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*a guide  
for the  
aspiring*

# The Path to Being a Pastor

BOBBY JAMIESON

“Bobby Jamieson’s *The Path to Being a Pastor* helpfully reframes and normalizes the experience of becoming a pastor, and the process of decision-making surrounding it. For those wrestling with whether to pursue the pastorate, *The Path to Being a Pastor* will be both an encouraging and thought-provoking read, and will give them biblical, practical, and edifying steps for how to move forward. Give this excellent book both to aspiring pastors and to current pastors who seek to encourage them.”

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*Finding the Right Hills to Die On*

“This is a gold mine of pastoral wisdom filled with answers to questions we all ask, as well as answers to questions we should ask. I have been a pastor for fifteen years and I learned something in every chapter. If you are considering pastoral ministry, this book is a gift to you.”

**Andrew Wilson**, Teaching Pastor, King’s Church London

“This clear-thinking and realistic book covers all the essential matters that a man considering pastoral ministry ought to ponder. I appreciated not only the biblical comprehensiveness but also the very practical rootedness in the actual life of churches. This will be an accessible and useful resource for a man to work through slowly, perhaps with his wife and a group of trusted friends. Jamieson is a sure-footed, measured, and well-informed guide.”

**Christopher Ash**, Writer in Residence, Tyndale House, Cambridge

“Bobby Jamieson is a gift to the church, as is *The Path to Being a Pastor*. I heartily recommend this book for all who are contemplating a life of ministry service and for seasoned ministers who are shepherding along these conversations.”

**Jason K. Allen**, President, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Bobby Jamieson writes with wisdom beyond his years as he tackles some of the most pressing questions men wrestle with as they consider becoming an elder. He is careful to distinguish between revealed truth and matters of prudence, which makes this book a unique gift in the field, reaching beyond typical cultural limitations. I cannot wait to get this into the hands of prospective elders here in Canada. Written from a humble and generous heart, *The Path to Being a Pastor* fills an important void in the current literature. I am so thankful he took the time to write it.”

**Paul Martin**, Senior Pastor, Grace Fellowship Church, Toronto, Canada

“For most young men, the path to being a pastor is simply to go to seminary and then try to get hired. I can only imagine how much good it will do for many pastors and churches if they would carefully consider what Bobby Jamison lays out as ‘the path to being a pastor.’ This book will challenge and stretch you, and at times might overwhelm you. But most certainly, it will be a great help for those who aspire to be pastors.”

**Matthias Lohmann**, Chairman, Evangelium21; Pastor, Free Evangelical Church Munich-Central, Germany

“This is a biblically accurate, very insightful, and practical book. In essence, it is a road map for becoming a faithful, fruitful, and blessed shepherd. It will also be a good tool in the training of new ministers.”

**Yevgeny Bakhmutsky**, Pastor, Russian Bible Church, Moscow, Russia

“This is a helpful book, not just for those who are aspiring to be in pastoral ministry but also for those who are involved in the ministry of training young men aspiring to be in ministry. Thank you for demystifying the ‘call to ministry,’ which certainly plagues the churches in my part of the world and inevitably leads to many unbiblical misconceptions about pastoral ministry and ends up hurting the church in the process. In spite of many Western cultural references, it will serve the church in the East well to help prepare workers for ministry. I know that I will be using this book a lot!”

**Hezekiah Harshit Singh**, Pastor, Satya Vachan Church, Lucknow, India

“Biblically sound, pastorally wise, and pointedly practical, *The Path to Being a Pastor* is eminently helpful for both would-be pastors and pastors alike. This will be at the top of my list of recommended books for anyone aspiring to pastoral ministry. It will also be required reading for all the interns at my church!”

**Eugene Low**, Lead Teaching Pastor, Grace Baptist Church, Singapore

*The Path to Being a Pastor*



# The Path to Being a Pastor

*A Guide for the Aspiring*

Bobby Jamieson

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*To Isaac Adams*

*“I love a minister whose face  
invites me to make him my friend—  
a man upon whose doorstep you read, ‘Salve,’ ‘Welcome.’”*

CHARLES SPURGEON





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## Preface

LET'S BEGIN WITH HOW I am evidently unqualified to write this book. The title is *The Path to Being a Pastor*, and I am not *the* pastor of a church. I aspire to be a senior pastor, but that remains an aspiration. I have not yet completed the path that this book maps. If that breaks the deal for you, I understand. I will not be offended if you put this book back on the shelf or, more likely, close the Amazon preview window. I wish you all the best.

But, if you're still with me, here are two factors that temper my lack of ethos. First, though I am not *the* pastor of my church, I am *a* pastor. And I spend a decent chunk of my time mentoring men who aspire to be pastors. Here at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, we run a full-time pastoral internship. Every year, we host two classes of about six men each for an intense five-month residency. Our interns study ecclesiology and observe the church in order to gain a biblical framework and living model for pastoring. I oversee this internship, so I have conversations almost every day about the topics this book addresses. If you talk about something enough, writing a book about it just might save you time in the long run.

Second, though I haven't been a pastor very long, I have spent an inordinate amount of time preparing to pastor. At this point, I have spent far longer preparing to pastor than I have pastoring, roughly eleven years to three. Not the most impressive credential, I know.

But along the way, I have learned a few things, especially from godly friends walking the same path, whether alongside or ahead of me. I am trying to pass on a few lessons while they're fresh.

Like our church's internship, this book is for men who aspire to be pastors. I say "men" because the Bible does (1 Tim. 2:12). And the men I chiefly have in mind are those who desire to vocationally serve a local church as that church's primary preacher. Not all churches can afford to pay a pastor; some churches can pay more than one. And certainly, there are many roles—missions, student evangelism, counseling, writing, and more—that might broadly be considered full-time Christian ministry. The further your goal is from serving as a full-time preaching pastor, the less relevant this book will be. But if you want to be a senior pastor, you're in the bull's-eye.

In a sense, I am writing this book to myself of fourteen years ago, when I first began to think seriously about becoming a pastor. I was nineteen. In the previous few months, my heart had been gripped by the preaching of God's word by John MacArthur and the other pastors of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California. Though I was then seriously pursuing a vocation in music, a desire to preach and pastor full-time took root in my heart quickly and deeply. God's word preached was thoroughly remaking me, and I yearned to be an instrument of that renovating work in others' lives.

Is that your longing too? This book seeks to help guide that desire from seed to fruition. One of the main lessons is: it can take a while. So give yourself to cultivating gifts and godliness, and leave fruit to God.

This book is mainly counsel. It is mainly advice, an effort to apply Scripture to your life and mine. Each chapter is titled with and driven by an imperative. Sometimes that imperative comes straight from Scripture; sometimes it's my best effort to distill and deploy the sense

## PREFACE

of Scripture. In the latter case, I usually state the imperative starkly, but its smooth exterior hides a host of exceptions. I will try to point out those exceptions as they come, but consider this a blanket qualification. There is a lot of advice in this book. I don't dream that it all applies to every person and circumstance. Your mileage may vary; think Proverbs, not case law.

This book's goal is modest. To switch metaphors from path to house, I aim only to conduct a brief tour: to open doors, flick on lights, and point out some crucial features. I won't even get to every room in the house. (No chapter on evangelism!) I am only trying to get you started and help you get your bearings. My goal is to provoke you. I want to provoke you to study Scripture, examine yourself, pray, and seek counsel, especially from your church's pastors. Speaking of provoking you, the meddling starts in the first chapter.



## Acknowledgments

IN MY OTHER BOOKS, I save the best for last, thanking my wife at the very end of the acknowledgements. But in this case, the book was as much her idea as mine. So thank you, Kristin, for what I, at least, think was a good idea. Thanks even more for reading the whole book as it came and for your heartening enthusiasm for what I wrote. And thanks most of all for being a sterling partner in life and ministry for the past twelve years.

In early 2020, I sketched the table of contents and wrote the preface, hoping to squeeze writing into the margins of ministry. Then the world stopped. So thank you, Mark Dever, for gladly supporting my writing this book during the sad, slow months when our church could not meet. And thank you for being a source and exemplar of so much of the good that this book attempts to commend.

I am thankful to Jonathan Leeman for making 9Marks a partner in this book's publication, and to Justin Taylor for gladly giving it a home at Crossway. Hearty thanks are also due to Kevin Emmert for his skillful editing. Trent Jones and John Lee deserve special thanks for vigorously encouraging the book when it was just an idea, and for reading the manuscript and offering insightful feedback. Jonathan Keisling and Drew Allenspach also read the whole thing and offered thoughtful comments, as did the Fall 2020 intern class of Capitol Hill Baptist Church. Thank you all.



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Warm thanks to friends whose counsel and wisdom enrich the following pages: Brian Bunnell, Chase Sears, Michael Lawrence, Tom Schreiner, and Isaac Adams. Finally, I thank the other pastors who have not yet been named here but who generously, graciously guided my path to being a pastor: Rick Holland, Greg Gilbert, Steve Auld, and Julian Hardyman.

PART 1

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# FINDING THE PATH



## Say “I Aspire,” Not “I’m Called”

*The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.*

1 TIMOTHY 3:1

HAVE YOU BEEN DROPPED into an existential crisis? A year or two ago, becoming a pastor was the farthest thing from your mind. You were contentedly working as a schoolteacher or studying to be an engineer. But then something happened. It might have been a sermon you heard or a conversation you had. A thought floated over the horizon of your mind: maybe you should be a pastor. In recent months, that little thought-cloud has quietly expanded. It now blankets your daily work, your plans, and your thoughts of the future. The more you think about pastoring, the more you want to do it. But how can you decide whether you should?

Most likely, you have picked up from Christians around you the vocabulary of *calling*. You are asking yourself, “Am I called to ministry?”

When a man who is not yet a pastor says he is called to be a pastor, he usually means something like this: “I have a constraining, settled, deeply rooted desire to serve full-time as a pastor.” Those who speak this way are doing their best to put words to an intense, sobering

experience. I share the experience and sympathize with the effort. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the language of “calling to ministry” points the whole conversation in the wrong direction. In this chapter, I aim to persuade you to set aside the language of *calling* and replace it with *aspiration*, specifically, aspiring to the office of elder, with the further aspiration of serving as an elder full-time. Instead of saying “I’m called to ministry,” say “I aspire to be a pastor.”<sup>1</sup>

My goal is for you to trade in the question, Am I called? in exchange for two different questions. First: Are you qualified to serve as an elder? Second: Should serving as an elder be your job? In pursuit of this goal, this chapter will identify two presumptions in saying that you are called to ministry, discuss two problems inherent in the language of calling, and commend five advantages of saying, instead, that you aspire to pastor.

Before we embark, I should underscore that as much as I care about the language we use, I care far more about the heart posture behind that language. Many thoughtful Christians use the language of calling to pastoral ministry, and I agree with much of what they mean. For instance, the Presbyterian Church in America’s *Book of Church Order* says, “Ordinary vocation to office in the Church is the calling of God by the Spirit, through the inward testimony of a good conscience, the manifest approbation of God’s people, and the concurring judgment of a lawful court of the Church.”<sup>2</sup> I will register some disagreements

- 1 I first explored some of the ideas in this chapter in my article entitled “The Double Presumption of Calling to Ministry,” 9Marks, August 24, 2014, <https://www.9marks.org/article/the-double-presumption-of-calling-to-ministry/>. I redeploy some of those ideas here in thoroughly reworked form.
- 2 *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America* (The Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America,

with this below. But if you are committed to the language of calling, you could still agree with every word of the remaining chapters of this book. You could also agree about some of the pitfalls that lurk in the neighborhood of calling, which we will come to shortly.

### **The Double Presumption of “Calling” to Ministry**

The expression “I’m called to ministry” asserts something about both God and yourself. You mean that, as far as you can tell, God is calling you to pastoral ministry. You think it is his will that you become a pastor. But you are also saying something about yourself. Generally, you are saying that you desire to be a pastor. More than that, you are saying you have a sense that you should be a pastor—as opposed to, say, a gardener or graphic designer. For those claims to make sense, you must think you are qualified to be a pastor, or at least well on your way.

More specifically, I want to argue that the phrase “I’m called to pastor” is pregnant with a double presumption. Saying that you are called to ministry presumes that, first, you are, or soon will be, qualified to be an elder; second, you are, or soon will be, sufficiently gifted in pastoral ministry that a church should pay you to do it. I call these presumptions not because the evidence necessarily contradicts them, but because saying so does not make it so. Let’s consider each.

First, to say “I’m called to pastor” presumes that you are, or soon will be, qualified to serve as an elder of a local church. “Elder” is the term the New Testament most frequently uses for the office of teaching, shepherding, and pastoral oversight (e.g., Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1). Less frequently, the New Testament

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2019), 16–1. Available at <https://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/BCO-2019-with-bookmarks-for-website-1.pdf>.

names this office “overseer” (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:7). The New Testament uses the noun “shepherd,” also commonly rendered “pastor,” with reference to the church office of pastor only once (Eph. 4:11). Both times the noun’s verbal equivalent is used, elders are the ones who are charged to pastor, or “shepherd” (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Pet. 5:1–2). In other words, the New Testament uses “elder,” “overseer,” and “pastor” interchangeably to name one office.<sup>3</sup> To be a pastor is to fulfill the office of elder. Every pastor is an elder, and every elder pastors.

Scripture tells us what kind of man an elder must be (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9; cf. 1 Pet. 5:1–5). If you want to pastor, you must meet those qualifications, which we will consider in chapter 3. If God is “calling” you to pastoral ministry, he will qualify you for that ministry. If you never meet the qualifications for eldership, then you are never called to be a pastor.

Second, saying you are called to pastor presumes that you are, or soon will be, sufficiently gifted in pastoral ministry that a church should pay you to do it. The New Testament requires that churches pay at least some of their pastors. In Galatians 6:6, Paul writes, “Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches.” And in 1 Timothy 5:17–18, he says, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’”

The basic principle is that eldering is hard work. Teaching God’s word publicly is hard work. And while every elder must be able to

3 For a brief treatment of the New Testament’s interchangeable use of “elder,” “overseer,” and “pastor,” see Benjamin L. Merkle, “The Scriptural Basis for Elders,” in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015), 243–52.

teach (1 Tim. 3:2), some elders will be especially gifted to teach, and will especially give themselves to teaching (1 Tim. 5:17). The whole church benefits from that teaching, and a man can do it best by giving it his best. So the church should relieve such men of the burden of providing for themselves by other means.

But this obligation to pay pastors does not mean churches should limit the number of their elders to those whom they can support financially. Some elders will be paid to serve full-time; others will not. In Acts 20:34–35, Paul reminds the elders of the church in Ephesus, “You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” Here Paul invokes his example of working to provide for his own and others’ needs as a model for these elders to follow. He clearly assumes that not all of them will be paid by the church. Throughout the New Testament, when elders of a church are mentioned, they consistently show up in the plural (Acts 14:23; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1). Where multiple men in a congregation are qualified to serve as elders, a church should have more than one.

Putting these passages together, we can say that each church should have multiple elders, and each church should financially support elders who devote themselves to public teaching, but not every elder will necessarily be paid by the church. Which means that you can be an elder without it being what provides your paycheck.

This has at least two implications for your “calling” or desire to be a pastor. First, distinguishing between serving as an elder and being paid for it clarifies what is at stake. Are you a sufficiently gifted preacher of God’s word that a church should pay you to preach? The New Testament



ties financial compensation for pastoral work to special labor in teaching, which assumes special ability in teaching (1 Tim. 5:17–18; Gal. 6:6). How gifted a preacher are you? What does your track record so far show? None of this implies that a church should not set aside pastors to serve full-time whose gifts are more pronounced in, say, counseling or evangelism. But most churches can afford to pay only one pastor, if that. And when they can hire only one pastor, they hire a preacher.

Second, aspiring to elder and aspiring to serve as a full-time preaching pastor are distinct. Biblically speaking, all elders are pastors. However, eldering is a broader category than full-time pastoring. To be a full-time preaching pastor is to occupy a subset of a broader office.

This distinction is freeing. Pastoring is not all-or-nothing. You are not limited to the two options of no pastoral ministry versus serving as a preaching pastor. Whether you will ever serve as an elder and whether that service will be your job are different matters.

There are two questions here, and it helps to keep them apart. Distinguishing the question of serving as an elder from what you do for your job can relieve some of the existential angst you may be feeling. It might be that your desire to help people grow spiritually suggests not that you should quit your job and move to seminary, but that you should aspire to eldership while keeping your job. If you desire to serve a local church as a pastor and teacher of God's word, then strive to meet these qualifications, start doing the work now as God enables, and entrust every aspect of your future to him.

### **Two Problems with Calling**

Before saying more about this positive vision of aspiring to eldership, there are two problems with calling language that we should address. These two problems are exegesis and entitlement.

First, the exegetical problem is that the Bible does not use calling language to mean what we mean. The New Testament frequently uses “called” to describe God’s effectual act of bringing us to saving faith (e.g., Rom. 1:6–7; 8:30; 9:24; 1 Cor. 1:9, 24; Gal. 1:6). The New Testament also uses “calling” to describe the life of holiness to which God has summoned us and for which God has empowered us through the gospel (Eph. 4:1; 1 Thess. 4:3–7). But nowhere does the New Testament use the verb “call” to describe God’s act of assigning us a vocation, pastoral or otherwise. The closest the Bible comes to this is in 1 Corinthians 7:17: “Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.” Paul then instructs Christians under various obligations not to seek release from them (1 Cor. 7:17–24). Yet here, Paul speaks of calling to describe what already is the case, not what we desire or what one day might be.

But is it really a problem to use “calling” in a way the New Testament does not? Not necessarily. As long as both speaker and listener know what is happening, one can use a biblical word in a sense that, while not strictly biblical, is not unbiblical either. Something like this is the case with systematic theology’s use of the word “regeneration” to mean “new birth.” But the test of all specialized theological terms, whether drawn from Scripture or not, is how well they map the biblical territory they refer to. “Trinity,” for instance, is hard to improve. Yet I would suggest that the term “calling” is a poor guide to the biblical terrain of aspiring to vocational eldership. “Calling” attributes to God something that you cannot be sure of until it happens. “Calling” implies you know God has done something before he has done it.

And so the exegetical problem leads to another potential problem: namely, entitlement. If God has called you to pastor, who can tell you he hasn’t? If God has called you to pastor, then it’s high time some

church out there catches up with what God is doing. I once heard a fellow seminary student ruefully reflect, “Lately, I’ve been questioning my calling.” That makes self-examination sound like deserting your post. But what if he was asking the right questions, and the answers came back negative? It is all too easy for a sense of calling to shield its possessor from needed criticism.

Of course, it is possible to use calling language and avoid entitlement. As I mentioned above, many wise, level-headed Christians have used this language throughout the centuries without apparent catastrophe.<sup>4</sup> Those who wield the language most wisely distinguish between an “internal call” and an “external call.” By “internal call,” they typically mean an intense desire to serve as a pastor. By “external call,” they tend to mean recognition and confirmation by a church. This recognition might initially take the form of encouragement from individual members, or informal support from a church’s eldership, but it remains incomplete until a church calls you to be their pastor.

I do not disagree with anything that people use these terms to refer to, but I think the terms themselves are more trouble than they’re worth. The phrase “internal call” sets up a subjective test for which I cannot find criteria in Scripture. How strong a desire is strong enough? Regarding the “external call,” what exactly counts, shy of a church’s call to serve as pastor? If one sweet, elderly sister encourages me about a sermon I preached, should I quit my job the next day? Even in its cautious, two-part form, the language of calling is like a misaligned drivetrain: you must constantly correct it in order to drive straight.

4 For a classic example, see Edmund P. Clowney, *Called to the Ministry* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1964).

One point that could support using calling language, especially that of internal call, is that it aptly names many people’s experience. Many men who go on to become pastors experience an overwhelming desire for the work. Typically, the internal call is identified with just such a consuming desire. Some say, “Unless you are gripped by an unrelenting, irresistible desire to become a pastor, don’t do it.” Charles Spurgeon put the point like this:

The first sign of the heavenly calling is *an intense, all-absorbing desire for the work*. In order to a true call to the ministry there must be an irresistible, overwhelming craving and raging thirst for telling others what God has done to our own souls. . . . “Do not enter the ministry *if you can help it*,” was the deeply sage advice of a divine to one who sought his judgment. If any student in this room could be content to be a newspaper editor, or a grocer, or a farmer, or a doctor, or a lawyer, or a senator, or a king, in the name of heaven and earth let him go his way; he is not the man in whom dwells the Spirit of God in its fulness, for a man so filled with God would utterly weary of any pursuit but that for which his inmost soul pants.<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, desire for the work is a biblical requirement for eldership. Paul lays down qualifications for one who “aspires to the office of overseer” and thereby “desires a noble task” (1 Tim. 3:1), and Peter says an elder must serve “not under compulsion, but

5 Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students: Complete and Unabridged* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954), 26–27 (emphasis original). My rejoinder to Spurgeon is indebted to Kevin DeYoung, “A Quibble with Spurgeon,” The Gospel Coalition, September 2, 2010, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/a-quibble-with-spurgeon/>.

willingly” (1 Pet. 5:2). Further, pastoring is taxing. Pastoring drops you into a surging rapid of emotional and spiritual hazards. A man should become a pastor only if he has a sober, informed eagerness for the work. Yet I think Spurgeon goes too far. Scripture nowhere says that a pastor must not be able to be content doing anything else. And some faithful pastors are prone to discouragement. They sometimes feel they would be more content doing anything other than pastoral ministry! As one dear friend of mine recently said, “If someone offered me a job as a gardener, and it paid enough to support my family, I’d take it.” He is still pastoring, and I don’t think he’s wrong to be.

Beyond that, Spurgeon’s quote seems to imply that pastors are necessarily more filled with the Spirit than a doctor or lawyer or senator could be. But this stands in tension with Paul’s insistence that the Spirit gives whatever gifts he wants to whomever he wants (1 Cor. 12:4–7, 11, 27–30). Pastors do not occupy the top rung on a ladder of Spirit-filled-ness. The body needs every member, and each needs all the others (1 Cor. 12:12–26).

So, even the “internal call plus external call” has its pitfalls. It can set up a too-subjective standard to which aspiring or current pastors must measure up, or else. Personally, I recommend ditching the language altogether. But my goal in all this is not to be a language cop. I am far more concerned about the posture than the phrasing.

### **Advantages of Aspiring**

Speaking of posture, we will conclude the chapter by exploring five advantages of using an aspiration framework over a calling one. In my view, saying “I aspire” is more biblical, more humble, more accurate, more fruitful, and more freeing.

First, aspiring to be a pastor is more biblical. Paul opens up this category for us in 1 Timothy 3:1. This aspiration becomes even more biblical when we recognize that the office is elder, all elders are pastors, and one can do the work of a pastor without being paid for it. Capitol Hill Baptist Church, which I serve as an associate pastor, currently has twenty-eight elders. Twenty-two of those men are non-staff elders; they are not paid to pastor. And yet, on top of working long hours and leading growing families, they tirelessly teach and counsel and care for the members of our church. Sometimes I feel like some of our non-staff elders do more pastoring in their free time than I do full-time!

For biblical precedents for being “called” by God to ministry, people sometimes point to the example of prophets like Jeremiah. Didn’t Jeremiah say, “If I say, ‘I will not mention him, / or speak any more in his name,’ / there is in my heart as it were a burning fire / shut up in my bones, / and I am weary with holding it in, / and I cannot” (Jer. 20:9). Jeremiah did indeed say that, but that is not how he became a prophet. Instead: “Now the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations’” (Jer. 1:4–5). Jeremiah did not become a prophet by getting fire in his bones; he became a prophet when God audibly summoned him to the task.

And what about Paul? Wasn’t he called to be an apostle (Rom. 1:1)? Yes, he was, by the voice of the risen Christ when he appeared to him personally (Acts 26:16). God authorized prophets and apostles in a unique manner for unique offices. None of us occupies those offices today. God used extraordinary means to call men to extraordinary offices.

Second, aspiration is more humble. Again, I do not mean that those who speak of calling are necessarily proud, or those who say “aspire” are

necessarily humble. But I think that calling language tilts the playing field toward pride. Calling makes a claim and puts the burden on someone else to disprove it; aspiration acknowledges you are not there yet.

Third, aspiration is more accurate. Maybe you will become a pastor, maybe you won't. Calling calls the election before all precincts have reported. Calling implies a private knowledge of God's will and ways. If you sense a calling to ministry, how can someone else verify or falsify that claim? If that claim is ever falsified, what does it say about the calling?

Fourth, aspiration is more fruitful. Calling directs your view inward, to your own desire. Aspiration directs your view outward, to the objective requirements of the office of elder. Aspiration directs your attention to the godliness and gifts you need to cultivate if you want to serve the church in this way. If you have just an inkling of a desire for pastoral ministry, the question you should be asking is not, Am I called? or How do I know whether I'm called? but, How can I grow into the kind of man who is able to serve as an elder, and even able to serve in that role full-time?

Fifth and finally, aspiration is more freeing. Saying "I aspire" shifts your focus from the subjective to the objective. You need not struggle to discern whether you have been struck by lightning from heaven. Instead, ask: Are you qualified to elder? How pastorally gifted are you? And who besides you says so? Saying "I aspire" relieves pressure and leaves freedom in its place. Your task is not to privately ascertain God's will and then wait for others to catch up. Instead, strive for growth in godliness, and cultivate the gifts God has given you. Saying "I aspire" is freeing because it reminds you that, as always, the result is up to God.

Calling asks you to picture yourself at the end of the trail. Aspiration points out the path and tells you to take a step.