

## **The Call of God**

*Escape From Church, Inc. – The Return of the Pastor-Shepherd*

Chapter 8

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A good friend of mine who used to teach at a well-known evangelical seminary once asked several of his classes, "Can you identify a sense of call to ministry?" Most of his students met the question with blank stares; they had no idea what their professor was talking about. Only about 30 percent in his most "enlightened" class could answer this question in the affirmative, while a scant 4 percent in his most uninformed class could say "yes."

My friend asked the same question of men and women headed to the mission field and into full-time evangelism-and found the same disturbing lack of call. When he asked one student, "Why are you attending seminary?" the young man replied, "So I can enter into a respectable, calm, professional ministry to provide for my family."

I gulped when I heard that. Could it be that such a rampant disregard of God's call to shepherd his flock is behind much of the decline we see in the American church? If pastoring is just another job, I can think of better things to do.

This disregard probably shouldn't surprise us. As I prepared to write this chapter, I scoured dozens of books that mentioned God's call, but almost all of them immediately dropped the topic to launch into discussions of preaching, managing, counseling, visiting, and the like. In essence, most of them said, "Make sure you're called, and then counsel, preach, visit, manage, and so forth." They don't all agree about what a call is, but they all say there ought to be one. Strangely, however, most never address the key piece.

Yet it's this sense of call that, like nothing else, is meant to fill us with a passionate sense of direction and destiny. Would a sovereign God leave us to our own devices to wander around hoping against hope that, just perhaps, we really might be suited for the pastorate?

I don't believe so. I agree with C. E. Colton, who wrote almost half a century ago: Every genuine preacher must feel the hand of God laid upon him for this specific task; otherwise his ministry will be unhappy and unproductive. Only the consciousness of a divine call to do a great and awful work can give that confidence and feeling of authority necessary to make one's ministry successful.<sup>1</sup>

### **WHAT IS A CALL?**

One reason that "the call of God" has not received the attention it merits may be that the concept is not easy to pin down and define objectively. When we consider the

Bible's most famous calls to ministry, we find that nearly all involved a physical, audible call, the actual voice of God summoning a person into his service.

It was this way with Moses: "The angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush...When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, 'Moses! Moses!... I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt!'" (Exodus 3:2, 4, 10).

So it was with Samuel: "The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. Then the LORD called Samuel... Again the LORD called, 'Samuel!' ... The LORD called Samuel a third time... The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, 'Samuel! Samuel!'" (1 Samuel 3:3-4, 6, 8, 10).

It was also this way with Paul:

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

"Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." (Acts 9:3-6)

But was it that way with me? No. In fact, few of us who believe God has called us into the pastorate can say the call was audible. Yet we continue to insist that the call was (and is) real. We applaud those who make comments such as this:

Why would a person enter the ministry without a call? Yet it is felt by some that a call is unnecessary.... In such cases aptitude tests may be used to determine a person's vocational ability. Then, counselors recommend certain educational pursuits to develop the natural acumen. While some are more suited for sciences, others are channeled to social or humanitarian pursuits, one of which might be an involvement in the religious field. Of course, the born-again believer understands that although natural intelligence and aptitudes are not to be scorned or considered unimportant, these are not the final criteria in determining one's call to the ministry.<sup>2</sup>

I know of pastors who wonder, Am I really called to this? Many doubt their calling because they merely ambled through some menu of career options and said, "I don't want to be a lawyer, I don't want to be a mechanic, I don't want to be a psychologist. Maybe I'll be a pastor." Or even worse, someone gave them an aptitude test and told them, "You have all the qualities for the ministry."

We need to hear more about what it means to be called of God. One person described it as "FIF disease," that Funny Interior Feeling disease. This disease doesn't come from eating cold pizza, nor does it come from the prolonged study of Hebrew grammar. In fact, many pastors regard FIF disease as the beginning point of their ministry. They talk about a particular moment when they received a divine call they could not ignore.

John Wesley talked about his heart being strangely warmed. Francis of Assisi said he heard the voice of Christ while in chapel prayer. Jack Hayford, pastor of the Church on the Way in Van Nuys, California, wrote, "Three years ago, I invited pastors across the nation to write to me and describe as well as they could, 'The reason I'm in the ministry. Unsurprisingly, yet a very telling fact, almost to the person the answer was the same: 'I was called by God.'"<sup>3</sup>

God will not be denied his sovereign right to choose the vessels he will use. What God stated about Saul of Tarsus- "This man is my chosen instrument" (Acts 9:15)—he also declares of others today.

#### WHAT DOES SCRIPTURE SAY?

Still, as we noted, it's not a cut-and-dried matter to define and describe what such a calling to vocational ministry looks like. While the Bible talks a great deal about God's call, most of these passages speak of how believers are "called to belong to Jesus Christ" (Romans 1:6), "called to be holy" (1 Corinthians 1:2), "called to one hope" (Ephesians 4:4), or "called to peace" (Colossians 3:15). Only a few passages bear directly on a "call to pastoral ministry," and these do not lay out an exact framework for recognizing such a call. Yet when we take them together, they do give us reason to expect that anyone who enters the pastoral ministry should do so only by means of a divine call.

We might begin our investigation by considering Hebrews 5. After the writer explains that "every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God," he insists that "no one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God" (5:1, 4). Note that although these priests were "selected from among men" and "appointed" to represent others before God, they had to be "called by God." Can we really imagine that God would do less for his new covenant people than he did for the old?

We don't have to imagine such an unsettling scenario, for we see the Lord doing in the New Testament exactly what he did in the Old. In Acts 13:2, Luke records that while the church at Antioch was "worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" Paul accepted these heavenly marching orders and identified himself later as one who was "called to be an apostle" (Romans 1:1; 1 Corinthians 1:1; see also Galatians 1:15).

However, this old missionary never imagined that God's call would stop with him. That is why he told the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28 that it was the Holy Spirit who had made them overseers, and that is also why he warned his protégé Timothy not to "be hasty in the laying on of hands" to set others apart for service (1 Timothy 5:22). It is as though Paul were telling the young pastor, "Make sure you know that a man is called into God's service before you endorse his ministry by publicly laying your hands on him. Be careful before you take such an important step!"

So, then, we can rightly ask, If God in the past specifically set apart men and women to serve his church, would he not do so in the present? I like what Charles Wagner has to say about this:

It is incongruous to think that an ambassador would go to a country as a representative of his homeland without being sent. This is even more true in the ministry. One of the most vital areas of pastoral theology is that of the call to the ministry; the awareness of such a call is imperative. To go, without being sent, is to walk in failure.<sup>4</sup>

I believe that every one of us in the pastorate should be able to say, as did the apostle Paul, that our ministry is not from men nor by man, but by the will of God (see Galatians 1:1).

### THE ROLE OF GIFTING

It is one thing to believe that God still calls specific believers into specific ministerial roles; it is quite another to recognize such a calling when it comes. If God does not call us with an audible voice, how are we to know for sure that we are called?

A big piece of the answer- but not all of it!-may be found in our personal gifting. That is, we must ask ourselves, "Am I gifted for the role of pastor? Has God equipped me to shepherd his flock? Do I fit the qualifications the Bible lists for anyone who wants to serve God in this way?" Regarding this element of recognizing God's call, Joe Stowell reminds us:

In Ephesians 4, Paul declares that each one in the body of Christ has been given grace, i.e., a special enablement, "according to the measure of Christ's gift". (Ephesians 4:7). Paul follows this with an interesting statement regarding the ascension of Christ. He says that when Christ left this planet to function as our Advocate and High Priest in heaven, He "gave gifts to men." The [implication] is that when He gave us the task of carrying out the work of His church, He also graciously supplied supernatural enablement for us to carry out the assignment. In the midst of our insecurities, we must remember that He empowers us with enabling gifts of ministry.

The gift of pastor/teacher combines two key elements of local church leadership: the ministry of caring and concern combined with the indispensable ingredient of instructing the flock in the truth of God and its ramifications for their lives. Those with the gift of pastor/teacher are individuals who are particularly inclined toward the needs of people and are committed to meeting those needs not just through the ministries of personal resourcing, but public proclamation.<sup>5</sup>

Jay Adams makes the same point:

The important list of church office bearers in Ephesians 4:11 describes the Christian minister as that of a "pastor and teacher" (or perhaps, to convey the Greek text most clearly, a "pastor-teacher"). In this verse the minister's teaching is viewed as distinct (but not separate) from his pastoral duties. That is to say, the two works are distinguished by the use of two terms but not in such a way that two offices composed

of different personnel are in view. Rather they are viewed as two distinct but inseparable functions of one man who occupies one office.<sup>6</sup>

God does not call anyone into a service for which he or she is unsuited. Yet we must be careful here! Would we regard the oft-jailed, sharp-tongued, whirling dervish we know as the apostle Paul as “suitable” for church ministry? How about the apostle Peter? Tax-collecting Matthew? Yet all these men really were gifted by God for the tasks and roles to which he called them. As they were, so must we be.

### A PASSION FOR MINISTRY

A second key component identifying God’s call on our lives to pastoral service is an unmistakable passion for church ministry. It is not enough to possess the gifts that would enable pastoral service. There must also be an unquenchable desire burning in the human heart to serve God in this way.

In his excellent book, *The Call*, Os Guinness explains, “Calling is the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to his summons and service.”<sup>7</sup> Note several words Guinness so carefully chooses: “decisively,” “special devotion,” “dynamism.” Those called into pastoral ministry know they could never choose to do something else (not that they would want to). They know they are made for the pastorate like a fish is made for the sea, like a bird is made for the air.

If, for whatever reason, they try to do something else, they begin to sound a lot like the prophet Jeremiah when he tried to resign his commission to look for another calling: But if I say, “I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,” his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones.

I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot. (Jeremiah 20:9)

Although the prophet's ministry brought him nothing but ridicule and mocking, insults and reproach from those to whom he ministered, he found himself compelled to fulfill God's specific calling on his life. He could do no other.

The apostle Paul knew something of Jeremiah's intense ministerial imperative. His attitude is well expressed in 1 Corinthians 9:16, where he confessed, “I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”

Pastors serving in the later centuries of the Christian era have made similar comments. The great Charles H Spurgeon once told his ministerial students, “If any student in this room could be content to be a newspaper editor, or a grocer, or a farmer, or a doctor, or a lawyer, or a senator, or a king, in the name of heaven and earth let him go his way; he is not the man in whom dwells the Spirit of God in its fullness, for a man so filled with God would utterly weary of any pursuit but that for which his inmost soul pants.”<sup>8</sup>

Several years ago a friend of mine, a seminary graduate who had not pursued full-time ministry, was asked to consider a pastoral position with a growing church. This man has strong teaching and leadership gifts, and he has used them extensively over the years in the several churches where he has been a member. He was at a point in his professional career at which he had begun to wonder if he ought to use those gifts in full-time church ministry. After several weeks of prayer, pondering, and earnest discussions with others, my friend decided against even interviewing for the position. Do you know why?

When he carefully examined the key biblical texts regarding church ministry, he began to notice one consistent element, an element largely lacking in his outlook. Read the texts for yourself and see if you can spot this make-or-break factor:

- "Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task" (1 Timothy 3:1).
- "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Hebrews 13:17).
- "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, . . . serving as overseers not because you must, but - because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve" (1 Peter 5:2).

Did you see it? All three of these passages resound with the trumpet blast of passion for pastoral ministry. They express that passion in different ways, but the same intense desire for ministry surges through all three. As soon as my friend saw that, he knew that pastoral ministry wasn't for him. No great passion for the ministry rumbled in his heart. No intense desire. No overflowing joy at the thought of serving as a shepherd. My friend believed he possessed the gifts to do a good job in a pastoral role, but these lively words from the first century shocked him into realizing that God wanted passionate shepherds, not merely dutiful ones.

Consider the key words of these passages. Paul talks about someone who "sets his heart on" ministry, about someone who "desires" it. The first phrase translates the Greek term *orego*, which literally means "to stretch oneself, to reach out one's hand" and which came to mean "to aspire to, to strive for, to desire."<sup>9</sup> The second word; *epithymeo*, means "to desire, to long for."<sup>10</sup> Through the use of these words, the apostle paints a picture of someone who yearns for pastoral ministry as a deer pants for cool water.

The writer of Hebrews changes the vocabulary but not the sense. He contrasts the "joy" (*chara*) that pastors should experience (like that of the disciples when their risen Lord appeared to them; see Luke 24:41) with the "burden" (*ste-nazo*, to "sigh, groan because of an undesirable circumstance"<sup>11</sup>) they would be forced to bear if their sheep acted in stubborn and contrary ways. This is not the language of bare duty but of a full and overflowing heart!

Peter picks right up where the writer of Hebrews leaves off. He tells his readers that no one should pastor out of sheer duty ("because you must"). On the contrary, they are to shepherd God's flock because they are "willing" or even "eager" (prothymos, meaning "willingly, eagerly, freely"<sup>12</sup>) to serve. In other words, God requires passion of those who serve his flock as undershepherds. There must be no half hearted, lukewarm, tepid forays into the pastoral ministry to try it on for size to see if it might fit. None of that for Paul! None of that for the writer of Hebrews! None of that for Peter! They all demand overseers with passion for the task, and no one else.

This is where that Funny Interior Feeling comes in. Because I have been long infected with the FIF disease, I can't see myself doing anything other than pastoring. It's not that I can't do anything else. At one time I did work as a mechanic, but I am not a mechanic. I have also done carpentry, but I am not a carpenter. I am a pastor-that is my identity.

Someone on my staff once asked me, "How do you know you're called?" "Because," I replied, "you can't see yourself doing anything else" "Well, I can't do anything else," he admitted. "I took time out of my life to go to Bible college and seminary, so there is nothing else I can do." "But that's not the issue," I insisted. "Can you see yourself doing anything else? That's the defining mark. You can't allow your decision to be dictated by the thought that you can't earn a living unless you do this." That man eventually left the ministry. The truth was, he could see himself doing just about anything else.

Erwin Lutzer once wrote, "I'm disturbed by those who preach and teach without a sense of calling. Those who consider the ministry to be one choice among many tend to have horizontal vision. They lack the urgency of Paul, who said, 'Necessity is laid upon me.'<sup>13</sup>

I too am disturbed by those who try to pastor without ever having received God's call to do so. Such attempts cheapen the God-ordained nature of pastoral work. I agree with John Henry Jowett, who warned, "If we lose the sense of wonder of our commission, we shall become like common traders in a common market, babbling about common wares."<sup>14</sup>

As a general rule, we feel most fulfilled when we minister in the area of our gifting, passion, and calling. When we leave that area, we often grow frustrated. No wonder the pastoral dropout rate is so high! Charles Bridges was right when he wrote: 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?.. Where the call is manifest, the promise is assured. But if we run unsent, our labours must prove unblest. Many, we fear, have never exercised their minds upon this inquiry.<sup>15</sup>

Amen. A little exercise never hurt anyone—and it has saved a number of people from serious injury down the line.

#### THE PERSONAL AND CORPORATE DIMENSIONS OF GOD'S CALL

Let's say that you believe you are gifted for the pastoral ministry. You also feel a passion for the work; you can see yourself doing nothing else. Does that mean God is calling you to the ministry?

Maybe, and maybe not.

When God calls someone to be a shepherd of his flock he generally doesn't do it in isolation. Personal conviction is an absolute requirement, but the church's voice needs to be heard as well. Erwin Lutzer rightly says, "God's call is an inner conviction given by the Holy Spirit and confirmed by the Word of God and the Body of Christ."<sup>16</sup>

God's call involves both inward conviction and external confirmation by the church. When we study God's call of Paul, we notice immediately the deep involvement of the body of Christ. Paul didn't bust down the church doors at Antioch and proclaim himself a missionary. It is significant that he and Barnabas received their call during a church service, when the congregation was "worshiping the Lord and fasting" (Acts 13:2). Notice also to whom Paul's call was announced: "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." The Holy Spirit said those words to the congregation, not merely to a solitary Paul or Barnabas. It was as if the Holy Spirit said, "Listen to me, my flock. I am calling two men among you to serve me in a special way. Set Barnabas and Saul apart for this work." This way Saul knew about his call, Barnabas knew about his call—and the entire church knew about both. That's why they confirmed the call by placing their hands on the pair and sending them off.

It would be scary if we had to depend solely on a person's inner conviction to know whether God had called that one to shepherd his sheep. For example, my fifteen-year-old son came home from camp last summer and announced, "I think God might be calling me to ministry, but I don't want to be a pastor." We talked about sports ministry and I introduced him to some representatives of Athletes in Action and a few other alternatives. Then I said, "If God doesn't give you a conviction to be a pastor, whether it be a youth pastor or whatever, then don't pursue it. But if God is showing you he wants to give you a life in ministry in some other area, then let's confirm that and take some steps to further your movement in that direction."

My son had heard a great motivational speaker at that camp, so his conviction may come or go. Who knows? But we don't have to depend merely on a fifteen-year-old's "gut feeling" to recognize God's call. I know if God is truly calling my son into ministry, the church will eventually confirm that's how God does things.

In a celebrated Lyman Beecher lecture, professor John Henry Jowett once declared:



I hold with profound conviction that before a man selects the Christian ministry as his vocation he must have the assurance that the selection has been imperatively constrained by the eternal God. The call of the Eternal must ring through the rooms of his soul as clearly as the sound of the morning bell rings through the valleys of Switzerland, calling the peasants to early prayer and praise.<sup>17</sup>

Such "assurance," however, comes only when a person's passion for ministry is enthusiastically confirmed by a body of believers. God uses the confirmation of his body to transform a personal call into the compelling force in a pastor's life.

#### A SCRATCH-N-SNIFF VOCATION

If I didn't know that God has called me to be a pastor, I wouldn't even get up some mornings. His call is what drives me. Being a shepherd is tough, unglamorous work. No one who understands the reality of pastoring would ever choose it apart from God's call. People might daydream about becoming a great leader, but few ever fantasize about doing a shepherd's messy work.

That is not to say that it can't be done, of course. I suspect that a lot of people enter the ministry because they don't understand who a shepherd is and what a shepherd does. They think it would be such a neat thing to take up a staff. By gazing at beautiful paintings of barnyard scenes that look so quaint, so peaceful, they nurture a romantic view of the pastorate. Yet one thing is true of every barnyard. Barnyards stink. These pictures might come closer to reality if they came in scratch-n-sniff versions.

It's too bad we can't come up with a scratch-n-sniff picture of the pastoral ministry. If we could, a person might think twice before entering it. It's a difficult life. It's blessed, to be sure, but it can be very hard-and unless God has called you to it, you should never pursue it. As Erwin Lutzer notes, "I don't see how anyone could survive in the ministry if he felt it was just his own choice. Some ministers scarcely have two good days back to back. They are sustained by the knowledge that God has placed them where they are."<sup>18</sup>

#### MY PERSONAL CALL

I received my call to the pastorate at age sixteen in a strange way. I was working at a Christian youth camp but was not following the Lord. In fact, I had no desire to follow him. But I taught horseback riding and thought it was a great way to spend the summer.

Then one night I heard a great speaker. I don't remember who he was, but I instantly knew I was to be a pastor. My parents were ecstatic when I wrote to tell them the news, but by the time I got home, I said, "I don't know what I was thinking. There ain't no way."

You see, I had never known a pastor whom I respected. Most of them seemed like the "geeks" of the kingdom. They were good, faithful men, but I didn't know one pastor

who was athletically inclined. They all tended toward the uncoordinated, chubby set. So I ran as hard as I could away from that call ... and from God.

When I returned to the Lord at age twenty, I knew immediately what I was supposed to do. No doubt about it. People would tell me, "You should be a youth pastor first," but I always replied, "Nope. God called me to be a pastor. I don't want a stepping-stone. He has called me to be a pastor."

When Susan and I began dating, my call is one of the first things we discussed. We were traveling together with a Christian music group, but God had not called me to be a full-time musician. He had called me to be a pastor, and she needed to understand that. Could she be willing to be a pastor's wife? Glory to God, she was.

Once we were married, we asked God to allow us to pastor with Village Missions, a group that targets small towns and opens up closed churches. We had prayed and talked about what it would be like to pour our lives into a small community of people. It's the only specific vision of ministry I ever had.

We were supposed to open a church in upstate New York, but before we arrived my home church asked me to be its full-time, interim pastor. The church had shrunk from an attendance of 250 to about 75, and the deacons wanted me to help get it on an even keel so they could call someone else. We stayed three years, then thought, maybe this is the time. We called Village Missions and said, "Can we reactivate? The church here has grown and is stable." But nothing came of it.

That's when we received a call from a church in New Jersey with some problems of its own. This church of 150 to 200 in a middle- to lower-middle-class town of 6,000 had built a 500-seat auditorium-by amassing a debt of \$608,000. Would I come to be their pastor?

"We really want to go with Village Missions," I said. We even called another agency, but the timing didn't seem right. So Susan and I said, "Well, God must be making it clear that we're supposed to go to New Jersey." So off we went to serve a hundred-year-old church with a new building and a massive debt.

A group of church consultants once created a chart of the character qualities necessary for a "turnaround pastor." I possess only about half of them. You're supposed to have a strong stomach for confrontation; it makes me sick to my stomach. I could have asked, "Lord, why in the world would you have me do this?" I still don't fully know the answer to that question, although Susan says I get bored when everything runs smoothly. She knows I like the challenge of bringing hope to people in pain. I really hurt for sheep who have been beat up.

Through all this, God never let us fulfill our vision with Village Missions. While it was the only specific ministry vision I ever had, it never bore fruit. That has always intrigued me.

The main thing is that God called me to pastor. That's the extent of my call, a call identified in the church that ordained me and which continues to be confirmed today.

I have been in ministry now for more than twenty years, and I can honestly say I have a growing delight and passion to live out my call as a pastor. I have no distractions and no competitors for my time, for my strengths, for my allegiance, for my gifts. I have one passion that I have acted on with abandon for more than twenty years, and that is to be a shepherd, under God, for his people.

I never doubted that God called me to be a pastor, even when I served with Promise Keepers. Everyone knew that I was a pastor and that I would not stay in a parachurch ministry for long. People even sent me notes reminding me that I was a pastor. It's my whole identity. I am a pastor, and I want to follow only those things that are consistent with my calling.

#### CALLED TO BE SO WE CAN DO

Has God called you? If so, to what did he call you? Until you can define that, you're not in a position to minister. In short, what has he called you to be so that you can do?

Some time ago I interviewed a man for a staff position, but our conversation that day didn't last long. I performed the basic assessments: describe your gifts, your calling, and so forth. But when someone starts off by asking me to describe the benefit package and the salary range, I don't talk to him or her again. Unless I hear from somebody, "What's my role with the sheep? What unique thing would I be called to do? How would I fit in?" I'm not interested.

Pastoral ministry is not just a job. I've heard applicants immediately ask, "Will I have a secretary? Do I have to share? Do I get voice mail? Do I get a pager or a cell phone? Can you show me where my office would be, so I can see if it's big enough?" These questions have nothing to do with pastoral ministry which comes down to this. Is God calling you to this particular flock? Can you sense that God is calling you to minister to this specific congregation?

That is the heart of God. That is Jesus standing over Jerusalem, weeping because the people were like sheep without a shepherd. The question is, Are these sheep whom God is calling me to love? If so, I'll spend my life for them.

The pastorate is both a calling and a lifestyle. Doctors know something of what this is like because there is never a time when they are not a doctor. I talked to a friend the other day who complained, "You know, I wish that just once we could sit down in a restaurant and nobody would interrupt to say, Hey, Doctor!"

It does get awkward at times, especially as your kids get older. They often view the pastoral identity as an intrusion. The truth is, I am a pastor, and there is no time when I am not a pastor. It's who I am. It's my identity. That is how I am defined. I am a pastor.

This explains why I don't like being called "Preacher" or "Dr. Wagner." Those titles don't do a thing for me. "Glenn" is cool, but it does something special for me whenever someone calls me "Pastor." A distinctiveness about that word reminds me of who I am. It's not what I do that defines me; it's who I am. That, I think, is the essence of God's call.

The old Puritan Richard Baxter was on to something when he wrote, "The ultimate purpose of our pastoral oversight must be linked with the ultimate purpose of our whole lives. This is to please and to glorify God. It is also to see the sanctification and holy obedience of the people under our charge."<sup>19</sup>

Pastor. I like it. I really do!

#### GOD DOESN'T DO THINGS OUR WAY

God doesn't do things the way we would. The Lord goes to some coward hiding in a winepress and says, "I'm going to make you a mighty man of valor."

If we had handed Gideon a modern gifts and talents inventory, would he have ended up where he did?

God goes to some little shepherd boy and says to him, "I'm going to take you out of the sheep pens and make you the shepherd of my people Israel."

If we had been looking for a king, would we have searched in the pastures?

God goes to a murderer named Saul and says, "I'm going to make you an apostle to the Gentiles."

If we had wanted to commission a wildly successful missionary, would Paul have ever passed our screening criteria?

God goes to a big oaf named Peter, a fisherman with foot-in-mouth disease, and says, "I'm going to make you one of my apostles. In fact, you'll be the leader."

If we had been asked to disqualify one of the apostles, would we have picked Cephas or Judas?

No, God does not do things as we would. He even tells us, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways... As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9). Jesus adds, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matthew 7:13).

We should not try to enter in either to eternal life or to pastoral ministry-by some other way, only by his way. When we comply, when we do things his way, the picture envisioned by Henlee Barnette more than three decades ago just might begin to turn into reality for us:

A recovery of the theological doctrine of calling in the contemporary churches would transform them into revolutionary forces in a revolutionary age. Society itself would feel the impact of a prophetic faith and be brought more into conformity with the Kingdom of God on earth. 20

Let it be so, Lord. Let it be so.