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CHAPTER 1

Celebrate and Clarify Your Call

Congratulations! The fact that you're reading this book likely means you sense a call to ministry. A calling is a singular opportunity, a precious stewardship. You are embarking on one of the most joy-filled, consequential lives you can live.

To be clear, the call to follow Christ is universal—to be issued by believers to all people, at all times, and in all places. All people must hear the gospel call because God intends it for all people (Matt. 28:18–19).

But God's call to ministry is different—it is selective, individual, and specific. God enlists ministers into a conscripted force and equips them to serve His church, teach His Word, and proclaim His gospel. Therefore, if you have been called to ministry, God has sovereignly set you apart for His service.

I begin this book by pointing out the singularity of your call not to foster pride or fear within you. Rather, my goal is to remind you of the uniqueness of your call, to awaken you accordingly, and to prompt you to pursue it with maturity and faithfulness.

THE BEST INVITATION

Invitations are common to human experience. We receive them from all sorts of people to all sorts of events: graduations, weddings, office parties, baby showers, dinner gatherings, and so on. We've grown accustomed to it.

Yet some invitations eclipse all others—such as, say, an invitation to the White House. In fact, etiquette expert Emily Post famously observed, “An invitation to the White House is a must attend. You must drop everything and go.”¹ A number of years ago, I received a White House invitation and, believe me, I prioritized it accordingly.

As grand as such an invitation is, an invitation to ministry is grander still. God, who issues the call, is infinitely greater than the president of the United States. The location—fields white for harvest (John 4:35)—is far superior to the White House. And, of course, the work of ministry is far more noble and lasting than anything happening at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue—regardless of who occupies the address.

THE HIGH CALL OF MINISTRY

This is a book about preparing—especially in seminary—for the ministry God has called you to undertake. Before we get ahead of ourselves, though, I first want to make sure you have a clear grasp on your own call. It is imperative that you biblically frame God's call on your life—both what it means and why you should pursue it.

Lest you think I'm overhyping the grandeur of God's call, reflect with me on three key New Testament passages. In Ephesians, the apostle Paul teaches us that Christ has gifted His church, in this age, with pastors and evangelists for the work of ministry. A called minister is, quite literally, one of Christ's gifts to His church:

And He gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for 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. (Eph. 4:11–13)

Christ has given His church certain leaders for a certain purpose: to equip the saints for the work of ministry. But you can only pass on to others what you have received. In order to equip the saints, *you* must be equipped; in order to nurture them, *you* must be nurtured.

Moreover, in Romans, Paul unpacks God's plan to reach the nations through preachers whom He has set apart. If Ephesians 4 depicts the minister as *teaching* Christians, Romans 10 depicts the minister as *making* Christians through the preaching of the gospel. Consider Paul's airtight logic, and bask in the glory of a minister's call:

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

How then are they to call on Him in whom they have not believed? How are they to believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? But how are they to preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!" (Rom. 10:13–15)

God again makes clear that individuals are the means through which He will reconcile others to Himself (cf. 2 Cor. 5:11–21). In Paul's mind, God setting apart some for ministry is directly tethered to others becoming Christians.

The church has to affirm one's call to ministry. Biblically speaking, there is no such thing as a self-authenticated minister.

In 1 Timothy, finally, Paul clarifies *who* may undertake the work of pastoral ministry. As I've mentioned, it's not a "whosoever will, may come" type of call. Your subjective desire for the work is not enough; your local church is responsible for assessing your desire and gifting. This involves together evaluating your sense of call against the objective standard

of 1 Timothy 3:1–7:

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, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, skillful in teaching, not overindulging in wine, not a bully, but gentle, not contentious, 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 condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil.

Do you measure up to this divine standard? Process these qualifications with your pastor(s) and church leaders. Ask them to honestly evaluate you and your desire. As I said above, the church has to affirm one's call to ministry. Biblically speaking,

there is no such thing as a self-authenticated minister.

Do you see yourself in these three passages? Have you reckoned with the nobility of the work and the high qualifications for those who undertake it? This is God's view of the office you wish to hold and the service you seek to render. These are His standards for those who serve in ministry. These are His standards for you.

ARE YOU CALLED TO MINISTRY?

So, again, is this you? Have you received a call to ministry? Do you see God at work in your life in these ways and toward these ends? Has your pastor or your elders encouraged you to pursue ministry? Has your church affirmed your calling? If questions still linger, I point you to my book *Discerning Your Call to Ministry*. It will help you engage these questions more deeply and, I hope, steer you toward greater clarity in your call.²

Given that this book is about succeeding at seminary, you likely believe you've received God's call and are pursuing it accordingly. That's why you're reading the book.

**A call to ministry
is a call to
prepare.**

While I encourage you to settle the question of whether or not God has truly called you to ministry, don't feel pressure at this juncture to declare what type of ministry you will pursue. For some of you, that sense of calling is quite clear. You are poised to pastor, or plant a church, or serve as a student minister. You know what God has called you to do and you're eager to do it.

For others of you, your calling is clear but the specifics are not. You have a general sense God is setting you apart for a

ministry of the Word, but beyond that you still have more questions than answers. That's perfectly okay, too.

Seminary is not just a season of theological formation; it's also a season of spiritual and ministerial discovery. A healthy seminary experience will not only inform the mind but shape the heart and crystallize the calling.

That's why, if you're called to ministry, a step toward seminary is a step in the right direction. A call to ministry is a call to prepare. Do your best to get the entire ministry toolkit so you are ready for whatever door God might open for you. You simply have no way of knowing what God has in store for your future.

Consider my journey in this regard, for example. In just over twenty years of ministry, I have served in roles as a student minister, assistant to the pastor, minister of outreach, college minister, pastor, interim pastor, seminary professor, seminary administrator, seminary president, and more!

Here's the point: it is impossible to predict where God will lead you, but it *is* possible to prepare for where God may lead you. That is what this book is about—your ministry preparation and how to get the most out of it.

IN CONCLUSION

Almost every kind of invitation—yes, even to the White House—includes an RSVP date. The host needs to make appropriate preparations, and the invited guest is holding a place that could be extended to another.

Too many would-be ministers treat God's call to ministry like there is no RSVP date. They dawdle and delay, halfheartedly pursuing what's ahead. We don't send mixed signals to other invitations; why do we do so with God?

You need to operate as though you have a clear RSVP date.

Clarify your calling with your pastors and your church, seek wise counsel and helpful resources to chart your course for ministry preparation, and then, by faith, follow God's call. The needs of the church and nations are too great—and the calling to ministry too grand—to delay.

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