

JASON K. ALLEN

LETTERS

— *TO MY* —

STUDENTS

— VOLUME 2 —

ON PASTORING



“If there’s a young man in your church who senses a call to pastoral ministry, give him this book. Likewise, give it to a seminary student you know or a man early in his pastoral ministry. There’s a bounty of biblical teaching and practical advice condensed in these pages. Too many men in ministry, as was true for me, had to learn much of this the hard way: by years of experience and through many mistakes. My first years in the ministry would have gone much smoother for me and better for the people I pastored if I’d had the benefit of this book decades ago.”

Dr. Donald S. Whitney, professor of biblical spirituality and associate dean at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, and author of *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, *Praying the Bible*, and *Family Worship*

“The call to be a pastor does not come with automatic insight, knowledge, or competency. Consequently, every shepherd sometimes finds himself overwhelmed, overworked, underappreciated, and unprepared for the deluge of demands on his time and the constant drain on his spirit. That is precisely the moment when someone needs to put a copy of Jason Allen’s *Letters to My Students* in his hands. Filled with biblical truth, practical wisdom, Christian warmth, and gentle instruction on every page, this book reads like an encouraging conversation with a trusted friend who knows what is needed to walk the pathway of joyful obedience.”

Dr. Hershael York, dean of the School of Theology; Victor and Louise Lester Professor of Christian Preaching at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, and senior pastor of Buck Run Baptist Church in Frankfort, Kentucky

“I am so thankful for *Letters to My Students* from Jason Allen. It might look like a book, but really it’s an opportunity. It’s an opportunity to sit with and learn from a godly man who has dedicated his life to the ministry of

Jesus Christ, and to equipping others for that ministry. He knows the ministry priorities; and as he guides you through them he will help you see the pleasures and avoid some of the pain. You will be wiser and more prepared once you have heard from this man. I wish this has been available twenty-five years ago.”

Dr. Heath Lambert, senior pastor of
First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida

“This book is really good. Clear, concise, and packed with straightforward practical advice for every pastor. This volume will be especially helpful for those just getting started in pastoral ministry. If only I had this book thirty years ago! This book should be handed out to every seminary graduate in the country.”

Dr. Clint Pressley, senior pastor of Hickory Grove
Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina

“‘For The Church’ is not only the mantra of Dr. Jason Allen’s vision for Midwestern Seminary, but it is also his life’s passion. I cannot think of a better person to share wisdom about pastoring than one fully invested in the leadership of training the next generation of gospel preachers for the church. *Letters to My Students, Volume 2: On Pastoring* is a great compliment to the first volume as pastoring becomes the central focus and emphasis of this book. Dr. Allen lives what he teaches. He cares about pastors deeply, and I am certain this will be a helpful book for me as a current pastor and for those training to one day join this great calling. As pastors, we need mentoring. I am grateful to have access to one of the best through the words of this book.”

Dean Inserra, lead pastor of
City Church in Tallahassee, Florida

“In a time when pastoring has come to mean all kinds of things that have little to do with the biblical vision for the

office, the Church needs regular reminders of the irreducible complexity of biblical ministry. This is why I'm grateful for Jason Allen's latest volume in his *Letters to My Students* series. Volume 2, *On Pastoring* proves a reliable survey of a true shepherd's ministry both faithful and fruitful, and above all, oriented around the glory of Jesus."

Jared C. Wilson, assistant professor of pastoral ministry, Spurgeon College and director of the Pastoral Training Center, Liberty Baptist Church

"In this second volume of his *Letters to My Students. Volume 2: On Pastoring*, Dr. Jason Allen has provided a wonderful treatise for prospective, new, and seasoned pastors. Writing with a pastoral heart and from pastoral experience, Dr. Allen helps prospective pastoral students understand their call to ministry and prepare for what that call entails. He provides new pastors with an introductory manual for ministry—what every new pastor needs to know. And finally, he calls seasoned pastors to return to the basics. Whether you love God's people and want to shepherd them faithfully or love pastors and want to encourage them lovingly, you'll want to pick up this book."

Dr. Juan R Sanchez, senior pastor of High Pointe Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, and author of *The Leadership Formula: Develop the Next Generation of Leaders in the Church*

"Dr. Jason Allen is helping to change the world by investing his life in ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. By writing to his students, he pours his life into the next generation of Christian leaders. Blending his former service as a pastor with his personal scholarship as a seminary President, he brings a biblical and passionate vision for the church. This is why I hope you will read this book."

Dr. Ronnie W. Floyd, president/CEO of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention and pastor emeritus of Cross Church

“Many pressures pull pastors in many directions. This book calls them to keep their eye on the ball: Here is your job description in the Bible, pastor. Don’t forsake it. Jason Allen combines this call to Scripture with the wisdom earned through his own pastoral experience, giving readers a clear-eyed view of the wonderful work of pastoring.”

Dr. Jonathan Leeman, editorial director at 9Marks and elder at Cheverly Baptist Church

“‘The call to pastor is the highest calling known to man.’ This quote from my friend, Dr. Jason Allen, sets the tone for his new book, *Letters to My Students, Volume 2: On Pastoring*. In this excellent work, Dr. Allen encourages and challenges local church pastors to willingly, prayerfully, and soberly embrace the daunting tasks that are involved in leading a local church. This work is filled with encouraging, practical information and challenges for every pastor. I highly recommend it.”

Dr. Steve Gaines, senior pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee

“In *Letters to My Students, Volume 2: On Pastoring*, Dr. Allen takes a fresh look at what it means to be a pastor in the twenty-first century. In this book, you will glean insights about the joys and the challenges of pastoral ministry: serving and preaching, feeding and leading, as well as, guarding and guiding the flock the Lord has called you to oversee. Whether you’re a new pastor serving in your first pastorate or you’ve been pastoring for decades, you will learn biblical principles that apply to your current ministry context.”

Dr. Robby Gallaty, senior pastor of Long Hollow Baptist Church and author of *Growing Up* and *Replicate*

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DEDICATION

With great affection, I dedicate this book to my boyhood pastor, Fred Wolfe. It was under Dr. Wolfe's preaching that, as a freshman in college, I came to faith in Christ. Even before coming to faith in Christ, in hindsight I see how blessed I was to grow up under his ministry. As a child I heard the inerrancy of Scripture preached, the lordship of Christ upheld, and the necessity of the new birth proclaimed.

Though Brother Fred's faith has now become sight, I remain indebted to him for his many decades of faithful ministry. The prophet Isaiah tells us "How beautiful are feet of those who bring good news of good things." As one to whom Dr. Wolfe brought the gospel message, his feet remain beautiful to me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As with any writing project, this book would not have come to completion without the sacrifice and support of many. I remain profoundly indebted to each one of them.

At the personal level, my life and ministry is enabled and enriched by the prayers and encouragement of my family. God has abundantly blessed me with my wife Karen and our children Anne-Marie, Caroline, William, Alden, and Elizabeth, who have surpassed my every hope and dream as to what they'd be and mean to me. To my favorite six people on the planet, thank you.

At the institutional level, my colleagues and office staff likewise are a valuable source of support and encouragement. Most especially, I'm thankful for Tyler Sykora, Dawn Philbrick, and Lauren Hanssen. These people are an absolute delight to serve with, and they go about their daily tasks with graciousness and competence. Thank you.

Furthermore, I'm thankful to the team at B&H Publishers, most especially Devin Maddox and Taylor Combs. Thank you, dear friends, for believing in this project and for working with me to bring it to fruition.

Last, and most of all, I'm indebted to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Like every other ministerial undertaking, none of this would be possible without His grace, calling and enabling. May this book, and all that I do, bring Him much glory.

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FOREWORD

As I write this in early 2021, pastors face more pressure and are navigating more challenges than at any point in my lifetime. Crises related to the pandemic have not only taken a toll emotionally, physically and financially on congregations and pastors, they have become divisive. Pastors are criticized for being too political or not political enough. They take shots for addressing racial issues too often and for not addressing them enough. And the list goes on.

That is why I believe Dr. Allen's book could not have been more well-timed. In moments of crisis and question, we are often tempted to work harder, do things faster and become more isolated. When that happens, the stresses of ministry start to take an even larger toll. Turning to a book like this helps recalibrate your thinking and remind you of the reasons you answered the call to pastor in the first place. It also gives you a step-by-step guide when you feel like you may be floundering and just need some handles to grab on to while you regroup and get your bearings.

Of course, no book can or should replace God's Word in our lives. Make Scripture and your daily

conversations with God the lifeline that keeps you anchored spiritually and ministerially. This is the only place you can turn for true restoration for your soul. In times like these, it's tempting to turn to other places for relief, but only God's Word and His specific words for you can provide what you need to shepherd your congregation and bring the truth to them.

As a pastor, never forget that you live each day on a spiritual battlefield. The church will always be under fire, and you will always be a target. Satan wants to distract, discourage, and defeat you. If you wake up each day with the goal of having a peaceful, conflict-free ministry, you will be ground down with discouragement in no time. Prepare yourself, protect yourself with your spiritual armor, and don't pretend that spiritual warfare is not raging around you.

As you practice that discipline, you must also protect your marriage and family. The only thing worse than not giving your church and ministry enough time, attention, and focus is giving it too much—letting it dominate everything including your marriage and family life. I am grateful for mentors who encouraged me to make marriage and family a priority early on in my pastoring years. The pastorate will always demand more than you can give, and demands are loud and consistent. Until a crisis occurs, the needs of your wife and family most often won't be so overt. Focus on them now. Give them

the time they need and deserve. You are called to them as well.

Always remember that you have the best job in the world. With all of the challenges it brings, there is nothing in the world like being a pastor. It is a wonderful calling and privilege to lead God's people and to proclaim His Word. I hope you will make this book one that you turn to often. It is filled with wisdom, experience, and great ideas. And I hope you will never cease to hold up God's Word and let it shine brightly in this world that has never been more in need.

Dr. Kevin Ezell
President
North American Mission Board

SERIES PREFACE

Good books are like good friends. Both bring with them words of instruction and counsel. They are companions on life's journey, providing insight and encouragement along the way.

For the Christian minister this is doubly true. To be a minister is to be a reader. You read books to know the Bible and to mature as a teacher of it. And, like a friend, God often brings a book into our lives at just the right time. That's exactly what God did for me.

In my earliest days of ministry, while still processing God's call and exploring what a life of ministry would entail, a friend gave me Charles Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students*. Spurgeon walked into my life at precisely the right time. *Lectures to My Students* proved not only helpful but also transformative. I would come to learn that *Lectures to My Students*, and the man who authored it, had equipped and inspired generations of ministers like me. I was hooked.

Who Was Charles Spurgeon?

In the words of Carl F. H. Henry, Charles Spurgeon was “one of evangelical Christianity’s immortals.”¹ Henry so labeled Spurgeon due to the expansiveness of his ministry and its continued reverberation after his death.

Spurgeon was a phenom. He preached in the largest church in the Protestant world situated in the most powerful city in the world, London; yet his ministry stretched even farther, coursing through the expansive tentacles of the British Empire. He embodied all that is right about biblical ministry and all that the contemporary church must recover in the twenty-first century: biblical faithfulness, evangelistic fervor, self-sacrificial ministry, power in the pulpit, social awareness, and defense of the faith.

As a preacher Spurgeon pastored London’s Metropolitan Tabernacle, where he ministered for nearly forty years to a congregation of some six thousand members. Spurgeon is commonly ranked, along with George Whitefield, as one of the two greatest preachers in the English language. In 1858, he preached to a crowd numbering 23,654 at London’s Crystal Palace, and by the end of his ministry, he had preached to more than ten million people without the aid of modern technologies.

As an author Spurgeon wrote with an unstoppable pen. By the time of his death, he had published

approximately 150 books. His sermons, which were edited weekly and distributed globally, sold more than fifty-six million copies in his lifetime. In Spurgeon's day they were translated into more than forty languages and now total more than sixty-two hefty volumes. Additionally, Spurgeon wrote for various magazines and journals, including his *Sword and Trowel*.

As a humanitarian Spurgeon hurled his might at the great social ills of his day. He founded two orphanages and a ministry for "fallen women," was an ardent abolitionist, started a pastors' college, and began a book distribution ministry for undersupplied pastors. Spurgeon launched clothes closets and soup kitchens for members and nonmembers of the Metropolitan Tabernacle. By the age of fifty, he had started no fewer than sixty-six social ministries, all of which were designed to meet both physical and spiritual needs.

As an apologist Spurgeon ardently defended his Baptist, evangelical, and reformed convictions. He attacked hyper-Calvinism and Arminianism, Campbellism, and Darwinism. Most especially, Spurgeon defended the person and work of Christ and the comprehensive inspiration and infallibility of Scripture. Spurgeon's apologetic efforts were most clearly witnessed through the prism of the Downgrade Controversy, where he challenged and ultimately withdrew from his own Baptist Union for their equivocation over these same issues.

As an evangelist Spurgeon relentlessly preached the gospel and consistently won sinners to Christ. He remains an unsurpassed model for clinging tightly to both the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man in evangelism. In fact, one is hard-pressed to find any sermon Spurgeon ever preached that does not conclude with a presentation of the cross. By the end of his ministry, Spurgeon had baptized nearly fifteen thousand believers.

Spurgeon's ministry is still shrouded in a certain mystique. This is, in part, because he was a genius. But it is also due to his indefatigable ministerial work ethic, which prompted David Livingstone to ask of Spurgeon, "How do you manage to do two men's work in a single day?" Spurgeon, referencing the Holy Spirit, replied, "You have forgotten there are two of us."

Lectures to My Students

Central to Spurgeon's legacy is his classic work *Lectures to My Students*. This volume developed organically, as the natural outflow of Spurgeon's Friday interactions with his pastors' college students.

Since these men had spent the week in rigorous study, Spurgeon styled his Friday sessions as more informal. He dealt with the practical aspects of preaching and pastoral ministry. Over time the counsel Spurgeon gave in those sessions was recorded and compiled into book

form. Thus, Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students* is brimming with biblical and practical advice for the minister. He covers everything from the call to ministry to calling on church members. He swerves back and forth from the theological to the practical, from the convictional to the preferential, from the mundane to the spiritual.

In so doing, Spurgeon gave his students a near-comprehensive text on the full range of issues related to preaching and pastoral ministry. *Lectures to My Students* has proven to be a timeless work, benefitting most every minister who reads it.

Letters to My Students

Thus, this volume—and entire series—is written in the venerable tradition of Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students*. I know how much he helped me, and I want similarly to help you.

I'm inquisitive by nature; and as a new minister, I was especially so. Thankfully, I had a couple of mentors who answered my queries and pointed me to others who could do the same.

I now find myself on the other end of such questions and conversations. As a seminary president, I teach classes on preaching, pastoral ministry, and leadership. On a near daily basis, I converse with pastors and students about these topics.

Herein are my best answers. Over the years I've kept up with my correspondence, some in the form of literal letters, others in emails, classroom lectures, phone conversations, or conference sermons and presentations. These answers have found their way into my class lectures, and still others have migrated all the way to my website, where I often write on preaching and pastoral ministry.

In my role as a seminary president, I'm giving my life to equipping those called by God for more faithful and effective ministry. While that preparation is essential, it doesn't end when one walks across the graduation stage. Growing in ministry is a lifelong pursuit, and growing as a preacher is to be the same. The book in your hand is intended to help you toward these ends.

Introduction

Why I Admire Pastors

Theodore Roosevelt, the twenty-sixth president of the United States, was one of the greatest elected officials in our nation's history. He was also one of the greatest leaders the world has ever known. A tsunami of energy, Roosevelt never saw a mountain too tall to scale or a fight too threatening to join. He shook the nation, invented the modern presidency, and left a changed country in his wake.

In other words, there is a reason why his face, along with Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln is chiseled on Mount Rushmore.

Roosevelt, reflecting on the burden of leadership and the willingness to risk all and attempt great things, famously observed,

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs

to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.¹

Every time I read Roosevelt's quote my mind darts to the pastorate, and the fine work men of God do. The office of the pastorate is a high one, the work a noble one, and the men who faithfully undertake it are worthy of our admiration. Unless and until they give me reason to think otherwise, they have mine.

In our age of constant news, social media excesses, and the world's voyeuristic interest in pastors who have morally failed, it is easy to forget all that pastors do for the church. Sure, we have all heard of a pastor who has not acted admirably, but they are the exception, not the norm.

The fact that I have spent more than two decades serving local churches also informs my admiration. I have stood in the pastoral gap. I have lived in the trenches of local-church ministry. I know what it is like to crank out sermons, bury dear congregants, deal with difficult members, confront those in sin, and lead a struggling congregation. I have endured the lows; I have enjoyed the highs. Through it all, the romance of God's call to ministry has never left me.

What is more, I now daily interact with pastors as a seminary president. Many are on the front end of ministry, preparing for their first church and eager for the same. Just as frequently, though, I interact with well tenured men of God. I hear their stories. I sense their struggles. I have lived their life and walked in their shoes. Whether you are an upstart minister or a long-tenured pastor, my heart is with you.

Yet, my personal experience as a pastor and my daily interactions with pastors are not the ultimate reasons I admire such men of God. My admiration is first driven by deeper, more convictional issues—matters of calling, stewardship, and biblical qualifications and responsibilities. At the outset of this book, review just a few of these reasons with me.

First, pastors are called by God. Christ has given the church, in our age, “Evangelists, pastors, and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11–12).

One does not stroll into the ministry; one surrenders to it. Pastors have been set apart by God, called by His Spirit, and submitted their lives to Him. It requires obedience not only to enter the ministry, but to continue in it. Thus, I admire pastors for yielding their lives to God.

Second, pastors minister the Word. The pastor's one irreducible responsibility is to feed the sheep the Word of God. Paul stipulates the pastor "must be able to teach," and he charged Timothy to "give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching" and to "preach the Word" (1 Tim. 3:2; 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:2). The pastor who faithfully discharges this responsibility does more than feed the church the Word; he feeds me the Word. Every Christian needs a steady intake of God's Word, and a faithful pastor, who rightly divides the Word weekly, is worthy of high praise.

Third, pastors are held to a higher level of accountability. This accountability begins with the qualifications of the office, as outlined in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9. But it extends to other passages as well, including "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment," and that congregations should "obey their leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account" (James 3:1; Heb. 13:17). This fact is all the more daunting when you realize that pastors face more intense temptation. Satan targets those whose fall will do most damage to

the church and most sully God's glory. I admire pastors for putting themselves in the arena.

Fourth, pastors tend the flock of God. Pastors preach, lead, and fulfill a host of other ministerial responsibilities, but pastors also bear the burdens of their people. When we need prayer, counsel, or support, pastors stand in the gap for us. Paul spoke of his affection and parental care of the believers in Thessalonica, and Peter exhorted the elders to shepherd the flock with eagerness, not lording it over them. Such is the heart of a pastor, one who loves his congregation. This is no easy task. Church members can be wayward, stubborn, and even rebellious. Thus, the pastor who serves the flock is worthy of our admiration.

In Conclusion

Do you admire pastors? I sure do. If you are in or pursuing pastoral ministry, know that I admire you. In fact, most every pastor I know garners my trust and respect and deserves my prayers and support.

It is that spirit that motivated this book, and it is that spirit I hope you will detect as you read it. Pastors and future pastors, I am for you. I believe in you. I admire you. This book is to encourage you in your ministry labors and to strengthen your hand as you go about them. May God bless you in the work.

Chapter 1

Set Apart by God

The Minister and His Calling

The call to pastor is the highest calling known to man. This high view of gospel ministry prompted Charles Spurgeon to famously reflect, “If God has called you to be his servant, never stoop to be a King of men.” If you are reading this book, you have probably sensed that call. In fact, you most likely resonate with Spurgeon’s lofty assessment of pastoral ministry.

The work of pastoral ministry is indeed grand—thus, you should undertake it with a profound sense of spiritual opportunity and stewardship. No doubt, that is one reason why you are reading this book: you want to be better equipped for a faithful, fruitful ministry.

In this chapter, and as we open this book, I want to briefly frame for you the call to pastoral ministry and, in particular, your personal call to ministry.¹ What are the major indicators of God’s call, and how do these intersect with your personal life and ministry? This is

important not only as you enter ministry but will also serve as ongoing accountability and guidance throughout your ministry. As an entry point, let us first clear up common misconceptions about the call to ministry.

Calling: A Misunderstood Concept

Among evangelical churches, the call to ministry is often misunderstood. Some view the call to ministry as an altogether personal, individual decision. If one believes themselves to be called to ministry, that settles it. What gives the church, or any other deliberative body, the right to question what God called me to do? If a person self-identifies as called to ministry, that is evidence enough, so the argument goes.

Others view God's call as an entirely mystical, subjective experience. They believe that to evaluate one's call to ministry in objective terms is altogether unspiritual. They shrug off biblical expectations for ministry, such as 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9. They view God as too big, too dynamic to confine Himself to His written Word. If someone thinks the Spirit is leading them into ministry, one need not be held up by biblical or congregational expectations.

What is more, others view the call to ministry in human, professional terms. They view a seminary degree, or some other ministerial credential, as sufficient qualification for ministry service. Just like attorneys,

physicians, and other professionals are marked out by their formal training, so are ministers to be. Earn a degree or gain a license for ministry and then pursue religious work accordingly. It is as simple as that.

Still others view the call to ministry as a one-time experience, and the biblical qualifications for ministry a one-time threshold to cross. They believe calling to be a past-tense reality. Perhaps on the front-end of ministry one needed a church's affirmation and to meet biblical qualifications found in places like 1 Timothy 3:1–7, but now it is a settled matter. Additionally, so goes the argument, God leads you into ministry as a life calling but is indifferent to where and how you serve throughout your life. In other words, you are free to move and maneuver the ministerial ranks as you desire, not as God leads.

Lastly, many evangelicals view the call to ministry as something one does not pursue but reluctantly surrenders to undertake. In fact, the common phrase “surrender to ministry” suggests as much. Yes, God initiates the call to ministry, not man. Moreover, in a sense, the spiritual office is to seek the man and not *vice versa*. But the apostle Paul makes clear that “If any man *aspires* to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he *desires* to do” (1 Tim. 3:1, emphasis added). Note the words, *aspire* and *desire*. It is not only appropriate, but necessary, for one entering ministry to desire the work of ministry!

Clarity Out of Confusion

As a college student wrestling with the call to ministry, I was confused. It all seemed imperceptibly mystical and mysterious to me. I thought I sensed God's call to ministry but was unsure of precisely what I was to be looking for. I desired to serve in ministry but thought that desire inappropriate, perhaps a sign of pride or unhealthy ambition.

In God's kind providence a friend pointed me to 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Charles Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students*. Reading Spurgeon's book, especially his section on the call to ministry, and meditating on 1 Timothy 3:1–7 were of enormous help, giving me a breakthrough of clarity and certainty.

Paul's words to Timothy (and similarly to Titus, in Titus 1:6–9) framed my call to ministry then—and still do. Read and reflect carefully on this passage.

It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control

with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?), and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. (1 Tim. 3:1–7)

Additionally, Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students* is a timeless work on ministry service. In fact, I deliberately played off of Spurgeon's classic in the title of this book series, *Letters to My Students*, as my own tribute to Spurgeon, who is widely acclaimed as the prince of preachers. Spurgeon helpfully unpacks signs of the call to ministry, most especially the first sign as "an intense, all absorbing desire for the work."² For me, this point was clarifying and even liberating and compelling for my life and my call to ministry. I learned God had placed that desire in my heart. That assurance propelled me forward, launching me to the next stage of reflection and deliberation.

The Gravity of the Call to Ministry

As I continued to pursue ministry service, I increasingly sensed the gravity of that calling. Doing so did not dissuade me, but it did awaken me to the majesty of ministry service. I found myself resonating with Charles Bridges, who wrote on the gravity of ministry some 200 years ago. Consider his words with me:

Who, whether man or angel, “is sufficient” to open “the wisdom of God in a mystery”—to speak what in its full extent is “unspeakable”—to make known that which “passeth knowledge”—to bear the fearful weight of the care of souls? Who hath skill and strength proportionate? Who has a mind and temper to direct and sustain so vast a work? If our Great Master had not himself answered these appalling questions by his promise—“My grace is sufficient for thee;” and if the experience of faith did not demonstrably prove, that “our sufficiency is of God;” who, with an enlightened apprehension, could enter upon such an awful service; or, if entered, continue in it?³

In order to find our balance here, we should review the apostle Paul's words to the Ephesian believers. He writes in Ephesians 4:11–15,

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ.

In the context, Paul unpacks for us how God is building His church, and how essential pastors and teachers are to His plan. Furthermore, Paul shows how Christ equips His church and how the church is central to God's eternal purpose and redemptive plan.

Notice what Paul says in verse 11. He begins by unpacking specific offices Christ has established for the

church. The first two, apostles and prophets, have long been understood to be first-century offices given for a season until the church was established and the canon of Scripture was closed.

But in verse 11, we see that Christ has given His church leaders today and for all times in the form of evangelists, pastors, and teachers. These leaders have been given their proper role and function by none other than Christ Himself.

If this calling by Christ is not weighty enough in and of itself, Paul goes on to state the reason Christ has given His church these leaders is “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ” (v. 12). This results in a church that is spiritually healthy, theologically sturdy, and missionally united. What a task. What a calling. What a stewardship we have!

Calling: A Checklist to Consider

All of this reminds us we must be sure about God’s qualifications for ministry and certain He has set us apart for such service. Along these lines, review with me seven questions, indicators that God has called you into the ministry:

1. *Does your character match God’s expectations?* First Timothy 3:1–7 and

Titus 1:6–9 are paramount here. You should carefully review and reflect on these passages. Moreover, you should invite others to assess your life along these lines and remember that these qualifications are not a one-time threshold to cross, but are an ongoing expectation for the minister.

2. *Do you desire the work of ministry?* As we have seen, longing for the work of ministry is not only appropriate; it is essential. That inner longing for ministry will serve as a magnet, pulling you forward throughout various seasons and trials of ministry. If ministry is one of many opportunities before you, each seeming similarly attractive, that is a sign that you may not be called to the ministry. As the apostle Paul makes clear, you should desire the work of ministry.
3. *Are you gifted to teach the Word?* As you review 1 Timothy 3, you will note the only real difference between the office of the deacon and the office of the elder is the ability to teach. Of course, there are varying levels of accomplishment. Gifting, training,

experience, and a host of other factors will determine how strong you are as a preacher and/or teacher, but the pastor must have a baseline ability to minister God's Word to God's people.

4. *Do you currently see fruit from your ministry activities?* By this, I mean: Have you seen God bless some of your efforts in the ministry so far? Have people seemed to benefit from your teaching and preaching? Have you been able to lead anyone to Christ? These are just a few questions that you can use to gauge the fruit of your labor. If you have not seen any fruit so far, that does not necessarily mean you should give up. Rather, go to your pastor and seek more opportunities, and pray fervently for God to bless your efforts.
5. *Are you passionate about the gospel and the Great Commission?* A passion for the gospel is a good sign that the Lord is calling you to ministry. As we shall see in the pages ahead, when Paul reflected in Romans 10 on the gospel, he was emphatic that people cannot hear the gospel message

without a messenger delivering it to them. If the idea of people coming to faith in Christ does not stir you, that is not a good sign.

6. *Does your church affirm your calling?*
Ultimately, all the preceding questions are to be adjudicated by the local church. The Bible indicates the local church is responsible to call out the called. More specifically, the local church is responsible for who it calls to minister to the congregation. The church knows best how fit an individual in their midst is for ministry. Look to them for affirmation.
7. *Finally, are you willing to surrender?*
As I wrote earlier, the idea of surrendering to ministry is often misunderstood, and I once misunderstood it. But, the one who would minister faithfully must be submissive to God's call whenever and wherever he issues it. That is not just as you enter ministry, it is throughout your ministry. Throughout your ministry, God will call you to specific tasks and to specific people, some more desirable than others. Will you follow wherever he leads?

In Conclusion

It is fitting to begin a book on pastoral ministry by clarifying and celebrating God's call to it. Even as I type these words, I am overjoyed by God's kind providence in my life, setting me apart for ministry service and strengthening me for that service over the years. I trust it does you as well. Let us now turn our attention to the work of pastoral ministry.

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