



# Is God Calling You to the Ministry?

by

City Seminary Professor

Rev. Sam Powell M.Div.



**City Seminary**  
SACRAMENTO

If you are reading this you are probably wondering if the Lord is calling you to the gospel ministry.

It's a noble calling.

Paul himself said, "This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work" (1Tim. 3:1 KJV).



If you are looking for a fleece or a talking donkey, you will most likely be looking for a long time. You probably won't be taken up into heaven for a glimpse of God's throne. You won't receive a visit from an angel and you won't meet Jesus while walking on the road to Damascus.

But Jesus still calls men to the ministry. Jesus said that all power was given unto Him when He rose from the dead. It is Jesus that prepares his servants; it is He that gives gifts to men (Eph. 4:8-12). If it is our Lord's will that you serve His kingdom in the gospel ministry, He will not leave you to guess. He will make it clear, both to you and to His church, that your calling is from Him.

A desire to serve Jesus Christ is common to every Christian. We are all called to present our bodies as living sacrifices of thanksgiving (Rom. 12:1), but the call to serve as a shepherd of the sheep is something different. The Apostle James wrote, "My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment" (James 3:1). The calling to be a pastor is not something to be played with, for we do not trifle either with God or with God's people. Many churches and pastors could have been spared great damage if sober self-examination had taken place before a call was pursued. So with that in mind, I would like to give eight qualities that you ought to

prayerfully examine in yourself. Search your own heart. Pray for humility and grace, and honestly judge yourself. Do you have these qualities that are absolutely necessary for the successful pastor?

### **1. Have you thought about the pears?**

When we came to Christ, we came to be delivered from our sins. You cannot truly come to Christ until you know your desperate need. But there comes a time in every Christian's life when the concept of sin becomes concrete rather than theoretical. As Christians, we know that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. But do we know exactly how sinful and corrupt we actually are?

Paul wrote, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief" (1Tim. 1:15 KJV). A good pastor is one who has come face to face with his own hideous heart. He is one who has gazed long into the mirror of God's law and has fallen on his face before the throne of God and cried out "Woe is me! I am undone!"

The great church father Augustine wrote about this moment in his life, remembering an incident when he was a reckless and wicked youth. He writes,

I lusted to thieve, and did it, compelled by no hunger, nor poverty, but through a cloyedness of well-doing, and a pamperedness of iniquity. For I stole that of which I had enough, and much better. Nor cared I to enjoy what I stole, but joyed in the theft and sin itself. A pear tree there was near our vineyard, laden with fruit, tempting neither for color nor taste. To shake and rob this, some lewd young fellows of us went, late one night...and took huge loads, not for our eating, but to fling to the very hogs, having only tasted them....Behold my heart, O God, behold my heart which thou hadst pity upon in the bottom of the bottomless pit (Confessions, Book II).

*As horrible as it sounds, there are those who enter the ministry because they are looking for wealth...there are also some who enter the ministry looking for respect.... Perhaps they are looking for a life of relative ease.... Or perhaps one desires the call because.... He dreams of large churches.... Ezekiel says, "Woe to them."*

Every Christian at one point or another remembers the pears. Our sin bears no excuse; we sin because we love to do so. We sink in the mire of our own wickedness because we love to have it so. Before God calls a man to the ministry, He first brings him low with the remembrance of his sin. Only those who know their thirst can learn to love the fountain of living water.

Do you remember the pears? Can you say, with Jeremiah,

*And I said, My strength and my hope is perished from the LORD: Remembering mine affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the gall. My soul hath them still in remembrance, and is humbled in me.*

(Lam. 3:18-20)

Only when a man is broken by his sin can he truly know the gospel. And only a man who truly knows the gospel can preach it to others.

## **2. Do you have a shepherd's heart?**

*Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD unto the shepherds; Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks?*

(Ezek. 34:2)

There are many ways that shepherds feed themselves rather than the sheep. As horrible as it sounds, there are those who enter the ministry because they are looking for wealth and privilege on the backs of the people of God. But there are also some who enter the ministry looking for respect or self-esteem. Perhaps they are looking for a life of relative ease away from the hustle and toil of the 9-to-5 world. Or perhaps one desires the call

because one likes the idea of being admired. He thinks of the great pastors of bygone years, or the great pastors of today. He thinks to himself, "I could do that. I also could be respected, admired, loved."

He dreams of large churches, admiring congregations, sermons that move statues of stone to tears. He dreams of preaching like Whitefield or Spurgeon, taking on wicked empires as Luther did, and receiving the adulations of the masses, packing conference halls, presiding at prayer breakfasts with the powerful and famous.

Ezekiel says "Woe to them." This is harsh. Whatever the various motives, all of these are seeking to enrich or feed themselves at the expense of the sheep. A shepherd of the sheep only has one calling: to feed the sheep. It is true that God provides for all that his ministers require. It is proper for a minister to receive a salary. It is proper for a minister who is honorable to receive honor. But if the minister seeks after these things rather than the care and feeding of the sheep, he will damage himself and the Church of God.

*Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.*

(1Tim. 4:16)



A faithful shepherd only has one task: He is to shepherd the flock of God which has been entrusted to his care (1 Peter 5:1-2). If God places you in a tiny congregation in the back area of nowhere, it is because He has sheep there that He loves. He has placed them under your care and expects you to feed them.

Is it your desire to feed yourself? Or do you long to feed the sheep of God? If your motivation for seeking the ministry is to gain respect, admiration, an easy living, or filthy lucre, please repent, ask the Lord for a clean heart, and whatever else you do, stay out of the ministry until the Lord gives you a heart to feed the sheep. You can feed the sheep or you can feed yourself. You cannot do both.

### **3. Do you have a servant's heart?**

*And he said unto them, The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve. For whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? is not he that sitteth at meat? but I am among you as he that serveth.*

(Luke 22:25-27)

Nothing is more destructive to God's people than one man's desire to be in charge. It is a great temptation to think that we can change the world by telling people what to do. The law can never change a heart. Even Jesus, who actually is our lord and master, did not come to be served, but to serve.

The power of the church is not the power of authority. That is the world's idea of power. The power of the church is love. Jesus did not defeat the devil by exalting himself. The defeat of Satan came while Jesus was hanging on a cross dying as a criminal in our place. True power is never where the kings of the world think it is.

The world builds power by coalitions, parties, prestige, wealth, influence and strength. "But ye shall not be so," Jesus said. Do you wish to be a minister of the gospel? Start now by taking the lowest place in every circle. Be the one that clears the table, empties the trash, mops the floor. Consider each one greater than yourself.

*If the idea of learning Hebrew and Greek fills you with terror, if you cannot tell the difference between "Of the same substance" and "of similar substance", if you consider reading systematic theology to be an activity of drudgery and toil, then perhaps the Lord is not calling you to the gospel ministry.*

Pray for a servant's heart. Our strength is in service; our power is in weakness. Ultimately, it is not our gifts and abilities that make us pastors, but the Holy Spirit. God delights in showing Himself strong when we are at our weakest.

#### **4. Do you have the intellectual gifts necessary for study?**

*Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all. Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.*

(1 Tim. 4:13-16)

Everyone is called to serve the Lord in his own way with his own gifts. The primary function of a minister of the gospel is to study the scripture and proclaim the doctrine of the gospel. If a man is called to do that, then he will have the gifts necessary to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15). If the idea of learning Hebrew and Greek fills you with terror, if you cannot tell the difference between "Of the same substance" and "of similar substance", if you consider reading systematic theology to be an activity of drudgery and toil, then perhaps the Lord is not calling you to the gospel ministry.

A faithful shepherd, as we have said, feeds the sheep. To feed the sheep, one must have a good storehouse of food. This takes a great deal of study. We must protect the sheep from wolves; we must know the current trends in theology; we must be able to understand the great battles of the past and why they were fought.

Seminary education is valuable to test a man's intellectual gifts. If one does not have the

gifts to withstand the trials of a seminary education, he will not be able to rightly divide the word of truth when he is out of seminary. This does not mean that he has no place in the kingdom of Christ. Certainly not! But it does mean that he should look for his calling elsewhere.

Paul commanded Timothy to avoid foolish and unlearned questions, “in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves” (2 Tim. 2:23-25). This takes certain gifts and abilities. One must have the intellectual capability to recognize a foolish and unlearned question; one must have the gifts to understand the opposition and be able to oppose them. For this reason, Paul said that the “servant of the Lord must be...apt to teach” (2 Tim. 2:24).



Not everyone has those gifts, and a man would do well to examine himself to see if he has the necessary intellectual gifts. One sermon takes hours of study and reflection. If that thought sends shivers of terror down your spine, perhaps the gospel ministry is NOT where the Lord is calling you.

Intellectual gifts are not sufficient to make a man a pastor, but they are necessary.

### **5. Do you have gifts of communication?**

A man who cannot speak clearly will make a poor preacher. He may be called to another area of ministry, but not to the pulpit.

An effective preacher must be able to take what He has learned in his study and feed that knowledge to the sheep. We are not speaking of the so-called “wisdom of the world” (1 Cor. 2:4), which Paul condemns, but are speaking of the gift to communicate—simply, clearly and precisely declaring God’s word to the world. The wisdom of the world, of which Paul speaks, is communication that seeks to manipulate, excite and entertain. The world has too much of that already. The wisdom from above taught by God is the wisdom of the gospel, ultimately taught by the Holy Spirit through vessels of clay, who are the ministers of the gospel. These ministers, then, must be able to speak the mysteries of the gospel clearly and simply.

When you speak of what is on your heart, can your friends and family understand what you are saying? Can you make your voice heard? Are there physical impairments to your speech that would hinder the message that you are seeking to convey? Remember that as a minister of the gospel, you must decrease, while Jesus increases (John 3:30). A man of God should desire that nothing stand in the way of the gospel of Jesus, and certainly not awkward and distracting communication problems.

Many (but not all) difficulties in communication can be overcome with training. But first, they must be recognized and acknowledged. Remember that it is God that has made the mouth of man. If he has called you to serve as a preacher, he will give you the ability to speak clearly and effectively.

## 6. Are you self-disciplined?

A minister of the gospel, for the most part, does not have someone watching over his shoulder helping him organize his time. I have heard of certain elders in certain places who drive to the church to make sure that their pastor is in the office by 9:00 AM, but fortunately these elders are few and far between.

A man who cannot organize his time and discipline himself to the work that God has called him to would make a very poor leader and shepherd of the sheep.

Solomon said, "As vinegar to the teeth, and as smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to them that send him" (Prov. 10:26). A minister of the gospel is sent by Christ himself. One who loves Jesus would certainly not wish to be smoke in the eyes of the Lord of Glory!

The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. There is much to do in the kingdom of God. The church of Jesus Christ is only hindered by a man who is slow to get out of bed, slow to finish his work, and unable to discipline his time and his money.

If we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. Learn to discipline yourself now before you seek ordination. What does your employer think of you now? Are you smoke to his eyes? If you are, repent now and pray for self-control, that you do not become a burden to the church of Jesus Christ.

*The call to the ministry must not only be internal...but also external. This means that not only will God give the call to you...but He will also prepare the Church to accept you as their pastor... If the Church says "no", the answer is "no."*

## 7. Do you have the wisdom to discern your lack of wisdom?

*My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee; So that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding; Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; Then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding.*  
(Proverbs 2:1-6)

Biblical wisdom is not only knowing the facts and knowing what to do, but it also includes actually doing it. Imagine that you and your friends are sitting in a house. You hear a cry that the house is on fire. A wise man understands the words, knows that the best course of action is to leave the house, and then actually leaves the house. A foolish man discusses the theological implications of the concept of fire and whether or not it fits with the water themes of the gospel of John while he and his friends perish in the flames. A foolish man might debate whether or not fire is something that exists in reality or whether we can actually know if WE exist, or whether words and thoughts actually bear a relationship with what is real and how this might fit in with the Logos theme of John.... But a wise man understands the words, grasps

the implications, and then gets out of the house. A foolish man might even understand that the best course of action is to leave the house immediately. He might argue it convincingly with his friends. But if they do not actually leave the house, they are foolish men, no matter how much knowledge they have.

So a wise man is one whose knowledge, understanding and actions are undivided. He knows what to do and he does it.

There is a tremendous need for wise men in the gospel ministry. We have not been placed in the world of our fathers, but in OUR world, with our own particular challenges and difficulties. Your congregations will be filled with people who have been victims of crimes, victims of childhood sexual abuse, neglect, they have been hurt, scattered, outcast. The sheep that God places under your care are sick, wounded, hurt, scattered and starving. It is your task to give each sheep what it needs (Ezek. 34:4-6).

Some sheep need rebuke. Some need encouragement. Some need to be strengthened. Some need comfort. Some will turn out to be wolves dressed as sheep. They will need to be driven away, for all the sheep not only need to be fed, but they also need to be protected. We fail because we lack wisdom. We lack wisdom because we do not ask for wisdom (James 1:5). And we do not ask for wisdom because we naturally think that we already have it.

But wisdom only comes from God. Our natural state is foolishness. In any situation, we will do the exact wrong thing, because we are foolish. In order for us to be wise, we must seek wisdom as for hidden treasure. We must single-mindedly pursue wisdom, for it comes from only one source: the Lord gives wisdom.

Do you recognize your natural foolishness? Do you understand your tremendous need for wisdom? Seek the Lord's face and ask for wisdom. A foolish pastor is a destroyer and scatterer of the sheep.

## **8. Do you have true humility?**

When was the last time you were wrong about something? You will be wrong about plenty as a minister of the gospel. The pages of church history up until today are littered with men who could have done tremendous things had they not fallen into pride.

Pride should terrify every Christian, but especially those who serve as ministers of the gospel. God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6). How can we serve God's sheep if our pride causes the Almighty Himself to resist us? Who can stand when the Creator is fighting against you?

I am not speaking of false humility, a put on show of denigrating the gifts that God has given you. No, we must be thankful to God if He has given us gifts and seek to use them for His glory and the good of the Church. I am speaking of true humility—understanding our place before the Almighty God.

First of all, we are creatures, and the Creator has the right to place us where He pleases.

You do not have a right to have a large church, to have a best-selling book, or to have the accolades of the masses, and to seek after those things will destroy you and those who hear you. Think of the Apostle James. He was one of Jesus' inner circle, with his brother John and Peter. He was one of the three witnesses of the Transfiguration of our Lord. He was one of the closest associates of Jesus. After Jesus ascended into heaven He sent the Holy Spirit upon His church and sent them to preach the gospel to every creature. What a tremendous calling! And then we read that Herod took James' head off. All of that promise and training, and James' place in the spreading of the gospel was to die so that the rest would leave Jerusalem.

God has the right to do with us as He wishes. Do you wish to be a faithful servant? Then pray that God will use you as He sees fit. Whether He trains you in the wilderness for 40 years by putting you in charge of sheep and goats, or whether He gives you a sermon that changes the lives of thousands—ultimately, it is God who gives the increase.

You are not only a creature, you are a sinner. Even now, as a believer in Jesus Christ, you cannot exist a moment without sin. We have no concept of how filthy, vile and corrupt sin actually is. We won't until we see Jesus face to face. Then, like Isaiah and John both, we will be face down in front of true holiness and beauty. Until that day, believe what Jesus says about you. Without Him, you can do nothing. Without Him and His Spirit, every decision you make will be foolish, every pastoral visit you make will end in scattered and wounded sheep, every sermon you preach will be the doctrine of demons. Don't dare take a step without relying on His grace completely.

So destructive is pride, that the church from the very beginning has examined men who seek a call. If the church says "no", be willing to hear. If the church says, "not yet", then wait.

The call to the ministry must not only be internal, which we have been talking about, but also external. This means that not only will God give the call to you through a careful examination of your gifts, but He will also prepare the Church to accept you as their pastor. The elders must examine your gifts and your knowledge. The congregation of the saints must examine your life and your calling. If the Church says "no", the answer is "no." Find another area to serve. The body has many parts, each with their own function. It is no shame at all to be directed to where your gifts will be of service. But a man in the pulpit without the gifts will eventually destroy the sheep of God.

Have the humility to listen to the church. If it is God's will for you to serve as a minister of the Gospel, He WILL prepare the way. In His providence, He will give you the opportunity to complete a seminary education; He will confirm His call in the hearts of His saints. Without these marks, be content where you are. If you're still unsure, then I suggest that you take a few seminary classes and wait to see where the Lord will lead. And where he leads, be quick to follow.