Inefficiency* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1991) p 62
27. Jeff Purswell, Dean of the Pastors College of Sovereign Grace Ministries, from his message, "Am I Called?"
28. A few points appearing in this paper have been drawn from portions of Dave Harvey, "Polity: Serving and Leading the Local Church," *Perspectives: Reflections on Doctrine and Practice in the Local Church*, No 2, March 2004 (Gaithersburg, MD: Sovereign Grace Ministries, 2004). The language of this section, in particular, is drawn from pp 13–14.
29. John MacArthur, Jr., "Preaching" in *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry*, John MacArthur, Jr., ed. (Dallas, TX: Word, 1995) p 250
30. "I do not believe that there is a gift of 'preaching' listed among the spiritual gifts in any of the 'gifts lists' in the New Testament... 1 Peter 4:10 speaks of the spiritual gift of *lalein*, 'speaking'. But I think this is a general term describing a whole category of 'speaking gifts'—teaching, evangelism, exhortation, and so on." Timothy Keller, "A Model for Preaching, Part 3: The Personal Aspect," *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Vol 13, No 2, Winter 1995, p 52

31. Mt 4:17; Mk 1:14; Lk 4:43; Ac 14:21–22; 1Co 1:17–25; 1Ti 4:13–14, 2Ti 4:1–4 to name just a few passages.
32. John Piper, *Pastoral Care: Purpose & Providers*, Audiotape of message given at Bethlehem Baptist Church, February 22, 1987, Cassette.
33. Darius Salter, *What Really Matters in Ministry: Profiling Pastoral Success in Flourishing Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990) p 109
34. Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Eldership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 1995) p 149
35. James M. George, “The Call to Pastoral Ministry,” in MacArthur, ed., *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry*, p 114.
36. John MacArthur, Jr. quoted in Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, p 70
37. Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, p 188
38. Charles Spurgeon quoted in Fred Smith, *Learning to Lead* (Waco, TX: Word, 1986) p 23
39. www.netword.jesusanswers.com home page as of 2/9/05 cited this quote as such: D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, quoted in *The Banner of Truth*, Aug/Sep 1986.
40. John MacArthur, Jr., “The Character of a Pastor,” in MacArthur, ed., *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry*, p 91
41. Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, p 90
42. *Ibid.*, p 94.
43. John Piper, “Is There Such a Thing as a Call to the Pastorate?” (a paper issued by Bethlehem Baptist Church), Minneapolis, MN, 19 September 1986.
44. Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, pp 91–92: “Our authority is derived jointly from God and from the Church—that is, originally from God—confirmed through the medium of the Church. *The external call* is a commission received from and recognized by the Church, according to the sacred and primitive order; not indeed qualifying the Minister, but accrediting him, whom God had internally and suitably qualified. This call communicates therefore only official authority. *The internal call* is the voice and power of the Holy Ghost, directing the will and the judgment, and conveying personal qualifications. Both calls, however— though essentially distinct in their character and source—are indispensable for the exercise of our commission.”
45. George Whitefield, quoted in Luke Tyerman, *The Life of George Whitefield* (Azle, TX: Need of the Times, 1995) p 40.
46. Oswald Sanders, quoted in Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership*, p 88
47. Shakespeare, *The Life of King Henry VIII*, Act 3, Scene 2

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48. Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1998) p 157
49. Eli Stanley Jones, per www.worldofquotes.com
50. C.H. Spurgeon quoted in Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1992) p 200
51. Thomas Watson, *The Art of Divine Contentment* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria) p 223
52. C.H. Spurgeon, “The Prayer of Jabez,” sermon no. 994, delivered at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington. www.spurgeon.com/sermons/0994.htm
53. John Owen, *Sin & Temptation*, James Houston, ed. (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1983) p 132
54. David Powlison, *Seeing Through New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition Through the Lens of Scripture* (Phillippsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003) pp 149–150
55. Edwards, *Charity and its Fruits*, pp 138–139
56. J. Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader: Recognizing the Lessons and Stages of Leadership Development* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1988) p 33
57. John Calvin, *Commentaries on The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, Calvin’s Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999) p 312, and at http://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/comment3/comm_vol44/htm/xviii.htm
58. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994) p 916
59. Thomas Watson, *The Godly Man’s Picture* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1999) p 81

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The Summons: Exploring the Call to Ministry

In December of 2004, men from three nations and representing more than 20 churches gathered at Covenant Fellowship Church in Glen Mills, Pennsylvania for this one-day seminar. The audio messages, listed below, are now available on the Sovereign Grace website.

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