



Sheep Searching for a Shepherd

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Sooner or later your church will face the trauma of losing your beloved pastor. Naturally the church and the pulpit committee are often inexperienced in this important responsibility. Perhaps it has been three, five, ten or fifteen years since the church has needed to call a pastor. Imagine, sheep searching for a shepherd! All too frequently a church body sits in dismay (sadly, sometimes with undisguised relief) as they hear their pastor tender his resignation. Often the news comes as a shock, and soul-searching questions surface: "Why is our beloved pastor leaving us?" "Is he dissatisfied with our response to his ministry?" "Have we been unduly critical in our evaluations?"

These are self-flagellating questions when, actually, the reasons for his resignation may have no implications of failure on the part of the church body. A pastoral resignation is a splendid opportunity for the sheep to reassess their goals, clarify again their purpose, and possibly, to learn some valuable lessons in the sheep/shepherd relationships; but it is never a time to tolerate discouragement or confusion.

The calling of a pastor is one of the foremost responsibilities of the church. At no time should a church be more prayerful, more aware of what it wants, more diligent in its search, and more dependent upon the Holy Spirit, the Divine Administrator of the church. Never should the saints be more unified. Since the shepherd makes the difference, your prayerful, Spirit-directed choice at this time will determine the future spiritual health of your church including your own spiritual growth as well as that of your children and grandchildren. Your choice here will have a bearing on the church's testimony in the community and, of course, its impact for Christ worldwide.

Be assured of the Lord's concern for His sheep. To Israel God promised, "I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding," Jer. 3:15. Without question, God is as concerned over the local

churches as He was over Israel. The principle of this Old Testament promise still pertains. Search procedures are vitally important; but in response to oft-repeated questions concerning finding a new pastor, I would like to focus primarily on the church's personal preparation prior to extending a call to God's choice of an undershepherd.

The Church's Internal Preparation

Your church may not be ready at this moment for the kind of pastor God wants to give you. Is the church ready for and maybe somewhat worthy of a great man of God, one with vision and faith, a man with a tender pastor's heart but balanced with strength and forthrightness, one with a gift of leadership but also mindful of his servant role? May I suggest the following:

1. *Be sure the relationship with the former pastor is without stigma or offense.* It is better to bend over backward or "go the second mile" than to leave misunderstandings unresolved. Be known for your grace and patience rather than for your technical correctness.
2. *Recognize your dependence upon the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:1-3; 13:1-3).* When the early church was in prayer the Holy Spirit revealed His mind concerning the selection of Paul and Barnabas.
3. *Recognize it is your church's responsibility to search and select just as it was in Acts 6.* The long hours spent in prayer, research, evaluation, and finally, in the selection of the undershepherd are not in vain. We dare not be less than diligent under the excuse that this is the work of the Holy Spirit. He will never do for us what He has enabled us to do ourselves.
4. *Know your mission.* Only when we are gripped with the understanding of and the importance of our mission can we see clearly the kind of man we need. The church is responsible to (1) evangelize, (2) edify, (3) educate, (4) expand its outreach, and (5) bring believers to full maturity and the exercising of their spiritual gifts. Such a mission demands men of God.
5. *Know the interacting agents in the performance of this great mission: the Holy Spirit as the Administrator and Architect of the church, the "Pastor/Shepherd (Eph. 4:12), capable and tested leaders (Acts 6:3), and the Body itself (Eph. 4:12-*

15). God gave the church a built-in growth capacity – a tremendous storehouse of energy and spiritual ministry gifts (I Cor. 12:1, 4, 7, 11). These interacting agents are the team, with no one agent usurping the “prima donna” role. Headship we must have, but the head needs a body.

6. *Know the pastor’s role.* He is pastor, teacher, bishop and elder – extremely responsible; but he cannot, and dare not, wing it alone. He needs counsel, supportive personnel, relief from the secondary, and protection for his primary tasks.

7. *Know the role of the deacon board,* especially its relationship with the pastor in the partnership team.

The Biblical Perspective of the Pastor

God has established high standards for His undershepherds. Augustine indicated that so great are the responsibilities of the pastors they should fit only on the shoulders of angels, but God chose to use men. Biblically the pastor must be a knowledgeable man (Mal. 2:4-7), ever studying, learning and growing. Few pastors will ever succeed who do not spend at least 20 hours a week in their Bible and study books. He must also be a man of God in every aspect of life – pulpit, home, family, business, relaxation – always a man of God. The New Testament identifies him as:

1. *A Pastor.* His heart is deeply involved with his sheep. He loves, comforts, protects, feeds, preaches, teaches, corrects, weeps with and over his people, and rejoices too.

2. *An elder.* Used interchangeably with pastor and bishop, the name refers to his spiritual stature, personal life and maturity. This includes the nitty-gritty of how he relates to his wife and children, how he drives the car, and how he pays his bills.

3. *A bishop.* This speaks of the pastor’s administrative skills and leadership qualities. These three offices (pastor/elder/bishop) are all united in Acts 20:28. No man has all the gifts in equal measure; but if called of God, he will have some of the gifts. Beware lest the church inspect only the more visible gifts.

What do we look for in a pastor? What constitutes a good pastor? Difficult questions? There is really no

hard and fast rule in determining a good pastor. Can we identify him because he has a large church? No, for I have seen some excellent pastors who ministered to churches with 30, 50 or 75 in attendance and some with churches of 500 who in the proper use of the word “pastor” were not good pastors. Then should we use the yardstick of experience? I wish we could concur heartily, but long experience does not necessarily produce good pastors. There is a vast difference between a man with 20 years of rich, fruitful, soul-searching pastoral experience and a man with one-year experiences repeated 20 times.

In all probability we have an image of a man who is a Spurgeon in the pulpit, a Truett in pastoral evangelism, an Ironside in popular Bible teaching and writing, a G.M. executive in administration, a Mueller in faith, a Hyde in prayer, a Nightingale in ministering to the sick, and a Schuler with popular charisma.

Maybe our image needs a little refocusing. If we had such an ideal man there would be no need for the gifts of the Body. I’m afraid we expect pastors to be paragons of perfection in every facet of ministry, and when they fall short in some area both the church and the pastor become discouraged. Let us read again Ephesians 4:11-15 and I Timothy 3:1-7. How would you like these as your job description and essential qualifications?

Now the God Who calls a man is the God Who also enables him. At the same time it is easy for a pastor to become discouraged. Even with a 60 hour week, he knows he never finished his task. He may sense he didn’t study enough for this week’s sermons. He didn’t pray enough. He didn’t visit as many as he should have. He didn’t plan for the future program of the church as he had hoped to do. He must learn to practice the “ministry of planned neglect,” omitting some of the more secondary responsibilities.

Let us explore some high priority attitudes exemplified by Paul which we should look for in a potential pastor. From his first epistle to the Thessalonians, let us note that Paul:

1. *Appreciated People, I Thess. 1:2.* He didn’t berate them for their immaturity. A pastor doesn’t

stone the flock but feeds them. Not all members are at the same spiritual level, and so the pastor begins with them where they are, not where he wishes they were. A pastor may occasionally need to correct his people so they both can later rejoice, but he must correct in love.

2. *Prayed for His People, I Thess. 1:2.* Ministers need to be good pray-ers. It is both a privilege and a monumental responsibility to spiritually shepherd a flock. Abundant labors are only fruitful when blessed by the Lord.

3. *Worked with Confidence in The Lord, I Thess. 2:1.* Pastors should be spiritual optimists. They co-labor with the Lord knowing that even the most immature lambs have God's promise of becoming mature sheep.

4. *Was Industrious, I Thess. 2:9.* Paul never heard of a 40-hour week. No man can be a good pastor if he is lazy and constantly chafes from the demands placed upon his time. No man can maintain a 12-hour-per-day, 7-days-per-week pace nor should the church expect such hours from him. At the same time he must display diligence in the balanced use of time. When the pastor girds himself with the servant's towel his people will more readily accept the servant's role.

5. *Expected Godliness of Life, I Thess. 4:1, 3, 7.* The church is not a place for perfect saints but rather a place where saints are being perfected. The pastor must raise high Biblical standards of godliness and then point to the bounteous provisions of the Lord for living the life to which He has called us.

6. *Comforted the Sorrowing, I Thess. 4:13.* Pastors should love people. They hurt when their sheep hurt; they seek lambs with genuine concern when they stray; they weep with and for the flock.

7. *Majored on Gratitude, I Thess. 5:18.* A pastor should be positive, setting the example of "in everything give thanks." No one thing more quickly brightens the tone of a church than a pastor and people who have learned how to major on reasons for blessing God.

When searching for a pastor we certainly should not neglect the more visible strengths of an appealing pulpit ministry, effective evangelism and quality administration. Also let us remember that many of

the inner qualities (even more important) are not so easily identified in a questionnaire or through the brief Sunday morning visit of two or three members of the pulpit committee.

A Suggested Procedure

How should the church proceed in its search for another undershepherd? No particular procedure is perfect for every church, but possibly a few suggested steps may be of benefit when that hour of trauma arrives. God will honor good procedures. In all His creation, whether macrocosm or microcosm, we recognize that our God is One of design and orderliness. So should there be the orderliness of good procedures in our church life. One primary factor should be kept in sharp focus. God will not do for the church what the church can and should do for itself. May we suggest the following steps for the church and pulpit committee to consider.

1. *Inquire of God.* We must not substitute procedures or phrenetic activities for the wisdom and direction which can only come from above. Our Lord gave us an example in that He prayed all night before selecting His disciples. The church at Antioch was in a time of prayer and fasting when the Holy Spirit pointed out Paul and Barnabas for missionary endeavors. From the human perspective Paul may have been regarded as a misfit for the ministry – bad eyesight, unmarried, sometimes sickly, not really attractive in appearance, and occasionally disputatious in spirit. The church must express its dependence upon the Lord.

2. *Identify the Needs of the Church.* If a church has a large staff and possibly a strong Christian grade school which the pastor must supervise, then, of course, his administrative experience or capability should be a more important factor than for a church which didn't require these responsibilities. Correspondingly, if the great need is evangelism and community penetration, or if the emphasis should now be toward discipleship, these also are factors which should be considered. No one man has all the ministry gifts in equal measure to, broadly speaking, a church should not call a good and godly man and then crush him with performance expectations outside of his major strengths.

3. *Identify and Institute Worthy Goals.* What do you want your church to be in two years? In five years? A wise church which really desires the blessings of the Lord should be capable of presenting its hopes to a potential pastor. A candidate should be able to sense whether the church is forward looking or simply satisfied with the "status quo." Quality men who are anointed of God for the ministry are challenged not so much by the size of the church or its salary but more by the potential of growth and outreach. These are the masked questions in the heart of a candidate: "Are these a people who desire to move forward in obedience to the great commission?" "Should I invest my life with them?" Identifying your desire for God's work is a great encouragement to a potential pastor.

4. *Identify Potential Candidates.* This is not easy, but one productive possibility is to contact some Christian leaders. Don't forget earnest prayer and God's promise, "I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding," Jer. 3:15. Contact the National Office, your Christian schools, your State Representative and other Christian leaders in your area. Be cautious about candidates who look for a change every one to three years.

5. *Determine Candidate Priority.* Choose which candidate should be contacted first, which should be second, and so on. Notify the potential candidate of your need and of your interest in him. Inquire whether he is willing to be considered, willing to pray about it, willing to talk to the members of the committee.

6. *Investigate for Qualifications and Experience.* I suggest the inquiries focus as fully upon the personal and family life as upon the pulpit and administrative capabilities. God places primary emphasis upon the man. If possible, spend some time and effort in his community. Check on preaching, teaching, and communication skills, diligence in study, compassion for people, integrity in business and finances, and relationships with wife, children and colleagues. Remember, the Holy Spirit will not do this work for you.

7. *Invite the Candidate and His Wife to an Official Church Social.* This is a golden opportunity to talk

"business" and allow the ladies to better know the candidate's wife. It provides the Holy Spirit the opportunity to confirm His will in the hearts of a larger body of people than just the pulpit committee.

8. *Invite the Prospect to Fill the Pulpit as a Candidate.* This is a good opportunity for the committee to provide for the church body a written profile on the candidate – salvation, call, training, marriage, family, experience in ministry.

9. *Inform the Church Regularly and Fully.* This is an essential responsibility of the pulpit committee during the entire searching process.

Naturally the above suggestions in no way identify all the details related to the call of a pastor. It is our desire only that when that hour of decision comes to your church, the sheep may quickly identify God's choice of a shepherd for the flock.