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November 2023 “Ministry Callings and Church Growth”

Dear Friend,

A question many parents, teachers and adult acquaintances ask children is, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” As a young child I had no idea what career path I wanted to follow. In my teen years I first thought I wanted to be an Air Force pilot; but when I found out my vision wasn’t good enough, that idea went by the wayside. Then I thought I wanted to be a lawyer, but soon changed my mind. After that, I wanted to be a disc jockey for a radio station until I found out that few disc jockeys remain at one station their entire career and most moved from one station to another in different cities and states; I didn’t like the idea of relocating so frequently.

For a period of time, I held numerous jobs in a variety of different occupations. More than once a job I had was eliminated by my employer. Sometimes, I left a job after feeling very misled about my responsibilities and employment opportunities. Then there were times when I resigned from one job in order to accept a position with another company for better pay and advancement opportunities. This continued even after I was married. Over all those years I felt very aimless and very embarrassed about my employment instability and lack of a good, promising career.

A major change began taking place in my life after Kathy and I got married in February 1982. I had recommitted my life to God in January of that year, and she and I began regularly attending a very good, Full Gospel church. I also began pursuing God more intently than ever before: I read my Bible, listened to the Bible on cassette tapes (this was before CD’s or MP3’s), read books and magazines by preachers, and listened to sermons on tape. Kathy and I even enrolled in a Bible college our church was hosting, not because I wanted to go into ministry, but because I just wanted to learn more about God and His Word. What I didn’t realize was that all that reading, listening and studying was sowing God’s Word in my heart and creating a storehouse of spiritual truth the Holy Spirit would use later on.

A few years passed and what the Holy Spirit had been doing in me began to bear fruit. In the latter part of 1988, I began sensing God was calling me to preach. In February of 1989, I shared with my pastor about this calling. Then, on Wednesday, July 12, 1989, I preached my first sermon. As time progressed, I preached more in my home church and had a few invitations from other churches to minister.

At that time, my idea of my calling was that I would travel, minister in churches, receive offerings, and go home. I had no desire or intention to pastor; in fact, I didn’t want to pastor. But again, the Holy Spirit kept working in me and I began to realize that my attitude toward pastoring wasn’t the best. So, I prayed and told God if He wanted me to pastor, I would...and reminded Him I really didn’t want to be a pastor. Well, three weeks after that prayer, on June 1, 1994, I was pastoring a church in Springboro, Ohio that was running about 25 people.

As a pastor, I had great aspirations for that church. I just knew it was going to grow from 25 to 50, from 50 to 100, from 100 to 500, from 500 to 1,000, from 1,000 to...you get the idea. Guess what? That never happened. Oh, it did grow, just not the way I had envisioned. After a little

more than two years at that church God began impressing upon me that I would not be there permanently. So, I thought I would help God and started looking for a facility to rent in order to establish a new church. After much fruitless searching, I rethought my approach. I told God I knew He would be leading me elsewhere, but that I was totally willing to stay at that church in Springboro for the rest of my life. During the next two years I pastored there as though I was never leaving. Then God moved fairly quickly and on February 21, 1999, I began pastoring where I am to this day.

Along with God leading me to pastor a different church, He also further clarified His calling on my life by telling me, "I didn't call you to build a church. I called you to build people, My Kingdom, and to teach those who will receive it." No longer am I trying to get more people in our church, I'm simply doing what He tells me and letting Him do the rest. Don't misunderstand, I definitely want to see the church grow, just not by my efforts.

I remember one time during prayer I told God I wanted to see the church grow. He replied by asking, "Why?" I did not expect that question and it caused me to stop and think hard about my answer. I decided it was best to be totally honest with Him and questioned my own motives. I told Him I wanted it to grow for the sake of the Kingdom, but I wasn't sure that was my real reason. However, I told Him I wanted my heart and motives to be right before Him, knowing He would work on me in those areas.

There are two main points in what I've shared so far.

Point #1 – Discovering Your Calling

Every Christian has a call for some type of ministry. A ministry calling originates with God (Romans 11:29) and is administered to the individual by Jesus (Ephesians 4:7-16). It is **IMPOSSIBLE** for another human (pastor, evangelist, etc) to impart a ministry calling to another person! Sadly, too many Christians seem to think they can get in a prayer line, have hands laid on them, and receive the calling of their choice. It doesn't work that way. Yes, a minister can pray for people that they become more sensitive to what God has called them to do, but that minister cannot arbitrarily impart to someone what only comes from God through Jesus.

Can you imagine someone asking a renowned doctor to impart the skill of heart surgeon through the laying on of hands? That is ridiculous! It takes years of medical school, internship, hours of study, and intense training under the instruction and guidance of experts in that field. It doesn't just happen because someone wants it.

What it comes down to is that so many Christians simply want a shortcut to receiving from God. They don't want to spend time in fellowship with Him to feed themselves spiritually and grow in the knowledge of His divine plan for their lives. Consider this: Jesus didn't start His ministry on Earth until He was about thirty years old (Luke 3:21-23); that means the first thirty years of His life were spent in preparation for what was to come. Is it really asking too much for God to expect us to spend time *with* Him to find out what He wants us to do *for* Him? After all, the calling does originate with Him.

Not everyone is called to full time ministry wherein they do not work a secular job. But the calling they have is specific and unique. I say it is specific and unique because there is no set plan or precedent for how we are to fulfill our callings. For example, some are called to be a

pastor, but how that pastoral calling is fulfilled will be different for each person. It is true we can glean wisdom from other pastors, but we are not to pattern our calling after what we see in another person. For example, in Galatians 2:9 we see that Peter, James and John had a primary calling to minister to the Jews, while Paul and Barnabas had a primary calling to minister to the Gentiles.

If you want to know what God has called you to do and how to fulfill that calling, spend time with Him. Stop trying to figure it out with your own rationalization, desires, and self-designed life goals. Stop trying to find someone to give you a prophetic word about your ministry. Stop relying on questionnaires that are based on human psychological profiles. Spend time with God. Feast on His Word. Listen to sermons by preachers who are Word-oriented rather than tradition-oriented. Pray in the Spirit and with the understanding. Get your spirit and mind conditioned to receive guidance and instruction from God. It won't happen overnight, but He will give you a revelation of His plan for your life.

Point #2 – The Goals of Your Church

Not everyone is called to be a pastor. A pastor is to be the shepherd of a local congregation, leading that congregation according to the direction of God. He is an under shepherd to Jesus, the Chief Shepherd of the Church (1 Peter 5:1-4). Therefore, Jesus is the Head of the Church (Ephesians 1:22, Ephesians 5:23, Colossians 1:18). This being so, it stands to reason that every church should have as its primary goals the standards set forth by the Chief Shepherd and Head of the Church. Those standards are revealed in Matthew 28:18-20,

¹⁸And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. ¹⁹Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: ²⁰Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

In short, Jesus is saying this, “Tell people why they need to be born again and how to be born again by accepting Me as Savior. Then, after they have professed their faith in Me, disciple them on how to grow and mature spiritually by teaching them what you have received from Me.” No where in these instructions, or anywhere else in the New Testament, has Jesus instructed anyone to focus on making the church they attend grow.

Many pastors seem to measure their success on the number of people attending their church. I have attended several pastors' gatherings in years past and invariably, one of the questions they ask each other is, “what's your attendance?” If, as a pastor, your church isn't growing by leaps and bounds or your attendance isn't attention-grabbing, you can be made to feel like a second-class citizen in those situations. However, numbers alone can be misleading. For example, in a city of 5,000, a pastor whose church is running 50 in attendance means that he has 1% of the population attending. On the other hand, a church in New York City would need to run over 84,000 in order to have 1% of the population attending. The truth is, the measure of success for a pastor is how much he is obeying the instructions of the Lord. Even so, pastor after pastor seeks for ways to “make our church grow.”

I did an internet search by typing “church growth seminars” and there were 39 million results! Granted, I don't believe there have been literally 39 million seminars on church growth, but

those numbers clearly indicate a tremendous number of church leaders may not have their priorities in order. It seems as though every denomination conducts seminars on how to make churches grow. Church growth “experts” travel throughout the country conducting such seminars, in the process selling their books and courses to those in attendance. The latest trends in societal change, church décor and building design, changes in worship style, developing interactive and immersive services, and much more are presented as methods to attract larger crowds.

I find it interesting that Jesus never tried to figure out how He could get more people to attend His teaching sessions. Additionally, He never told the disciples to develop strategies that would attract larger crowds. Along with His instructions mentioned above in Matthew 28:18-20, He said the following,

¹⁵And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. ¹⁶He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. ¹⁷And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; ¹⁸They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. ¹⁹So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God.

(Mark 16:15-19)

Notice what happened when they did it according to His instructions,

And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen. (Mark 16:20)

The word “them” in the above verse was inserted by the interpreters. The Lord worked with and confirmed His Word, not the individuals delivering His Word. God’s Word supersedes trendy buildings, lobby area coffee bars, fairs and festivals, fog machines and flashing lights, and Hollywood-level video productions. Neither Jesus nor the apostles focused on gadgetry or wow-factor presentation to attract people; they simply did what God instructed and results followed. Human effort can impact the emotions; God’s truth impacts the heart. What good is it if programs and religion-wrapped entertainment results in a church attendance of thousands if the great majority of those attending aren’t being told of their need to be born again?

You may not be a pastor, but if you attend a church that is continually striving for church growth, I suggest you pray and ask God what is at the core of the church leaders focus. Yes, outreach is good; but it absolutely must be accompanied by genuine, scriptural discipleship.

Furthermore, keep in mind that Kingdom growth does not necessarily mean exponential growth in the church you attend. Kingdom growth is a result of people truly accepting Jesus as Savior. Get it settled in your thinking that not all people who get born again are going to be open to the infilling of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues. Therefore, if the end-time revival results in the local Baptist churches experiencing rapid growth, to God be the glory! It’s all about Jesus and His Kingdom.

Summary

As a Christian, you have a ministry calling that God prepared for you from before the foundation of the world. He, and He alone, is the source for the identification of that calling and how it is to be fulfilled. Jesus is the One who will administer that calling into your life. The more you focus on your spiritual growth, the more you will come to know your Kingdom calling. This is especially true if you will spend time praying in the Spirit; the Holy Spirit will teach you all things about your calling and lead you into the fulness of the truth about fulfilling that calling (John 14:26 and John 16:13).

God wants churches to grow, but your goal is never to simply be about church growth. The goal should first and foremost be Kingdom growth and discipleship. Remember, when all is said and done, and we're in Heaven with Jesus, He's not going to ask us what programs we used to build our churches, He's going to focus on our obedience to His will. As He said in Luke 6:46, ***And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?***

May God's peace fill your life, may His will be fulfilled, and may you know His joy unspeakable and full of glory!

In His Grace,

Jim

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