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BEING A PASTOR

The word “pastor” appears once, undefined, in the list of Christ’s gifts to the church in Ephesians 4:11. The root meaning is “shepherd,” possibly from John 21. It probably combines aspects of “elder” and “overseer” from the pastoral epistles. Beyond that, the lack of specifics allows much freedom for different gifts, personalities and cultural settings. So if your pastoral style is different from some other pastor, don’t worry about it. Just trust God to guide and use you.

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BECOMING A PASTOR

Then I heard the Lord asking, “Whom should I send as a messenger to this people? Who will go for us?” I said, “Here I am. Send me.” – Isaiah 6:8

If you are already a pastor, please don't skip this chapter. Read it asking God to show you someone he might be calling.

You want to be a pastor, or you believe God is calling you to be a pastor, or someone has told you they think you could be really successful as a pastor. What does that mean?

Many pastors dream of having the largest church in town, or baptizing hundreds of new converts, or getting their own radio or television program. These can be great things, but they are only success if they are what God has called you to. Your success might look very different.

Jesus spent three years preaching, healing and doing miracles. After the greatest miracle of all, his resurrection from the dead, only five hundred people gathered (1 Corinthians 15:6).

Many of us would be happy to have a church of five hundred. But two years earlier, in John 6, five thousand people had come to hear him. In two years, Jesus lost 90% of his people!

Most pastors would not consider losing ninety percent of their church to

be a sign of success. But Jesus didn't panic. Jesus did not come to build an institution; he came to build believers. Jesus measured his success, not by the number of his fans, but by the number of his followers. **For Jesus, success was people who were motivated and equipped to go out and continue his work.**

God's standard of success is not the same for every pastor. He may want you to build a large church or he may want you faithfully to care for a small church. He may want you to focus on teaching or preaching or healing or evangelism or social justice. He may want you to stay at one church for decades or serve many congregations. Ultimately the only true measure of success is whether you are faithful to God's call for you.

As the church of Jesus Christ, we have a three-fold purpose: to become a people among whom God obviously lives, to help each other become more and more like Jesus, and to carry God's presence in love and power in such a way that everyone we meet will want to join God's family through faith in Jesus Christ. No two pastors will do all that in the same way.

Still, there are some basics.

Basic Requirements for Being a Pastor

Not just anyone can be a pastor. Not just anyone should be a pastor. Here are basic requirements for anyone who would carry out this most demanding, and rewarding, ministry.

You have to love

The two greatest commandments of the Law are about love (Matthew 22:38-39). Jesus' new commandment is about love (John 13:34). Paul says the greatest spiritual attribute, even greater than faith and hope, is love (1 Corinthians 13:13). John tells us God himself is love (1 John 4:8). The most basic requirement for anyone who feels called to lead God's people is love.

You have to love God

You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength. That's the greatest commandment (Mark 12:28-30), and it's a pastor's greatest need.

Some people become pastors because they think it's an easy way to achieve respect and a good living. They will soon find out differently. Anyone with the intelligence, drive and people skills to succeed as a pastor can certainly also succeed at other occupations that are easier and earn better respect and better pay. If money is what you love, being a pastor is the wrong place to look.

Others become pastors because they want to help people. That's a noble reason, but the pastorate is the wrong place to fulfill it. As a pastor you will help people, but it's a side effect of serving God. If helping people is your first love, consider being a doctor or teacher or social worker.

If you want to last as a pastor, your greatest passion must be to know and love and please God.

You have to love people

Jesus said that's the second great commandment (Mark 12:31). If you hope to spend all your time sitting alone with God and your books, you might be better off as a professor or a monk, because a pastor's job is people. You will listen to people, talk to people, counsel people, visit people and work with people in meetings. People will constantly be asking you for help. You'll be on call 24 hours a day. If you're not sure you like that idea, reconsider your career choice.

As a pastor you get to work with some wonderful people. Christian believers, especially mature ones, are the very best people there are on this planet. For me, spending time with people like that is one of the greatest rewards of the job. But people don't start off as mature Christian believers. People will come to the church in a wide variety of conditions and for a wide variety of reasons, most of them having to do with trying to get some need

met. Much of your time will be spent with people like this. And sometimes their needs aren't pretty.

Jesus sought out people who were hurting. He sought out sinners and people who didn't have it all together. He explained it this way: *Healthy people don't need a doctor - sick people do* (Mark 2:17). A person who doesn't like to be around people who are sick shouldn't become a doctor. **A person who doesn't like to be around people who are not yet like Jesus shouldn't become a pastor.**

This is not to say you have to be an extrovert or a sentimentalist. God calls all kinds of people to be pastors. (I should know; I'm an introvert who started out as an engineer.) But your driving force for loving people has to be God's love. You won't last long in ministry if it isn't.

You have to be called by God

Pastors are on the front lines of the battle between good and evil. Just as snipers try to pick off enemy officers, the devil tries to pick off pastors. Being a pastor is the most rewarding thing I can imagine, but it is also full of extremely difficult situations. Surveys in the United States suggest that almost three-quarters of all pastors regularly consider leaving the ministry because of the stress.^[i]

Becoming a pastor because somebody else thinks it's a good idea for you or because you think it might be a good career move is a recipe for a short and unhappy experience. **If you don't have a strong sense that God has called you to this and that God will support you and see you through, you are almost certain to burn out or break down.**

Every Christian has a calling. Being a pastor is just one way of serving God. If these warnings have made you feel discouraged about your calling, don't despair. God needs Christians in every walk of life. Civil servants, business people, tradesmen, retail workers, farmers, homemakers and people in every other kind of job can bless folks a pastor may never meet. If you are not called to be a pastor, that doesn't mean you don't have a calling from God; it means you have a calling to serve in some other way. But if God is calling you to be

a pastor you will never find peace until you answer the call.

Pastors, always encourage your people to seek out what God is calling them to be and do. Teach them to consider their callings just as important and God-honoring as yours. And always look for those whom God may be calling to be a pastor.

God can call you directly

One day as these men were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Dedicate Barnabas and Saul for the special work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2).

The church leaders were doing their primary job and ours, which is serving the Lord. (The word translated "serving" could refer to worship or to other religious service.) They were focused on God, so when he spoke they heard his voice clearly. God directly and specifically called two people by name for a particular work.

This is the clearest kind of call. It is also the rarest. It seems that God reserves such clear calls or directions for those who will have difficult tasks ahead of them. If God calls you in this way, remember it well. Then when the tough times come, you can look back and reassure yourself that this was not a mistake. God called you to it and God will see you through it.

God can call you through church leaders

In Acts 16:3 Paul asked Timothy to accompany him on his evangelizing journeys. Apparently Paul saw potential in Timothy, and he took him on as a kind of protégé. Later, when Timothy had become a pastor, Paul wrote two letters to him which include some of the clearest Biblical instructions on how to lead a church.

If your pastor or another church leader asks you to help in some pastoral duty, or suggests you take some kind of pastoral training, take this as a sign that God may be calling you to pastoral service. Pray about it and discuss it

with mature Christians you trust. It may not just be a request for help. It may be your call from God.

A sense of calling can grow gradually

A tent-maker named Aquila and his wife Priscilla appear three times in Acts 18. At the beginning they were nothing more than Christian believers who happened to have the same trade as Paul, and this coincidence brought them together. As they shared the same house with Paul, they naturally began to pick up some of what he was saying and doing. By the end of the chapter they had so grown in their ministry that they felt competent to correct the teaching of Apollos, one of the early church's most eloquent preachers.

It may be that you can't pinpoint a specific time or place when God called you to ministry, either directly or through someone else. Yet somehow you find that people are asking your advice, seeking your counsel, looking to you for leadership in church matters. If this is the case, pray seriously about whether this may be a sign that God is preparing you to be a pastor.

It's never too late to respond to God's call

Maybe you ran from God the first time you sensed God calling you. Maybe you weren't sure, or you were afraid, or you felt you couldn't leave your other responsibilities. Now you may be afraid you missed your chance. You may fear God will always be disappointed in you.

Please don't feel that way. Many successful pastors ran from God's call at first. Our God is the God of new beginnings. Jonah ran the first time God called him, yet God used him to save an entire city. I don't know if it is possible to reject God so strongly and consistently that he finally stops calling, but if you are taking the time to read this book, you have certainly not reached that point.

You have to prepare

Saul, who became the Apostle Paul, was already a highly trained expert in the Old Testament Scriptures when Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus. He immediately started witnessing to his conversion and new faith. Yet he was not given a leadership position in the church, and apparently he didn't seek one. Instead, he went into the Arabian desert for an intense time of prayer and study that may have lasted as long as three years. Then he went back home to Tarsus and made tents for a while. After that he spent several more years serving as assistant to Pastor Barnabas in the Antioch church. Scholars calculate that between Paul's calling and his first ministry assignment he spent as much as sixteen years in training and preparation. Being called is not the same thing as being prepared.

You may be naturally gifted in art or music, but until you train and develop your gifts, you can't be called an artist or a musician. In the same way, a person may be a gifted speaker and leader and truly be called from God, but until you acquire appropriate education and training you are not ready to be the lead pastor of a church. I say "lead pastor" because serving as an assistant pastor under a more experienced leader can be a very effective way to learn, as Paul learned from Barnabas in Antioch. During that time people may call you "pastor," but you will know you are still in training.

Most Christian groups have minimum requirements of education and competence before they will certify or ordain a person to be a pastor. There's a good reason for this. As a pastor, people will come to you with the most serious questions, questions affecting their eternal salvation. You are responsible before God to lead them right.

People will expect you to care for them in times of great personal need. They will expect you to guide them in relational problems and ethical and moral dilemmas. They will look to you for accurate information about the Bible and Christianity. And they will expect you to effectively administer the affairs of the church. While there is an element of natural skill in each of these areas, a good bit of education and training is also necessary. **Part of the calling to be a pastor is a calling to undergo necessary preparations**

and meet the requirements set by existing church leaders.

That said, I know there are groups of Christians who live far from an established church. It is best if they can develop a good relationship with an existing church, even at a distance, so they can receive some kind of pastoral care. I also know that sometimes this is not practical. If this is your situation, one of the group will have to take leadership. Praise God for the one willing to do it. Maybe that person is you. If so, make every effort to gain some training as soon as you can.

What kind of training does a pastor need?

You need training in practical matters

If you are going to be a pastor, you need to know how to do the things a pastor needs to do. Some parts may come naturally to you, but others may not. That training is the purpose of this book, but this book by itself is not enough.

Learn methods and techniques well enough to adapt them. Just because the Americans or the Germans or the Kazakhs do something a certain way, that doesn't mean the Turks or the Kenyans should. Just because another church in your city does it one way, that doesn't mean you should do it the same way. Find the underlying principles and prayerfully experiment with applying them in the way that best fits your situation.

As you study and observe how other pastors do things, remember 1 Thessalonians 5:21, *Test everything; hold fast what is good* (ESV). Or as I heard one pastor put it, "Be as smart as an old cow: swallow the grass and spit out the sticks."

What practical things do you need to learn?

You need to learn the Bible

Paul advised his protégé Timothy, *Work hard so you can present yourself to God and receive his approval. Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth* (2 Timothy 2:15). Anyone can read

the Bible and be greatly blessed, but there is much to learn that helps bring out deeper levels of understanding. Knowing about the history and cultures of the Bible, shades of meaning in translations, or recognizing figures of speech, for example, can open up new depths of revelation.

You need to learn teaching and preaching

Crafting sermons and Bible lessons is a skill. I'm still learning how to convey God's message in a way that people will understand, remember, and apply to their lives. And that way is not always the same for every group of listeners.

You need to learn to recognize and follow the leading of the Holy Spirit

As a pastor, people expect you to be an expert in spiritual ministry. You lead worship, you minister to the sick and disturbed, you pray for the needs of the church, you deal with opposition in the physical and spiritual realms. Paul tells us, *All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God* (Romans 8:14). Recognizing and following this leading is a learned skill.

You need to learn pastoral duties

You will be expected to baptize, marry and bury people, visit the sick, and celebrate the Lord's Supper. There are certain ways you will be expected to do these things, usually depending on the denomination or tradition to which your church belongs.

You need to learn church organization and administration

How do you choose leaders? Who makes which decisions? How do you deal with money and the building? How do you deal with the local government and community leaders? You may never think about such things until you find yourself in charge of a church, but they can literally make or break your

ministry. These are the focus of Part Three of this book.

You need training in theology and church history

Somebody may say, “Isn’t that pretty academic for a local church pastor? I know a lot of good pastors who don’t know a lot about that stuff.” When I first started into ministry, I felt the same way. I wondered why my seminary had spent so much time teaching me all that academic book-learning. What I wanted was practical ideas for how to grow a church! But the longer I have been in ministry, the more I appreciate the history and theology I was forced to learn.

Theology and church history can help a pastor recognize an error in doctrine or practice before it becomes a problem. They can also be very helpful in explaining the faith to those who have questions.

Nobody ever set out to invent a heresy. The great false teachings of Christian history were not developed to mislead folks. They came about as a result of honest, sincere people trying to understand and apply the Bible. When their ideas went astray, they didn’t have the knowledge to recognize it.

For instance, let’s say you didn’t know the history of the hundreds of years of theological struggle to understand the fact that Jesus is both fully God and fully human. In trying to figure this out, you could conclude that when Jesus came from heaven to earth he didn’t actually become human but just disguised himself as a human. Or you could decide that Jesus was just a man who somehow became God through spiritual exercises. Both of these are heresies that have plagued the church for centuries. This is not the place to go into the spiritual and practical problems that can arise from those wrong ideas, but rest assured they are many and serious. It is important for a pastor to be aware of these things. There are many similar examples.

I do want to add one note of caution. **There are many theological issues on which good, Bible-believing, educated Christians differ.** These are not matters of heresy versus orthodoxy. They are differences of interpretation within Christian thought. For instance, some churches baptize babies, while others believe only adults and older children should be baptized. Some

denominations emphasize predestination, others emphasize free will. Beware of any teaching that does not acknowledge these and similar differences as legitimate theological viewpoints. Look for a school, teacher or book that clearly says, “On this issue some Christians believe A for these reasons, others believe B for those reasons.” They may spend the rest of their time saying, “Here’s why I believe A is better,” but at least they have acknowledged the other opinion. This approach allows you to make your own choices, and to engage in intelligent conversation with someone who believes the other way. I even use this approach in my local church sermons and Bible studies.

Some ideas and interpretations fit within the spectrum of acceptable Christian understanding. Others do not. A pastor must be educated enough to know the difference and respond accordingly.

You need to keep learning and developing your skills

Initial preparation is necessary, but it is not enough. A person with a true pastoral calling will be self-motivated to continue reading and learning about God, the Bible, and new and better ways to help people and administer the church. Churches need to make sure their pastor takes advantage of new resources and continuing education.

I don’t mean to imply that you can’t be a good pastor without formal seminary training. If formal training is not available, there are many other ways to learn. I also don’t intend to imply that you should refuse to provide leadership to a group of Christians, or even start a church if that is what God is calling you to do, until you have some kind of diploma. My point is that **there are important things to learn that will make you a better, more effective pastor, and you should take every opportunity to learn them.**

If seminary education is not available where you are, one option might be to attend seminary somewhere else. Of course, this is very expensive, and the typical seminary course requires a university degree and then takes three years of full-time study. If you feel that God may be calling you to this, be very careful and prayerful about the seminary you choose. Not all seminaries teach the same thing. And be sure where God is calling you before you go. I

have been told that very often people who go to graduate schools in other countries wind up deciding to settle in that country rather than returning to their native land.

Thanks to the blessings of technology, many seminaries and Bible colleges now offer courses online. Nothing can take the place of live discussion in classrooms and coffee shops, but physically attending a school is often difficult or impossible. Online education is often your best choice if you have another job or live a distance from a school's physical location. Again, these classes vary widely in cost, quality, and theological perspective. Do your homework on them before you make a commitment.

Ordination

Once or twice someone has visited my church and introduced themselves like this: "Greetings in the name of the Lord! I am the Apostle So-and-So." When that happens, my first thought is, "Look out! This could be trouble." My experiences with such folks have not always been good. I have learned to beware of self-proclaimed pastors (or bishops or prophets or whatever title they claim) with no accountability structure. Don't become one of them.

The people of a local church entrust their pastor with their eternal destiny, not to mention an important part of their daily lives. What guarantee do they have that this pastor is qualified to lead them? The historical answer is ordination. **If you have the character and maturity to be a faithful pastor, you will be happy to submit your calling and preparation to a group of mature, experienced Christians.** They can help you and your church discern whether you are ready to take on the responsibility, and they can help you and support you down the road.

Paul advises, *Never be in a hurry about appointing a church leader* (1 Timothy 5:22). At ordination, a group of people goes on record that they know you, they have investigated you, and they are willing to state publicly that you are called, qualified and equipped to be a pastor. They are taking on a heavy responsibility.

For some kinds of churches, the ordaining group is the local congregation

itself. In many denominations, only a body of those who are already successfully serving in ministry is authorized to ordain new pastors. These denominations usually have specific standards of training and experience that are required before you can become a candidate for ordination. I personally believe this approach provides a greater degree of protection for the people of the church, because those making the decision have been through it themselves.

Of course, no method can guarantee that every ordained person will turn out to be a good pastor. For that reason, another important element of ordination is accountability. Pastors are human, and unfortunately some may succumb to human temptations. Some become misguided and are in danger of leading their people into false paths. Some even seek to prey upon local churches for financial gain.

If this happens, **the same group that ordains a pastor should be able to provide oversight.** A body that grants pastoral credentials should be able to revoke them where necessary. This can often be done more objectively and effectively when the ordaining body is made up of other experienced pastors rather than the local congregation. The ordaining body should then work to rehabilitate the pastor, if possible.

In some countries religious leaders are accorded certain legal privileges. If this is the case, the government needs a way to tell the difference between those who are actually pastors and those who are just trying to get the benefits. It is helpful if the churches can show through their ordination process that they are self-policing in this area, so the government doesn't have to try to define who is a pastor. No matter what country you live in, you want the government involved in church business as little as possible.

Becoming a Pastor

A pastor without a church is like a driver without a car. How do you get connected with a church to serve? There are basically three ways.

You can plant a church

Many pastors become pastors by the simple means of starting a church. If God has called you to do this, it can be very satisfying and fulfilling. However, it is a lot of hard work, and the failure rate is high. If the church thrives and grows, the founding pastor can gain a lot of authority and influence. This can be a real blessing to God's work. However, accountability can become an issue.

You can be hired by a church

In some traditions, when a local church finds itself without a pastor for whatever reason, the congregation or its group of leaders is responsible for selecting and hiring a new pastor. This also implies that if the congregation is unhappy, they can fire the pastor, and if the pastor is unhappy or gets a better offer, the pastor can leave. This kind of organization can give a local church great independence. However, as pastor it can tempt you to preach what the people want to hear, or what might make you more attractive to a bigger congregation, rather than what God is telling you to say.

You can be assigned to a church

Some church groups have bishops or other authority figures who are responsible for assigning pastors to churches. While consultation is normally a part of this process, it is understood that the pastor will go to the assigned church, and the church will accept the assigned pastor. This requires a degree of trust in God's use of the denominational structure. However, it also frees pastors to preach and act as they feel led, without the fear of possibly losing their job if they displease influential church members.

Points to Remember

- If you want to be a pastor, you have to love God and people.
- If God isn't calling you to be a pastor, don't try it.
- Your gifts and calling need to be trained and developed.
- Ordination and a continuing relationship with the ordaining body or similar group provide safety and accountability.

[i] "Nearly 3 in 4 Pastors Regularly Consider Leaving Due to Stress, Study Finds." The Christian Post, June 21, 2014.