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QUESTION #1

DO YOU DESIRE THE MINISTRY?

Martyn Lloyd-Jones was one of the greatest preachers of the twentieth century. He pastored the Westminster Chapel in the heart of London for nearly three decades, and by the end of his ministry he was one of the most influential ministers on earth. But before Lloyd-Jones was a great preacher, he was an accomplished physician. After earning his medical degree, he came under the tutelage of Lord Horder, caregiver to His Majesty, King George V, and enjoyed one of the most promising medical careers in all of England.

In considering God's call to ministry, Lloyd-Jones wrestled

with his “physician’s dilemma”—giving up medicine to pursue preaching. Ultimately, it was a war of desire, and his desire for ministry won out: “We spend most of our time rendering people fit to go back to their sin! I want to heal souls. If a man has a diseased body and his soul is all right, he is all right to the end; but a man with a healthy body and a distressed soul is all right for sixty years or so and then he has to face eternity in Hell.”¹

Lloyd-Jones well understood how God channeled the minister’s desires toward confirmation of calling. He reflected:

I would say that the only man who is called to preach is the man who cannot do anything else, in the sense that he is not satisfied with anything else. This call to preach is so put upon him, and such pressure comes to bear upon him that he says, “I can do nothing else, I must preach.”²

If ever a young man resonated with Lloyd-Jones’ description it was me, circa 1997. I felt an unprovoked, unintended desire for ministry, and I did not know what to do with it. That desire—and whether or not it was even appropriate—dominated my life. I did not know where to turn or what to do, but, thankfully, God drew me to the Pastoral Epistles.

First Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus are often called the Pastoral Epistles because they reflect most directly on pastoral

service. In them Paul sets forth how the church is to minister and who should lead that ministry. When I was discerning my call, I read through these letters daily to better grasp what a life of ministry entails, how one is to serve the church, and, especially, to clarify God's will for my life. They were like road signs and streetlights, both pointing and illuminating the way forward.

The most helpful passage in the letters for anyone sensing God's call to the ministry is 1 Timothy 3:1–7, as it states plainly the qualifications for the ministry. From verse one I derive our first question: *Do you desire the ministry?*

APPROACHING THE PASTORATE

In 3:1 Paul writes, “It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.” This singular verse is pregnant with meaning and is key to discerning your call to ministry. Let's unpack it piece by piece.

It is a trustworthy statement. On five occasions in the Pastoral Epistles Paul says, “It is a trustworthy statement.” Each time, he does it to draw particular attention to a word or phrase of special importance. Here, he uses it to introduce the qualifications for ministry, reminding us that they are essential for both the church and the would-be minister. In other words, we should sit up and pay careful attention to what follows!

Aspires. This is an uncommon New Testament word. It means “to reach out after” or “grasp for.” We can think of this as the practical act of seeking the office of overseer. Common expressions of this in our day are applying for a ministry position, seeking mentorship from a pastor or elder, enrolling in seminary, or entering a ministry training program.

Office of overseer. This is the subject of verses 1–7, and it refers to both a title and task, or form and function. By form and function I mean the correspondence between what someone is called and what they do. Those who are pastors in title (form) must do what pastors, biblically defined, do (function). Conversely, if a person is not qualified to exercise authority in the church (function), you don’t get around it by downgrading their title to “minister” or “director” (form). They are still positioned to exercise authority in the church, thus functioning as a pastor or elder. The term *overseer* refers to one who exercises spiritual leadership over a congregation. As we will see, this office also carries with it pastoral care responsibilities, a duty to preach or teach Scripture, and a requirement to meet certain character qualifications. Scripture also says that those who labor well in it are worth double honor—that is, full-time elders (pastors) should be supported financially by their church (1 Tim. 5:17).

Depending on your Bible translation, *overseer* may also be translated “bishop.” In the New Testament, *overseer*, *bishop*, *elder*, and *pastor* are used interchangeably. For example, here

in 1 Timothy 3:1 the word *overseer* is the Greek word *episkopos*, which is sometimes translated “bishop,” and from which the Episcopal Church gets its name. It is synonymous with the Greek word *presbyteros*, meaning “elder,” and from which the Presbyterian Church gets its name. We see these terms, and the word *pastor* (Greek *poimen*), used interchangeably in places like Acts 20:17–38, 1 Peter 5:1–2, and Titus 1:5–7. The same scenario occurs in 1 Timothy 5:17 when Paul calls the overseers “elders.” Therefore, in this book we will use *pastor*, *elder*, *bishop*, and *overseer* interchangeably, and in so doing we will anchor their qualifications and functions to 1 Timothy 3:1–7.

Fine. The work of ministry is a fine work. *Fine* means “noble,” “honorable,” or “excellent.” This means that yearning for ministry is a good thing. Be encouraged, if you find yourself aspiring to the ministry, that the work is not only worthwhile but exceedingly glorious, and it is worthy of your full effort and pursuit.

Desire. This word refers to the inward compulsion, or passion, for ministry. It is what’s taking place in your inner person that leads you to “aspire,” or pursue practically, ministerial service. These two words—*aspire* and *desire*—must go together. If you desire the ministry, you will aspire to it.

To do. With this phrase Paul puts the minister’s task on an active, energetic footing. Again, the wording is subtle but important. The office of the pastor is not merely a position to

be occupied; it is a work to be done. For a number of years I had the privilege of pastoring near Fort Knox, Kentucky. Nearly half of my church was military, and I enjoyed spending many days on base. One day while eating lunch with a group of soldiers, I noticed that officers wore their ranks on their shoulders, whereas the enlisted soldiers' chevrons were positioned on their arms. When I asked about it, I learned that the placement of an officer's rank on his shoulder signified the burden of leadership he carried. Conversely, the enlisted soldier's rank on the arms indicates the brawny nature of his work, serving his country with strength and arms.

We should think of the pastoral office similarly, except that a pastor wears his ranks on both his shoulders and his arms. There is no such thing as a pastor who knows only the burden of leadership or only the sweat of service. He who desires the ministry must aspire to both, since the ministry necessarily includes both. A pastor serves the people of God and carries out his responsibilities as assigned by Scripture and God's people.

EAGER TO SURRENDER

First Timothy 3:1 brought refreshing and liberating clarity to my "desire dilemma." Though I desired the ministry, I was conflicted as to whether I *should* desire it. I feared I was being presumptuous, perhaps even arrogant. My confusion was rooted in

the phrase “surrendering to ministry.” The phrase was common in my home church, and it prompted me to assume one should resist ministry until ultimately relenting and surrendering to it. As we’ll see in chapter 12, ministry does require surrender, but not necessarily the type preceded by resisting God’s call.

In 1 Peter 5:1–3, the apostle underscores the appropriateness, and even the necessity, of desiring the ministry. Peter writes:

Therefore I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, *but with eagerness*; not yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. (emphasis added)

A simple reading of the passage shows us that pastors must desire the ministry. There is no other way to shepherd God’s flock but with eagerness. Alexander Strauch, in his book *Biblical Eldership*, agrees:

The desire to be an elder is not sinful or self-promoting, if it is generated by God’s Spirit. . . . A Spirit-given desire

for pastoral leadership will naturally demonstrate itself in action. It cannot be held in. A man who desires to be a shepherd elder will let others know of his desire.³

Every Sunday might not furnish the preacher with emotions like Richard Baxter, who famously resolved to preach “as a dying man, to dying men; as one not sure to ever preach again.”⁴ But the one whom God is calling will have a growing desire for the work of ministry.

If you’re contemplating ministry, desiring the work isn’t just an appropriate feeling; it is an indispensable one. As Charles Spurgeon said, “The first sign of the heavenly calling is an intense, all-absorbing desire for the work. In order to be a true call to the ministry there must be an irresistible, overwhelming craving and raging thirst for telling to others what God has done to our own souls.”⁵

Do you desire to serve in ministry? If you do, your desire is not the final step—it’s the first, and your stamina in pursuing each subsequent step will reveal the intensity of your desire. Next we turn to perhaps the most scrutinizing question in this journey of discernment: *Does your character meet God’s expectations?*