

*The Call of Christ
on Christian Leaders*

WORKERS FOR YOUR JOY



David Mathis

“David Mathis is right that two thousand years later, the biblical qualifications for elders ‘continue to pulse with relevancy to the everyday work of Christian leadership.’ What a great help this book would have been forty years ago when I was trying to build church-wide consensus around how the local church is to be led. What makes this book unique is the way pastoral joy, patient exposition, and personal application are woven into the fabric of Christian leadership. May God use *Workers for Your Joy* to raise up thousands of leaders who do not lord it over their people’s faith, but ‘work with you for your joy’ (2 Cor. 1:24).”

John Piper, Leader, Teacher, and Founder, desiringGod.org

“As an author who has written two books about leadership in Christ’s church, I know of no other book like *Workers for Your Joy*. David Mathis leads you through an examination of the biblical qualifications of an elder in a way that is penetrating, personal, and practical at every point. As I read chapter after chapter, each dedicated to a pastoral qualification, I was both deeply convicted and encouraged. As you read, you cannot help being amazed at the generosity of our Lord in gifting his church with this kind of leadership—all for the joy of his people. And I have to say: I love that joy is the central organizing theme of this book about pastoral ministry! I cannot think of any member or leader in the body of Christ who would not benefit from taking some time to stroll through the garden of practical gospel wisdom that makes up the pages of this book.”

Paul David Tripp, Pastor; author, *Lead: 12 Gospel Principles for Leadership in the Church* and *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry*

“Our culture is averse to authority, partially because of the sinful abuse of authority. Still, God intended for there to be leaders in our churches, and David Mathis helps us understand in this biblically saturated and pastorally wise book what the Scriptures teach about elders. The duties and responsibilities of elders are unpacked clearly and powerfully chapter by chapter. We desperately need qualified and godly leaders in our churches, and this is the ideal book for church members considering who should lead a church, for leaders as they consider whether they are qualified, and for seminarians and college students as they study what the Scriptures teach about elders.”

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“The antidote to bad authority is not no authority. It’s good authority. And we need a whole lot more good authority—humble, whole, and honorable—in the church today. I commend David Mathis’s wonderfully clear and biblical guide to Christian leadership that glorifies God.”

Collin Hansen, Vice President for Content and Editor in Chief, The Gospel Coalition; Host, *Gospelbound* podcast; coauthor, *Rediscover Church*

“At a time when Christian reflection on leadership seems to have been hijacked by ideas from the corporate world, it is refreshing to see a book on leadership that derives its material from the Scriptures. The major leadership crisis facing the church today has to do with character, not with method or strategy. The Bible has a lot to say about that. This is the focus of this book. It reflects deeply on what the Scriptures teach in a way that challenges our attitudes and behaviors and encourages change toward Christlikeness.”

Ajith Fernando, Teaching Director, Youth for Christ, Sri Lanka; author, *The Family Life of a Christian Leader*

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The Call of Christ on Christian Leaders

David Mathis

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*To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Cities Church,
with the pastors and deacons*

*Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you,
but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.*

LUKE 10:20

Contents

Preface *II*

Introduction: The Pastors We All Want *23*

PART 1: HUMBLLED: MEN BEFORE THEIR GOD

- 1 How Christ Appoints His Pastors *45*
- 2 Not a Novice—or Arrogant *63*
- 3 Pastors Are Teachers *73*
- 4 Pastors Keep Their Head in a Conflicted World *95*

PART 2: WHOLE: MEN WHERE THEY ARE KNOWN BEST

- 5 Self-Control and the Power of Christ *III*
- 6 The World Needs More One-Woman Men *127*
- 7 Does Drinking Disqualify a Pastor? *143*
- 8 Does Your Pastor Love God or Money? *153*
- 9 The Tragedy of Distracted Dads *163*

PART 3: HONORABLE: MEN BEFORE
A WATCHING WORLD

- 10 The First Requirement for Christian Leaders 183
- 11 How Pastors Win (and Lose) Respect 193
- 12 Love for Strangers and the Great Commission 207
- 13 The Strongest Men Are Gentle 221
- 14 How Do Pastors Pick Their Fights? 229
- 15 Why Christians Care What Outsiders Think 241

Commission: Christian Leadership versus Modern
Celebrity 249

Thanks 261

Appendix 1: Who Are the Deacons? 265

Appendix 2: A Word for Leaders: On Plurality and Team
Dynamics 269

Appendix 3: What Is Anointing with Oil? 283

Appendix 4: What Is the Laying On of Hands? 289

Appendix 5: How Old Should Elders Be? 295

Study Questions 303

General Index 327

Scripture Index 335

Desiring God Note on Resources 343

Preface

*Not that we lord it over your faith,
but we work with you for your joy.*

2 CORINTHIANS 1:24

WE LIVE IN AN AGE that has become painfully cynical about leadership—some of it for good reason. Much of it is simply the mood of our times.

Stories of use and abuse abound, and the letdowns make for big headlines. In the Information Age we have more and quicker access than ever before to tales of bad leaders. In our own lives, we all have felt the sting of being let down by some leader in whom we had placed our trust. The pain and confusion are real. The wounds can be deep. We learn to guard ourselves from future disappointment. Cynicism can feel like a worthy shield.

But the high-profile failures can mask the true source of our discontent with being led: we love *self* and come to pine for *self-rule*. Couple with it our generation's distorted sense of what leadership is. When leadership has become a symbol of status, achievement, and privilege—as it has in many modern eyes—we desire to be the leader ourselves, not to bless others but to get our way. And, understandably, we become reluctant to grant anyone else that authority over us.

Led by God through Leaders

Into such confusion the Christian faith speaks a different message. You need leadership. It is for your good. You were designed to be led, first and foremost by God himself—through the God-man, Jesus, who now wields all authority in heaven and on earth at the Father’s right hand. God made you to be led. He designed your mind and heart and body not to thrive in autonomy but to flourish under the wisdom and provision and care of worthy leaders and, most of all, under Christ himself. But there is more.

The risen Christ has appointed, even *gifted* his church with, human leaders, in submission to him, on the ground in local congregations. Precious as the priesthood of all believers is—a remarkable truth that was radically countercultural from the first century until the Reformation—today we have need to articulate afresh the nature and goodness of leadership in the local church—an important kind of *gracious inequality* within our equality in Christ.

Christian Vision of Leadership

One of the ways Christ governs his church and blesses her is by giving her the gift of leaders: “He *gave* the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11–12).

The mention of shepherds and teachers is of special significance, not only because it is the subject of this book but also because it is intensely personal to you as a Christian. It includes the *pastors* of your particular local church (and note that *pastors* is plural—that’s a major theme of this book). You’ve never met one of Jesus’s apostles

(even as their writings remain precious to us beyond words!), but chances are you know a pastor. I hope that many readers of this book will themselves be pastors. Faithful pastors are a gift from Christ to guide and keep his church today.

Are pastors flawed? Of course. Sinful? Regrettably. Have some pastors made terrible mistakes, sinned grievously, fleeced their flocks, and harmed the very ones they were commissioned to protect? Sadly, yes, too many have. Such failures do not fulfill the vision of what true Christian leadership is, but fall short of it or depart from it altogether. In fact, such failures show—by contrast—what real leadership in the church *should* be.

That's what this book is about: *what Christ calls leaders in his church to be and do*, especially the lead office or teaching office in the church, that of *pastor* or *elder* or *overseer*—three terms in the New Testament for the same lead office (more on that to come). At times the bar may seem surprisingly low. Other times it may seem almost impossibly high. Sometimes we'll talk in ideals; other times, very practically. My prayer is that these pages will be useful to congregants and leaders alike in considering what Christ expects of, and what vision he himself has cast through his apostles and prophets for, leadership in the local church.

Leaders for Your Joy

The epistle to the Hebrews gives this important glimpse into the dynamic of Christian leadership:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Heb. 13:17)

Here is a beautiful, marriage-like vision of the complementary relationship between the church and its leaders. The leaders, for their part, *labor* (they work *hard*; it is costly work) for the advantage—the profit—of the church. And the church, for its part, wants its leaders to work not only hard but *happily*, without groaning, because the pastors' joy in leading will lead to the church's own benefit. The people want their leaders to labor with joy because they know their leaders are working for theirs.

Leaders in the church, then, as Paul says of himself, are to be *workers for the joy of their people*. “Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy” (2 Cor. 1:24). Christ gives leaders to his people for their joy, which turns the world's paradigm and suspicions about leadership upside down.

For Your Advance and Advantage

Paul saw himself as such a *worker for joy* in the lives of the Philippians. Though in prison, he suspected this wasn't yet the end for him but that he would be released: “I will remain and continue with you all, *for your progress and joy in the faith*, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again” (Phil. 1:25–26).

The apostle saw his leadership as a laboring for the church's “progress and joy in the faith.” Not just progress, but progress *and joy*. How eager, then, would the people have been to submit to such a leader? The prospect of submitting to a leader drastically changes when you know he isn't pursuing his own private advantage but genuinely seeking yours, what is best for you, what will give you the deepest and most enduring joy—when he finds his joy *in yours* rather than *apart from* or *instead of* yours.

For readers who are skeptical of leaders in general (as many people today are—again, sometimes for good reasons), what if you knew that “those who are over you in the Lord” (1 Thess. 5:12) were not in it to stroke their ego, or secure selfish privilege, or indulge their desires to control others, but actively were laying aside their personal rights and private comforts to take inconvenient initiative and expend their limited energy to work for your joy?

For readers who are formal leaders in the church, in the home, or in the marketplace, what if those under your care were convinced—deeply convinced—that your place of relative authority, under Christ, was not for self-aggrandizement or self-promotion but was a sobering call to self-sacrifice, and that you were working for their joy? That your joy in leadership was not a selfish pursuit, but a holy satisfaction you were finding in the joy of those whom you lead?

No Greater Joy

The Christian vision is that leaders taste the greatest joys when they look out for, and give themselves to, the interests of others—when they marshal their power and effort to bring about the advantage and advance (on God’s terms) of those in their care. Such leaders know the delight of the apostle John, who says, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (3 John 4). They can say, with Paul, “What is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy” (1 Thess. 2:19–20).

When undershepherds in the church show themselves to be *workers for your joy*, they walk in the steps of the great shepherd—the great worker for joy—the one who bore the greatest cost for others’ good, and not to the exclusion of his own joy. He found his joy in the joy of those for whom he was Lord. “For the joy that

was set before him [he] endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2). He is the one who tells us to pray, “that your joy may be full” (John 16:24) and speaks to us, “that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11; also John 17:13). And he is the one who gives pastors to his church for your joy.

This Book

Christian leadership exists for the joy of the church. Such a vision may turn some of our churches upside down, first for pastors and then for the people. That’s the vision I hope to impart, and linger in, in this book.

My hope is that these chapters will be useful for Christians who do not personally aspire to office in the church but hope to get clarity, in confusing times, about what they can and should hope for and pray for and expect in their leaders in the local church. I also hope this book will bless those who aspire to be pastor-elders and deacons (the two offices in the church), to get a fresh sense of what the work is (and is not). The concepts and approach of these chapters originally emerged from teaching seminary students (aspiring pastors) at Bethlehem College & Seminary (BCS), beginning in 2012. With congregants and particularly aspiring pastor-elders in mind, my friend (and instructional designer) Pam Eason lent her expertise to crafting study questions for each chapter, from preface to conclusion. She designed these with both individual and group study in mind. They are located at the back. I’m amazed to see Pam’s skill at work, extending the key concepts of these chapters into insightful and enjoyable questions and activities. I pray many will benefit from the study, not just the reading.

If I may be so bold, I also hope that this book might be of some use for those who are already in local-church office, whether newly

or for years. This book may not have many new concepts and perspectives to offer you, but perhaps rehearsing them afresh, in this format, could provide some renewed sense of the preciousness of your charge and enrich the joy you find in it—for the good of your people (Heb. 13:17). Perhaps these pages will offer something you've overlooked or neglected. We all are lifelong learners.

In teaching the eldership class for the last decade at BCS, maybe my single biggest discovery has been how much the practical-ministry topics one would want to address with aspiring pastors map onto the elder qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9. Imagine that! The apostle Paul, speaking for the risen Christ, really knew what he was talking about. Almost two thousand years later, these qualifications continue to pulse with relevancy to the everyday work of Christian leadership, if we will only slow down enough to really listen and think and learn.

The eldership qualifications are not simply moral hoops to jump through to then be qualified to do the work of pastoring. Rather, Christ, through his apostle, requires these traits because they are *the precise virtues pastor-elders need* for the day-in, day-out work of their calling. These *are* the graces we need to be good pastors. These are not just *prerequisites* but ongoing requisites, because this is *who the elders need to be* to do what they're called to do. Without these fifteen attributes, leaders will not prove, in the long haul, to be genuine workers for the joy of their church. They will devolve, in time, into self-servers. They will not prove to be the kind of pastors we all want. Let me say it once more, so that the particular focus of this book is lost on as few readers as possible. The qualifications are not the main subject of this book. Rather, the pastorate, or eldership, is the subject, and the qualifications are the lens through which we will address the topic.

So, then, if the remarkable ongoing relevance of the elder qualifications is one of the central offerings of the book, why not just keep with Paul's order for the book's structure? Well, lists in a series, in a single sentence, don't necessarily impress themselves upon a reader in the same way that fifteen *chapters* do in the flow of a book. I'm asking you to pause with me over these qualifications and see the pastor's task through them. Intentional as Paul is in his choice of virtues in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, I don't believe he would insist we search them out in a particular order. Just the varying order of his twin lists may make that clear enough.

As for my semi-apologetic for the order of this volume and its parts, I'm taking my cues from the (near) mysterious power of three.¹ Perhaps it's because God is one and three, and our universe, even when we do not perceive it, dances spectacularly to the tune of one and three. Or maybe it's just enduringly helpful for finite creatures like us (prone to see things from a single perspective, or maybe two) to consider three angles. However deep the magic, I often find it illuminating to push myself to ponder three vantage points rather than just one or two. I don't force every sermon into a three-part outline, but I end up there an awful lot—and not just three disparate bullets but three perspectives that illumine and reveal one singular, multidimensional whole. In a previous project, on the so-called spiritual disciplines, a triperspectival approach contributed to the main insights I offered there, considering God's *means of grace* for the Christian life in view of

1 See John Frame's article "A Primer on Perspectivalism," The Works of John Frame and Vern Poythress website, June 4, 2012, <https://frame-poythress.org/>. Also John Frame, *Theology in Three Dimensions: A Guide to Triperspectivalism and Its Significance* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017); and Vern Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001).

three loci: the word of God (normative), prayer (existential), and fellowship (situational).²

On the topic of eldership—whether you’re a congregant considering your leaders or an aspiring (or current) pastor pondering your call—I find the elder qualifications cleanly cluster to at least one of three axes: (1) the man before his God (the devotional life), (2) the man before those who know him best (his private life), and (3) the man before the watching church and world (public life). In sum, we might say *humbled*, *whole*, and *honorable*. Instead of proceeding through the fifteen qualifications in the order of 1 Timothy 3, I’ve arranged them according to this paradigm. Sometimes we find insights in simply coming at known concepts in a fresh order.

This book does not mainly offer lessons from my years of pastoral ministry (only fourteen at the time of publication). This book is largely a biblical vision of Christian leadership that takes the elder requirements with utter seriousness. I have not aimed to produce a practical guide. This book is not designed to give you simple answers about many of the perennial questions in eldership—some of them, yes, but this is not mostly lessons and answers.

This book aims to paint a vision, not just in broad brushstrokes but with the fine lines the New Testament gives us and what we discover about those lines as we follow them across the canon of Scripture. Experience is not irrelevant. You probably wouldn’t want a book like this to be all theory from a man who has never pastored. But I hope my limited experience (as still a young pastor who recently turned forty) won’t be too much of a drawback. Perhaps if I waited another twenty years to write this book, then it would be substantially different. But I doubt it, given its nature.

2 *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

Time will tell. For now, I give you what I can offer, informed first by Scripture and tested in about two decades of spiritual leadership, from college ministry to almost fifteen years as a pastor—and sharpened and challenged by a decade in the seminary classroom. Not to mention with many wise, old friends in life and in print.

At the end of the day, I want to point you, like every good Christian teacher should, to the words of the chief shepherd himself in the writings of his apostles and prophets. If readers of this book will simply take the elder qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 with new seriousness (and fresh enthusiasm to embody them and apply them in the labor of pastoring), I will feel a great satisfaction in this work. I could say, “My joy will increase.” Which is another main emphasis and offering of this book.

I take the topic of joy in leadership very seriously. I believe, with John Piper, that “there is a joy without which pastors cannot profit their people.”³ In the Christian life and in spiritual leadership the pursuit of joy is not peripheral. It is not icing on the cake. It is central. Christian leaders, if they are true and faithful, are *workers for your joy*. As are good husbands and fathers and mothers and coaches and bosses and politicians. In one sense, this could be a book for any kind of leader—that is, if he wants to be *Christian* in his leadership. The vision is fundamentally different from the operating assumptions of fallen men in our sin-sick world. But there are Christians today, in business and in politics and elsewhere, who are disillusioned with the world’s assumptions about leadership as personal privilege instead of glad self-sacrifice for the collective good. I hope some readers in those spheres will find here—in the elder qualifications of all places!—the fresh vision they are look-

3 John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Eugene, OR: Multnomah, 2011), 11.

PREFACE

ing for to be a different kind of leader in the world, the kind of leader Jesus would call them to be. But mainly this is a book about Christian leaders in the local church and what the risen Christ calls them to be and do.

So what is the kind of pastor we all want? What does it mean for leaders to be *workers for your joy*? Let's find out.⁴

⁴ Study questions, by chapter, are available at the back of the book, beginning with this preface.

Introduction

The Pastors We All Want

*Shepherd the flock of God that is among you,
exercising oversight, not under compulsion,
but willingly, as God would have you.*

I PETER 5:2

SEVERAL NEW TESTAMENT texts give us snapshots of leadership that are plainly different from today's prevailing paradigms.¹ Yet the place I turn most often and most enjoy inviting others into is 1 Peter 5:1–5. I pray that God may be pleased in our day to raise up and sustain pastors like this, the kind of pastors we all want. Here at the outset of this book on Christian leadership in the local church, before we turn to the elder qualifications as a lens into the heart of the call and daily work, consider five glimpses Peter gives of the leading or teaching office in the church, that of pastor or elder.

¹ Among them would be Mark 10:42–45; Acts 20:18–35; and 2 Tim. 2:22–26, in addition to the qualifications listed in 1 Tim. 3:1–13 and Titus 1:5–9.

Men Who Are Present and Accessible

Peter begins, “I exhort the elders *among you* . . . : shepherd the flock of God that is *among you*” (1 Pet. 5:1–2). He says it twice in just one sentence. The pastor-elders (two terms for the same office in the New Testament, as we will see) are *among the people*, and the people are *among the elders*. Together they are one church, one flock.

Good pastors are first and foremost sheep. They know it and embrace it. Pastors do not comprise a fundamentally different category of Christian. They need not be world-class in their intellect, oratory, and executive skills. They are average, normal, healthy Christians, serving as examples for the flock, *while among the flock*, as they lead and feed the flock through teaching God’s word, accompanied with wise collective governance. The hearts of good pastors swell to Jesus’s charge in Luke 10:20: “Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” Their first and most fundamental joy is not what God does *through them* as pastors but what Christ has done (and does) *for them* as Christians.

Good pastors, therefore, are secure in soul and not blown left and right by the need to impress or to prove themselves. They are happy to be seen as normal Christians, not a cut above the congregation but reliable models of mature, healthy Christianity.

Another way to say it is that such pastors are humble. After all, Peter charges “all of you”—elders and congregants—“Clothe yourselves, *all of you*, with humility toward one another” (1 Pet. 5:5). Healthy churches are eager to clothe themselves in humility toward their pastors who have led the way in dressing with humility for the church.

Such pastors, humble in practice, not just in theory, are *present* in the life of the church and *accessible*. They invite, welcome, and

receive input from the flock. They don't pretend to shepherd God's flock in all the world through the Internet but focus on the flock "that is among you"—those particular names and faces assigned to their charge—and they delight to *be among* those people, not removed, distant, or remote.

Men Who Work Together

One of the most important truths to rehearse about pastoral ministry is that Christ means for it to be *teamwork*. This will be a major theme in this book. As in 1 Peter 5, so in every context in which local-church pastor-elders are mentioned in the New Testament, the title is plural. Christ alone sits atop the church as Lord. He is head of the church (Eph. 1:22; 5:23; Col. 1:18), and he alone. The glory of singular leadership is his. And he means for his undershepherds to labor and thrive *not alone* but as a team.²

- 2 Given the number of churches today with single pastor-elder structures, it may be worth addressing briefly, even this early in the book, how a pastor in such a situation might pray and work toward building a team of fellow pastors. In short, I would counsel him to make a patient plan to get there. Typically it is no fault of his own when a pastor finds himself in such a situation. Don't assume you are in error to be there, but I would think you are mistaken to happily stay there without some intentional effort to raise up other leaders (as Paul charges his protégé in 2 Tim. 2:2). Granted, you cannot raise up leaders overnight. But you may already have some ready-made elders in your congregation. You might start by making a list of Bible teachers. If you were going to have one or two other men in your church, other than you, teach the Bible for the whole church, who would it be? And if you do not already have qualified men at the ready, you can raise up men, God helping you, in a matter of time, whether a few years or perhaps even months, depending on the circumstances and your context. Begin by praying for God to raise up other qualified leaders in your congregation. Pray for particular faces and names. Then, in time, make a plan for regular meetings and opportunities to invest life-on-life in one or a few men in your church who have potential and invite them into the process. You might even pray, as you work, that God would cause a mature brother in Christ to come to your church out of the blue as well. A busy lone-ranger pastor may feel like he simply does not have the time to add personal disciple-making to his full schedule. I would counter that your busyness is precisely the reason to begin making the investment now. The demands on you are likely to increase over time, not recede, and you need more hands on deck to do the work to which

Mature congregations don't want an untouchable leader, perched high atop the church in his pulpit, safely removed from accountability and the rough-and-tumble exchanges of instinct and convictions among leaders that make for real wisdom. The kind of pastors we long for in this age are *good men with good friends*—friends who love them enough to challenge their assumptions, tell them when they're mistaken, hold them to the fire of accountability, and make life both harder and better, both more uncomfortable and more fruitful.

Men Who Are Attentive and Engaged

Pastors also exercise oversight (1 Pet. 5:2). However fragile modern humans have become, deep down we still want leaders who don't just listen and empower but also take initiative, give guidance, and provide genuine leadership. We want leaders who speak to us the word of God (Heb. 13:7) and actually do the hard and costly work of oversight, or governing, which they have been called to do. "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God" (Acts 20:28).

However experienced and capable good pastors may be, they are not typically men known for their world-class intellect, extensive experience, or their administrative savvy. Rather, they are known as *men of the book*—men for whom having God's word in Scripture makes all the difference in leadership; men whose leadership style is Bible based. The Bible is not a supplement or assumption for them; the Bible is central and explicit. God has spoken; that changes everything. Such pastors don't just *say* they trust God's

Christ calls the church's pastors. I would counsel you not to wait any longer. Begin praying, planning, searching, and taking some small steps now.

word. They trust it enough to know it backward and forward and bring it to bear, in prudent and proper application, on issue after issue in church life.

We want men who steward influence as teachers, not insist on control—“not domineering over those in your charge” (1 Pet. 5:3). Men who manifestly serve others, not self, with their abilities and authority. Men who actually expend the effort it takes to *lead*, not just occupy positions of authority. Men who do not treat the office as a privilege for personal gain but as a call from God to die to private comforts and convenience and to embrace the harder roads. Men who do the hard work to win trust rather than lazily presume it. Men who, as Peter says, “shepherd the flock of God” (1 Pet. 5:2), which not only means leading and feeding, casting vision and communicating truth, but also defending and protecting. This leads to a fourth quality.

Men Who Lean into Hardship

The true colors come out for leaders and congregations when tough times arise. We want the kind of pastors who lean in—not with forcefulness, necessarily, though that may be needed on occasion (yet rarely), but with even greater attentiveness, care, courage, and patient teaching.

In conflict, “the Lord’s servant” must not only be kind and patient, and correct opponents with gentleness, but also “able to teach” (2 Tim. 2:24–25), which in this context seems more like an inward temperament than an outward skill (more on that in chapter 3). God’s people don’t need teaching only in peacetime but just as much when times are tough, and even more. We need pastors who do not mainly see a static world of right and wrong and stand ready to pronounce judgment, but “teachers at heart,”

ready to take people where they are, in error and ignorance, and patiently present truth in an understandable and persuasive way, seeking to win them. When those who are in error receive such treatment from pastor-teachers, who knows? “God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:25–26).

Good pastors rise to the occasion in hardship. When times get tough, the hired hands flee (John 10:12–13); the true undershepherds abide. Peter’s “So” in 1 Peter 5:1 refers to what he just wrote in the previous sentence: “Let those who *suffer* according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good” (1 Pet. 4:19). Suffering is the context of Peter’s charge to the elders. That’s why he turns next in his letter to the elders—when the going gets toughest, the weight falls especially on the elders. As it should.

Good pastors know this and learn to lean in with courage and gentleness. When the situation is fraught, they become more present, not less. When uncertainty emerges, they grow more attentive, not less. Not that they have to be certain, or feign it, about what’s next and how the conflict will end. But they lean in and lead together and lean on fellow brothers in the cause. They do not pretend *their way* is best or the only one, but at least, with prayer and counsel, they will propose *a way* forward. When they don’t know what to do, they know one thing to do: look to God (2 Chron. 20:12). They initiate. They take a risk and put themselves out there in a world of cynicism and criticism. They overcome their fear of being wrong in the hope of caring for others.

To embrace the calling to the pastoral office in the church is to embrace suffering. Pastors suffer in ways *as pastors* they would not otherwise. But they do so looking to the reward, the selfless gain

to be had, the glory commensurate with the work, which is not shameful but pure: “When the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (1 Pet. 5:4). Which leads to a final quality.

Men Who Enjoy the Work

Churches want happy pastors. Not dutiful clergy. Not groaning ministers. The kind of pastors we all want are the ones who want to do the work and labor with joy for our joy. We want pastors who serve “not under compulsion, but *willingly*, as God would have you” (1 Pet. 5:2).

God himself wants pastors who labor from the heart. He wants them to aspire to the work (1 Tim. 3:1) and do it with joy (Heb. 13:17). Not dutifully or under obligation but willingly, eagerly, happily. And not just “as God would have you” but “as God himself does”—literally “according to God” (Greek *kata theon*). It says something about our God that he would have it this way. He is the infinitely happy “blessed God” (1 Tim. 1:11) who acts from joy. He wants pastors to work with joy because he is this way. He acts from fullness of joy. He is a God most glorified not by raw duty but by eagerness and enjoyment, and he himself cares for his people willingly, eagerly, happily.

Churches know this deep down—that happy pastors, not groaning elders, make for happy churches. Pastors who enjoy the work and work with joy are a benefit and an advantage to their people (Heb. 13:17).

Our Chief Pastor

Such are the pastors we all want. Of course, no man, and no team of men, will embody these dreams perfectly, but men of God learn

to press through their temptations to paralysis and resignation because of their imperfections. They happily lean on Christ as the perfect and great shepherd of the sheep, roll their burdens onto his broad shoulders (1 Pet. 5:7), remember that his Spirit lives and works in them, and then learn to take the next courageous, humble step—ready to repent and retry if it was the wrong one.

As pastors learn to live up to these realistic dreams—albeit not perfectly, but making real progress by the Spirit—some aspects of our wounded leadership culture will find healing. At least our churches, if not our world, will learn to lay down suspicions and enjoy God’s gift of good pastor-teachers.

The Church and Its Elders

Now, having lingered in that vision of eldership from 1 Peter 5:1–5, let’s establish a few basic, glorious truths about the church before addressing eldership more extensively. The nature of eldership flows from the nature of the church. And 1 Timothy 3:15 may be the best one-verse summary of the essence of the church. If I could give you just one text on the heart of ecclesiology, this would be it. The church, says 1 Timothy 3:15, is “the household of God” and “pillar and buttress of the truth.”³

Most of us know what pillars are; fewer today may be familiar with buttresses. A pillar lifts the roof up, and a buttress keeps the walls in. A pillar holds up from below so the roof doesn’t fall; the buttress holds up from the side so the walls don’t come down. What Paul is getting at in 1 Timothy 3:15 with the image of the pillar and the buttress, we might summarize as *presentation* and *protection*. Or advance and defense. Strength and support. A pil-

3 Bill Mounce calls this “perhaps the most significant phrase in all the Pastoral Epistles.” *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 222.

lar compresses against vertical weight for the sake of lifting an impressive structure high and catching eyes and attention, while a buttress acts against lateral forces to reinforce the defenses and provide security and stability. The church, then, as pillar and buttress holds high the truth (presentation) and holds firm to the truth (protection).

But what is “the truth” in verse 15? Is it truth in general, like the truths of mathematics and chemistry and physics? Is it truth *in general* that the church holds high and holds firm for the sake of maintaining order in society?

Here and throughout 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, “the truth” doesn’t mean truth in general, but specifically *the* truth, the message of the gospel that Jesus saves sinners (as in ten other texts: 1 Tim. 2:4; 4:3; 6:5; 2 Tim. 2:18, 25; 3:7, 8; 4:4; Titus 1:1, 14). And this *truth* contrasts with the *myths* propagated by false teachers. In other words, the truth in view in the Pastoral Epistles is the message of the gospel.⁴ So the church, we could say, is the pillar and buttress of *the gospel*. The church exists for the presentation and protection of the gospel of Jesus Christ. For the advance of the gospel and its defense.

Creature of the Word

Another way to say it is that the church is a *creature of the word*—a people (“living stones,” 1 Pet. 2:5) created and sustained by the word of the gospel for the advance and defense of the gospel (pillar and buttress), molded and shaped through and through by God and his word and the climactic revelation of himself in Jesus and his work.

⁴ As Mounce summarizes it, “‘truth’ in the Pastoral Epistles [is] a technical term for the gospel message.” *Pastoral Epistles*, 86–87.

The church is the creature of the word, the people of the gospel, created and birthed by the message of Jesus to lift it high and hold it firm. This is why Paul celebrates the way he does in verse 16.

Mystery of Godliness

First Timothy 3:16 expands “the truth” in 3:15. And we have this new enigmatic term “the mystery of godliness”:

. . . the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory. (1 Tim. 3:15–16)

Throughout 1 Timothy, *godliness* refers to Christian living. In light of who God is, we are to live together in the church in increasing degrees of likeness to him—godliness. We are to imitate God, imaging him, and live as he would if he were human in the world. And now Paul, in celebrating the church, moves into the very truth that created the church and sustains it and is its organizing principle at its center: the person and message of Jesus. We already saw Jesus’s message in “the truth.” Now we get his person in the poetic lines of verse 16.

The mystery of godliness, then, is that God himself in the person of his Son did become man and live in our world—true godliness

in human form—died for the ungodly, rose again in triumph, and now empowers the spread of his message throughout the world by his Spirit through his church. The mystery of godliness—a mystery no longer hidden but now revealed—is that we are not the source of our own godliness, but Jesus is. We don't *achieve* our own godliness. We begin by receiving God's gift to us in Christ, and his grace goes to work in and through us. As God incarnate, he is godliness incarnate. And only through him and the truth of his gospel and the power of his Spirit can we learn true godliness. The church is not a collection of self-made people. The church is Christ-made, a creature of his word.

Church Hymn

Some call these poetic lines in verse 16 a “Christ hymn,” but in this context it's not only about him. It's also a church hymn. This celebration of Christ becomes a celebration of the church. That's how we arrived here, remember. In peeling back the layers to the very heart of the church, we come to the gospel and to the Savior himself. And the poem has something to say not only about Jesus but also his church:

He was manifested in the flesh,
 vindicated by the Spirit,
 seen by angels,
 proclaimed among the nations,
 believed on in the world,
 taken up in glory.

The last word of each line forms three pairs: flesh/Spirit, angels/nations, world/glory. The hymn shows the universality and magnitude of Jesus's work. He brings together human flesh and the

realm of the Spirit, the angelic hosts and the earthly nations, the physical world and heavenly glory.

What's the connection to the church? The first two descriptions focus on what we might think of as the gospel: "He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit." He came, he lived, he died, he rose, he ascended. But the church—the people created by the gospel—is essential to complete the poem: "proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world." In union with her groom, the church stands with Jesus in spanning both the realms of flesh and spirit, both the audiences of angels and nations, and both this world and the glory to come.

So we have here a portrait of the glory of Christ and his church in the unrestricted scope of their impact and mission. Two worlds come together: the present world of flesh and nations and the coming world of angels and heavenly glory. And all of this celebrates the grandeur and expansiveness and beauty of Christ—and his church, which is essential in completing his mission in the world.

The church is the people in whom the physical world and spiritual universe come together. Here meets the current age and the age to come. The Lord of heaven kisses the things of earth. And the church is the manifestation, the creature, of Jesus's saving work, and the hands and feet of his ongoing work in the world.

Through the Church

Quite simply, there is no other institution among humans like the church. No other group, no other body, no other coming together in all of creation is more significant. In another memorable place in his letters, Paul celebrates like this the grandeur and centrality of the church in God's plan: Ephesians 3, verses 10 and 20. Let's see them with some context:

Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that *through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.* (Eph. 3:7–10)

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, *to him be glory in the church* and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Eph. 3:20–21)

Through the church—and no other particular institution or instrument—God is making his manifold wisdom known to the spiritual powers in the heavenly places (angels). And his glory—the very glory of God!—is shining from two great sources: “in the church and in Christ Jesus.” It is an almost unbelievably awesome calling. Yet we can be so prone to take the church lightly. May God be pleased to work in us wonder, like Paul's, that the church exists and that, in Christ, we get to be a part of the most important body and mission in the world today and in all of history.

Where Pastor-Elders Fit

Now the pastor-elders. If the essence of the church is as a creature of Christ's word, then the essence of eldership, we might say, is that pastor-elders are men of the word, men of the gospel.

I say “pastor-elders” here and throughout the book with the understanding that in the New Testament, elder = pastor = overseer.

These are not three offices in the New Testament but three terms for one office, the teaching or lead office. Three texts, among others, make this unmistakable, from the narrative of Acts, to Paul's letters, to Peter's. Acts 20:17 says Paul gathered the "elders"; 20:28 then says these elders are "overseers" who "care for"—literally the verb "pastor"—"the church of God." Titus 1:5 speaks of appointing elders; 1:7 uses the term "overseer." And like Acts 20, 1 Peter 5 brings all three terms together: Peter exhorts the elders (v. 1) to "shepherd" or "pastor" (same verb as Acts 20:28) God's flock, "exercising oversight" (v. 2).⁵

These pastor-elder-overseers are to be "men of the gospel," just as the church is the creature of the gospel. In chapter 3, we will look at that often underappreciated and very important qualification "able to teach" (Greek *didaktikos*, 1 Tim. 3:2). What is it that the elders teach? They teach the word of God that culminates in the gospel of Christ. Titus 1:9, we might say, expounds the requirement (note well this is for *all elders*, not just teaching elders or a preaching pastor): "He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it."

Pastor-elders are to be men of the word who know God's word, enjoy it, linger over it, have been shaped by it, live it, and want to teach others about it at every reasonable opportunity they can find. So Paul's charge to Timothy is not only for Timothy but for all pastor-elders: "Do your best to present yourself to God as

5 For more on the case that elder = pastor = overseer in the New Testament, see, among others, Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 76–83; Gregg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 211–12; Dave Harvey, *The Plurality Principle: How to Build and Maintain a Thriving Church Leadership Team* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 26n3.

one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

Christ means for his church—which is a word people, created by his word—to be led by word men. These word men, these teachers, as we’ll see, have two main tasks: to lead and to feed. The duly appointed elders, not just men in general, are the ones who “teach” and “exercise authority” (1 Tim. 2:12) in the church. The elders both “rule” (or “lead” or “govern”) and “labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17). The elders are “those who *labor among you* [in teaching] and *are over you* [in governing] in the Lord and admonish you” (1 Thess. 5:12). As we’ll see, the New Testament presents no regular category in church life of either “teachers” or “leaders” that are not pastor-elders. Whether the title is elder or overseer or pastor, or the function is teaching or governing, the New Testament consistently refers to one office.⁶

An important clarification to add is that the teaching provided by the elders is not to be thought of as “the ministry” of the church. It’s not the pastors who do “the ministry” while the congregation receives it or watches it. Rather, “the ministry” is what the congregation does in the world, in every nook and cranny of the community, in the home, in the neighborhood, at work, at play, in each other’s lives, and in the lives of unbelieving friends, neighbors, and coworkers. What the pastor-elders do in their teaching and leading is “equip *the saints* for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:12).

Receiving the apostles’ teaching and freshly proclaiming and applying it to the congregation through preaching and teaching is

6 The New Testament presents two offices in the local church: “overseers and deacons” (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1, 8). This book focuses on the lead office, the teaching office, that of overseer/elder/pastor, though the assisting office, as we might call it, is not irrelevant or unrelated. For more on deacons, see appendix 1.

the central task of the elders, but not the only one. Many today use the title “pastor” because we look to the elders to serve as shepherds in caring for the welfare of the church in its countless facets. The elders do more than simply teach; the elders are not only proactive in teaching and planning but responsive in meeting needs that arise.⁷ And every local church faces countless decisions that don’t fall out of the Gospels and Epistles like nice exegetical apples. Open Bibles and quoted Scripture at elder meetings are essential, and they rarely provide easy answers to some of thorniest issues facing faithful churches. The elders together must make mind-bending decisions that are not teaching per se; but God, remarkably, appoints that *the teachers*, those who should best know the apostles’ word, make these decisions on a regular basis, for the sake of the congregation.⁸

Humbled, Whole, and Honorable

The God of all grace has appointed that a plurality of mature Christian men—who know and love and are able to effectively communicate his word and his gospel—lead and feed his flock in the life of the local church. The God who has spoken—particularly in the Scriptures and his incarnate Word—created and sustains the church, a creature of his word, through the teaching and guidance of its leaders. So who are these men? In part 1, we turn our atten-

7 “A substantial part of the ruling/oversight function is discharged through the preaching and teaching of the Word of God. This is where a great deal of the best leadership is exercised. . . . But oversight of the church is more than simply teaching and preaching. . . . Just because a person is an able preacher does not necessarily make him an able pastor/elder/overseer. Indeed, if he shows no propensity for godly oversight, then no matter how good a teacher he may be, he is not qualified to be a pastor/teacher/overseer.” D. A. Carson, “Some Reflections on Pastoral Leadership,” *Themelios* 40.2 (2015): 197.

8 This is true both in elder-rule churches and in elder-led, congregational-rule churches. For my brief and measured case for elder-led, congregational rule, see “Who Governs the Local Church?” *Desiring God*, July 30, 2020, <https://desiringgod.org>.

tion to *humbled*: men before their God, what we might call the Godward or devotional life. Then we will look at *whole*: men in their own homes and private life, among those who know them best. Finally, in part 3, we will conclude with *honorable*: men before the watching eyes of the church and in the world, exemplary in their public life.⁹

9 Here is one final reminder about the study questions at the end of the book, designed for individuals or small groups to develop the concepts of these chapters and in particular to move them toward application.

PART 1

HUMBLD

Men before Their God

An overseer, as God's steward, . . . must not be arrogant.

TITUS 1:7

I count fifteen qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1–7. Some see fourteen. But in a book like this in which we are emphasizing the calling of pastor-elders to be “workers for your joy,” we will want to make much of the condition in verse 1: “*If anyone aspires* to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.” As we saw in 1 Peter 5:2, it is no small detail that God wants men who *aspire* to the work, men who *want* to do this labor, men able to *find joy* in what might be joyless work for many others. We need pastor-elders who exercise oversight “not under compulsion, but willingly.” Not all who aspire to the work will still do it willingly and joyfully ten or twenty years

later. But without an aspiration, we have no good reason to expect the necessary gladness will come.

Here in part 1, we will start where Paul starts in 1 Timothy 3:1, with “aspiration,” and consider the perennial question of how God appoints pastors to the work. How does a man know if he is “called” to the lead office in the church? The question is not altogether different from how we might know our calling into any line of labor, though in this one, as we’ll see, there is an unusual necessity.

Then we jump to what’s second to last in Paul’s list—humility—but conceptually so critical that in expanding the qualifications into chapters, it might be wise to address it up front in this book, not wait till the end. The Kings James Version says “not a novice”; the ESV, “not a recent convert”; and then the reason: so that he may not “become *puffed up with conceit* and fall into the condemnation of the devil.” In chapter 2 we’ll look at both realities: that elders not be new converts, on the one hand; and the deeper reason, and sobering reality, that arrogance in the elders is particularly destructive and spiritually deadly. The church needs pastor-elders who have been humbled and continue to grow in humility as they age.

Next is the single qualification that most sets elders apart from the deacons: able to teach. I’m aware that this is controversial today; it hasn’t always been so. Some traditions now lean hard on a distinction between “teaching elders” and “ruling elders.” I believe that’s a mistake, and instead of just arguing for a particular reading of 1 Timothy 5:17, I’ll try to provide a larger vision and framework of the eldership in the New Testament, including the “able to teach” (Greek *didaktikos*) qualification in 1 Timothy 3:2, that leads me to think of pastor-elders as essentially teachers, and that the regular teachers of the whole church are essentially (and ideally) the pastors. Hebrews 13:7 says, “Remember your leaders,

those who spoke to you the word of God.” He could assume that their leaders were the ones who spoke to them the word of God because the leaders were teachers, not mere governors.

As to why we address *didaktikos* here in chapter 3, so relatively early in the book: in the New Testament, the pastor-elders are so identified with teaching that it would be unwise to proceed at length into this study without tackling this central calling and function. In Paul’s list, *didaktikos* is fittingly at the very heart of the list, the eighth of the fifteen. But in this book, I doubt it would be wise to wait until halfway through to consider this one qualification that is perhaps the most distinctive as well as controversial.

Finally, we conclude part 1 with what may well be the most underrated qualification: sober-mindedness. Pastor-leaders are to be men who keep their heads under pressure, in conflict and controversy. And in just the normal, steady-state life of the church, we need level-headed, wise, spiritually and emotionally intelligent leaders rather than those who are impulsive, imbalanced, and reactive because pastor-elders are not just God-appointed teachers but God-appointed governors. I remember on many occasions sitting around the table with fellow elders when a man’s name would come up as a candidate. Guys would shake their heads and reach for words. He’s not a good fit. Or not yet. I came to learn that often the language we were groping for was right here in the eldership qualifications: sober-minded.

How Christ Appoints His Pastors

*If anyone aspires to the office of overseer,
he desires a noble task.*

I TIMOTHY 3:1

IS GOD CALLING ME to be a pastor in a local church? Many Christian men wrestle with this question at some point in their life of faith. Not just in adolescence or early manhood but sometimes at midlife or even as they approach their golden years.

The New Testament doesn't draw neat and distinct lines between full-time ministry and so-called secular work. In whatever God, by his providence, leads us into for our day job, he calls us to do our work "not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord" (Col. 3:22). Christ's apostle charges all workers, "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ" (Col. 3:23–24; also Eph. 6:6–8). Some pastors, unfortunately, may be too quick to overlook the application of these texts to our labors in the church, not just the world.

Discerning His Call

For our purposes in this book, the fundamental divide related to calling is not between full-time ministry and nonministry jobs, but this formal distinction: church office. This book focuses on the lead, or teaching, office of the church. Perhaps the better question to ask, then—or at least where we have some specific texts to give us more clarity—is this: Am I called to the office of *elder*?

Elders in the New Testament are to be spiritually mature men (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6). Not any Christian and not any man but mature men. Elder, as we rehearsed in the introduction, is the same office often called “pastor” today (based on the noun *pastor* or *shepherd* in Eph. 4:11 and its verb forms in Acts 20:28 and 1 Pet. 5:2). The same office is also called “overseer” in four places (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1–2; Titus 1:7). By focusing on the office rather than simply vocational (or nonvocational) ministry, several specific texts give us some bearings.

1. *Do I Desire the Work? (Aspiration)*

First, God wants pastors to *want* to do the work. He wants elders who happily give of themselves in this emotionally taxing work, “not reluctantly or under compulsion” (2 Cor. 9:7). God loves a cheerful pastor.

When the apostle Paul addresses the qualifications of pastor-elder-overseers, he first mentions aspiration and desire. “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone *aspires* to the office of overseer, he *desires* a noble task” (1 Tim. 3:1). God wants men who want to do this work, not men who do it under obligation. Christ grabs his pastors by the heart; he doesn’t twist them by the arm. He wants men with a holy ambition for the office, men with holy dreams about feeding

and leading the flock, men willing and eager to stretch themselves to do what the calling requires.

Peter says it even more powerfully. Christ wants elders to pastor his flock “not under compulsion, but willingly, *as God would have you*” (1 Pet. 5:2). Pastoring, eldering, and overseeing the church *from aspiration and desire*, not obligation and mere duty, are “as God would have you.” This is the kind of God we have—the desiring (not dutiful) God, who wants pastors who are desiring (not dutiful) pastors. Such a free and happy God means for the leaders of his church to do their work “with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage” to the people (Heb. 13:17). The good of the church is at stake in the holy desire of its pastors. They will not long work well for her joy if it is not their joy to do such work.

Practically, then, when we hear men, whether young or old, express an aspiration to the pastoral office, why would we not rejoice as a first instinct? How foolish would we be if our first inclination was to be skeptical, to challenge it, squash it, or see if we can disavow them of it? Rather, give them the benefit of the doubt, that God is at work. Such an aspiration is not natural. Let’s begin with the assumption that such an ambition is holy and start by encouraging, not interrogating, men who express such an otherwise unusual heart. If the aspiration is not holy, that will become clear in due course.

Desire for the work has a role to play in the calling to church office that it may not in other work. Your day job may be work you’re able to do but don’t enjoy, and God can be pleased with that. He often calls us to labor that is not our dream job; sometimes Christians may even labor in lines of work for years that, on the whole, they do not enjoy. But a fundamental difference between pastoral work and other callings is the *necessity* of desire for the work.

The presence and persistence (however imperfect) of such desire often marks the beginning of a pastoral calling, but it is never the entirety. *Aspiration* is a great place to start, but desire in and of itself does not amount to a calling. This is a common misunderstanding, at least in the way some speak of their “calling.” To complete the calling, God adds two layers of confirmation to pastoral aspirations: the consistent *affirmation* of others and some real-life *opportunity*.

2. *Am I a Good Fit for This Work? (Affirmation)*

Beyond sensing a subjective desire for pastoral ministry comes a more objective question about our fitness for the work. Have I seen evidence, however small, of fruitfulness in serving others through biblical teaching and counsel? And even more important than my own self-assessment, do others confirm my fit for pastoral ministry?

Here the desires of the heart meet the concrete realities of the real world and the needs of others. Office in the church is not for spiritual self-actualization or simply affirming a man’s spiritual maturity; biblical office is for meeting the actual needs of a particular local church. The elder qualifications are, in a sense, pretty unremarkable. Note well: the elders of the church should not be the sum total of all spiritually qualified men in the church. Rather, from among those who are qualified (let’s hope the number is great, and ever increasing), the elders are those willing to make extra sacrifices (whether for a season or the long haul) to care for the church and meet her ongoing needs. *Aspiration* has its vital part to play, but the call to pastoral office is not shaped mainly by the internal desires of our hearts but by external needs of the church.

This creates great tension with the “follow your heart” perspective and “don’t settle for anything less than your dreams” counsel we so often hear in society. What’s most important in discerning God’s call is not bringing the desires of our hearts to bear on the world but letting the actual needs of others meet with and shape our hearts.

Over time, then, an internal dialogue happens between what we *want* to do and what we find ourselves doing fruitfully for the benefit of others. Delight in certain kinds of labor grows as others’ real needs are met and as they affirm our abilities and efforts. Often Christians discover a calling to and fitness for ministry first through others’ observations and affirmations and only later through their own emerging aspirations.

Before you go looking for opportunities to shepherd in the future, make sure you are able to meet real spiritual needs in front of you today and seek confirmation from your current local church.

3. Has God Opened the Door Yet? (Opportunity)

Third, and perhaps most often overlooked in Christian discussions of calling, is the actual God-given, real-world open door. You may *aspire* and others may *affirm* your general direction, but you are not yet fully called to a specific pastoral ministry until God opens the door.

God in his providence does the decisive work. He started the process by giving you the aspiration. He affirmed the direction as his Spirit produced fruit through your abilities and inclinations and others took notice. Now he confirms that sense of calling by swinging open a real door in real time. It is finally God, not man—and God, not self—who issues the call and appoints to pastoral office:

- God the Spirit is the one who “*made* you overseers” (Acts 20:28).
- God the Son is the one who “*gave* the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:11–12).
- The Lord of the harvest is the one to whom we “pray earnestly . . . to *send out* laborers into his harvest” (Matt. 9:37–38).
- God is the master who “will *set* over his household” faithful and wise managers (Luke 12:42).
- The Lord Jesus Christ is the one from whom we *receive* the ministry we are to fulfill (Col. 4:17).

Excitement about *aspiring* and being *affirmed* can lead to our overlooking the reality check of this final step. Many today might say that a seminary student who aspires to be a pastor and has received affirmation from his home church is “called to ministry.” Well, not yet. He *senses* a call to full-time ministry—for which we thank God—and some people have found him to be fit for such work. He is well on his way. But what this aspiring, affirmed brother doesn’t yet have—to confirm his *sense* of calling—is a real-world opportunity where some church or Christian ministry presents him with a job description and says, “We are asking you to pastor here. Would you accept?”

Until God, through a specific local church, *makes* a man an overseer (Acts 20:28), *gives* him to the church (Eph. 4:11–12), *sends* him as a laborer (Matt. 9:37–38), and *sets* him over his household (Luke 12:42), he is not yet fully called. Aspiring pastor-elders would do better to speak of their *sense* of calling—and even more precisely, that they *aspire* to the work—rather than declaring, apart from the specific opportunity, that God has indeed called them.

What a marvel and blessing it is when God gives a man a desire for the pastoral office, equips him to meet real needs in the church with the word of God and wisdom, with affirmation from others, and opens a door for him to lead and serve in a specific local church. Then a man knows with conviction that he is indeed called.¹

Aspiration and calling lead naturally to questions about the appointment and disciplining of pastor-elders. Let's address the unpleasant topic first and then end this chapter on the higher note.

- ¹ This chapter is especially mindful of seminary students who feel an initial sense of call (aspiration), receive affirmation from their local church, and then make some major life change, often leaving town and their local church, to pursue a seminary education in preparation for the work. There can be great advantages to a season of such focus and intense study. A downside can be that the aspiring pastor is uprooted from his home church. Options for distance education now abound, which can be good for aspiring pastors to increase their competency without being uprooted from their church and city. But not every aspiring pastor-elder needs to pursue a formal seminary education, whether remote or onsite. What might we say to a man who aspires to the office of pastor-elder in his present church and does not plan to leave town and his church for a season of education elsewhere? First, let me commend patience. Getting a degree and searching for open jobs is often a faster track to a pastoral appointment than growing up organically in one's own church. Again, the needs of the particular church are critical. Does the church need more pastor-elders at present or soon, or not? And what might such an aspiring man do while he waits? Perhaps some readers find themselves in a place like this. I would commend that such a man seek intentionally to grow in the pastor-elder qualifications (one reason this book is structured as it is), and in particular seek to meet teaching needs, modest as they may be, as they become available. Try to get teaching "at bats," I like to say, however insignificant they may seem. Start with the nursery! Teach the Bible to kids. Small steps are vital to get going in the right direction for the long haul. Answer the humble opportunities presented you to teach God's word, prepare well, ask for feedback, and seek to grow. Be faithful where God has placed you, pray that he provide you more opportunities, and steward them well, one at a time.

Disciplining Elders

First, all pastor-elders need to know, and remember, that we have an inspired text for discipline. Paul addresses the disciplining of elders in 1 Timothy 5:19–24.

This is a solemn and weighty topic. As Christians, *we welcome all and affirm none*, as we might broadcast to the world, because all of us are sinners. Including Christian leaders. And sometimes gravely so. Power often corrupts, or at least magnifies the corruption of sin already in us. It is tragic on Capitol Hill and in Hollywood and even more tragic in the church.

We all have heard far too many stories about Christian leaders abusing power and failing egregiously—especially when not held accountable by a plurality of other leaders. And we’ve heard of leaders covering up the sins of other leaders, across ecclesial traditions and denominations. This is a great evil. And it is expressly what Paul stands against in 1 Timothy 5:21 in one of the most piercing statements in all his letters. He gives a solemn charge to not show partiality or favoritism to guilty leaders:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels
I charge you to keep these rules [which we’ll see below] without
prejudging, doing nothing from partiality.

The only other place where Paul expresses such a solemn charge is 2 Timothy 4:1–2:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is
to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his
kingdom: preach the word.

We've seen that the two main tasks of pastor-elders are preaching/teaching and leading/governing. So here, right alongside the magnitude of "preach the word," is, *Do not show partiality to leaders to keep them from the just consequences of their sin.*

Perhaps the charge in 1 Timothy 5:21 needs to be so solemn because we often have such great affection for our pastor-teachers, even when they have failed us. It is good when churches deeply love and admire worthy pastors and when fellow pastors have great affection for each other and genuinely are good friends and want to appropriately protect each other from unjust attacks. The danger comes with an inability to be impartial.

Apparently part of the problem (if not the whole) in Ephesus, where Paul had sent Timothy, was that false teaching had arisen among the elders. Paul himself had been part of establishing the church in Ephesus (Acts 19) and had stayed there more than two years teaching. He knew the church well. He knew faces and names and personal histories. And he had prophesied to the Ephesian elders that wolves would rise up from among the Ephesian elders:

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. (Acts 20:29–30)

Now Timothy has the task of addressing the trouble Paul had anticipated. I draw comfort from the fact that this conflict didn't take Paul off guard. Nor did it take Christ off guard. Conflicts will arise in the church, even among the elders. There is grace too for this. Choosing elders well goes a long way, but even when such

trouble arises, Christ, through his apostle, gives us more direction than simply the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3.

Hold Them Accountable

First Timothy 5:17–18 deals with elders who were leading well. Then because some pastors have not ruled well, Paul broaches the difficult subject of disciplining elders:

Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. (1 Tim. 5:19–21)

Perhaps you already sense the tension in these verses: on the one hand is protecting elders from unjust accusations, and on the other is holding them accountable when they've sinned. Because the office of pastor-elder is a public position, much is at stake from both sides. It's not a one-sided affair either way.

On one side, leaders are obvious targets of attack, and especially in a day when society increasingly loves to take out the powerful. The devil is regularly trying to take out the opposing lieutenants. Elders may not deserve special protection, but they should receive at least the kind of protection afforded every individual under the terms of the old covenant—two or three witnesses:

A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has

committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established. (Deut. 19:15)

Elders deserve the same benefit of the doubt as normal citizens. Timothy should not allow a suspect charge to sideline the ability of a pastor to serve the needs of the church. Leaders can be magnets for maniacal accusations or personal axe-grinding. The principle is *don't let the devil take out pastors with false charges*. “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.”

On the other side, leaders are sinners—and sometimes gravely so, as we’ve acknowledged. And so Paul gives Timothy the solemn charge in 5:21 not to show partiality or favoritism to leaders.

So verse 19 is in tension with verses 20–21: protect leaders from unjust accusations and treat just accusations seriously and without partiality. What Paul doesn’t lay out here is a specific plan for how to proceed with disciplining pastors in every church, or even in Ephesus. That he leaves to the collective wisdom of the elders in good standing. Paul gives principles for disciplining elders, not how-to steps. Each situation has its complexities, which is why we need pluralities of wise leaders, not rule books. So when a charge arises, we proceed carefully and patiently. Pluralities are known for being *inefficient but effective*, while authoritarian structures may seem efficient but are prone to error and partiality.

When elders, who are public servants in the church, are caught in significant sin, their discipline (or removal) needs to be public. Here Paul says, “As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.”² This may

2 John Piper, in personal conversation, observed that “rebuke” here (Greek *elegchō*) means “to expose” (as in Matt. 18:15; John 3:20; Eph. 5:11, 13). The persistent sin must be

be another allusion to Deuteronomy 19, where verse 20 says, “*The rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you.*” Paul applies that to the other elders. The public telling of one elder’s sin will have a sobering effect on the others, like Paul publicly opposing Peter “before them all” in Galatians 2:14 for the public sin of drawing back from table fellowship with Gentiles. Our leaders should not be untouchable. If not vigilant, they likewise will give in to sin. The discipline of one elder serves as a means of grace not only to him but also to the other elders, and the congregation as well.

So 1 Timothy 5:19 protects innocent elders from false charges, and 5:20 gives guilty elders greater discipline by making it public. The role of the other elders is vital in both counts. This is just one more reason, among many, for churches to have a plurality of elders, not a single pastor. Plurality provides better accountability. It is a plurality of elders that can both protect an elder from unjust charges as well as strive together for impartiality when one of their own has persisted in sin.

Appointing Pastors

Now we turn to the happier topic. In the same passage, Paul also addresses the appointing of pastor-elders:

Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure. (No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.) The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So

told or exposed; rebuke does not connote harshness or meanness, but clarity about the sin.

also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden. (1 Tim. 5:22–25)

This is now the second time in the letter that Paul has referenced this ancient ceremony called “the laying on of hands” (previously in 1 Tim. 4:14). In the Old Testament, the laying on of hands has a variety of meanings depending on context. Most often, the phrase is negative, meaning to inflict harm or lay God’s curse on someone (as in Gen. 22:12; Lev. 24:14). In Leviticus, the priest is to lay hands on a sacrifice to ceremonially place God’s righteous curse on the animal in place of the people. But two Old Testament texts, both in the book of Numbers, anticipate how the laying on of hands would come to be used in the church age. In Numbers 8:10, God’s people lay their hands on the priests to officially commission them as their representatives, and in Numbers 27:18, Moses lays his hands on Joshua to formally commission him as his successor.

In the New Testament, we find a noticeable shift in the typical use of *laying on of hands* language. Now, with God himself dwelling as man among his people, Jesus often lays his hands on people to bless and heal. Then in the book of Acts, once Jesus has ascended, his disciples serve as his hands and feet. They heal, as Jesus did, but what’s new in Acts is the giving of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands—from Jerusalem and Judea, then to Samaria (Acts 8:17), and then beyond, to Ephesus (Acts 19:6) and the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). But like the two texts from Numbers, we find two mentions in Acts (6:6 and 13:3) of commissioning ceremonies (for the seven and for the first missionaries). These commissionings in Acts then lead to these two references in 1 Timothy 4:14 and 5:22.

When established leaders formally lay their hands on someone for a particular new ministry calling, they both ask for God’s

blessing on the calling and put their seal of approval on the candidate—and share, in some sense, in the fruit and failures to come. It is both a commissioning to a calling and a commendation of the candidate among the people he will serve.

What Paul stresses here in 1 Timothy 5:22 is how the laying on of hands to ordain a man to the office of elder shares in his work, not just for good but also for ill. Paul charges Timothy and the church to exercise patience: “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands.” Elders are not to be new converts (1 Tim. 3:6), as we will address in chapter 2; they also are not to be hastily appointed.³

What Is Ordination?

Various traditions in the church have more or less developed practices regarding *ordination*, or formal appointment to office. *Ordination* in the new covenant, if that’s the best term for it, is markedly different from ordination of priests in the old covenant. For one, Jesus is our great high priest, and in him the whole church is a priesthood of believers. In this sense, baptism corresponds to old-covenant ordination. This may explain why the language of ordination does not appear in the New Testament. As Benjamin Merkle comments, “The NT never uses the word *ordain* (in the modern, technical sense) in connection with a Christian leader who is installed to an office.”⁴

The mention of a laying-on-of-hands *ceremony* in the New Testament is a good warrant for formal acknowledgment in the corporate assembly that a man is officially beginning his calling in the office of pastor (so also a particular moment of appointment for deacons

³ For more on the laying on of hands, see appendix 4.

⁴ Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 211.