

Am I Called?

THE SUMMONS TO PASTORAL MINISTRY

..... DAVE HARVEY



FOREWORD BY MATT CHANDLER

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Am I Called? The Summons to Pastoral Ministry

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To the pastoral team of
Covenant Fellowship Church,
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers

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Foreword

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Immediately after my conversion, I developed an insatiable appetite for the Scriptures. My personality, even from my earliest memories, was one of constant curiosity. I wanted and even needed to know how things worked. I would take apart and try to put back together anything I could get my hands on.

When the Father sent the Spirit to open my eyes and ears to the beauty of Jesus, that curiosity was redeemed. I wanted and again even needed to know how our faith—my faith—worked, so I read and studied and memorized and asked a thousand questions to the poor ministers at the First Baptist Church that God so graciously saved me in. It didn't take long for me to start answering the questions of the lost people with whom I was sharing my life—and more importantly the gospel. And my Christian friends started coming to me with questions also. Not knowing the answer simply fueled my curiosity, and I would try to find the answer.

About six months after my conversion, I started being asked to do some teaching, mainly at children's church, vacation Bible schools, and the like. My opportunities culminated in what was our "youth-led service," where I was asked by our pastor to preach the Sunday night service. I was simultaneously nervous and excited. I preached my guts out that night,

and although in my opinion the sermon was poorly done and exegetically erroneous, the Spirit of God moved powerfully that night. The altars were filled with people repenting and surrendering their lives to Christ. After the service, several people came up and encouraged me by saying they thought I was “called” into ministry.

I got my first job as a youth pastor at a small Baptist church about nine months later, and it was a nightmare. I was ill prepared, didn’t know what I was doing, didn’t know how church worked, and was in a system I didn’t understand or (if I’m honest) agree with. My walk with the Lord was suffering greatly; I had secret sin in my life and felt very, very alone. After a year, I left thinking I wasn’t called and instead should go into law and simply teach a Sunday school class.

I believe in God’s providence in all things, including his timing, but I can’t help but believe that if Dave Harvey had written this book twenty years ago, his wisdom and knowledge of the Scriptures and pastoral experience could have saved me from a bunch of pain and loss. If someone had pressed me regarding my godliness or asked me hard questions about my thought life and what I was doing in private, instead of looking at my personality and ability to communicate, I might not have bled so much in those days for being dishonest and walking in blatant rebellion before our great King.

Chapter after chapter, Dave does a phenomenal job of outlining what needs to be considered for all of us, regardless of life position or background, to answer the question: *Am I called?* The book’s first section sums up what the call is and how that call comes to us. The second section is filled with questions,

most of which you must continue to ask even after you enter pastoral ministry.

Are you godly? What a question to consider! Oh, how much deeper and wider ministries would be if godly men were leading them!

How's your home? So many young men forget that to not lead your home well disqualifies you from leading the church (1 Tim. 3:4). I've noticed among men I respect in ministry that they have a strong understanding of this truth. Read that chapter slowly.

Can you preach? What a simple and profound question. Can you open up the living Word and proclaim it in power? Dave does a great job pressing on a subject that gets muddy quickly. I've rarely come across a young man who doesn't believe he can bring it like Spurgeon. You don't have to be Spurgeon (and let's face it, you're not), but you have to be able to "feed the sheep."

The chapter on shepherding is a breath of fresh air in a climate where the false dichotomy of preaching or shepherding seems to be growing. We're called to do both.

Do you love the lost? I couldn't be happier that Dave included a chapter on evangelism and hospitality. It calls us not just to point others toward engaging the lost world but to actually engage it ourselves.

Who agrees? People should see these things in you. You should be known for your godliness and for your love for your family, the Scriptures, people, seeing people saved, and shepherding people who are hurting, broken, and wounded.

Dave finishes the book with a chapter titled "While You Wait." A week doesn't go by when someone doesn't tell me

they feel called but don't know what to do now. I had a long, drawn-out answer, but now I can simply hand them this book that you're holding.

This book is long overdue. Regardless of where you are in life, if the Spirit is pulling on you and you think that pull is toward pastoral ministry of any kind, let the Spirit of God—moving through the wisdom, experience, and knowledge of Dave Harvey—bring clarity to that tug.

Christ is all,
Matt Chandler
Lead Pastor
The Village Church

PART ONE

Approaching the Call

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The Summons As I See It

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Have you ever been summoned? In my elementary school, every classroom had a speaker mounted over the door. It crackled to life each morning, shaking us out of our slumber with all the delicacy of a caffeinated drill sergeant. But it also served a secondary, more diabolical purpose. If the principal wanted you in his office, your name was announced over the loudspeaker. Now remember this was back in the day when public humiliation ranked alongside arithmetic for a well-rounded education.

Each time a voice boomed forth from the box on the wall, I wondered whether my time had come for the long walk to the principal's office. Now I know eight-year-old minds rarely touch down on planet Reality, but I think there were kids summoned to his office who never returned. I'm serious. I could just imagine secret corridors from the principal's office to dungeons and torture chambers. What else could explain why some kids were so courteous and compliant? I figured those few who were called out were probably locked away forever. Someday they

would reappear somewhere, a shell of their former selves, their lives forever changed by the heart-stopping summons from a loudspeaker.

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*A summons is a call away from
one thing and into another.*

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But then I grew older and learned that a summons can be a good thing. Like when the coach grabs you by the jersey and shoves you into the game, “Let’s see what you’ve got.” Or an inconvenient thing, like the official county envelope announcing jury duty. A summons can also alter your life. Any of you guys remember the selective service? That’s what they call a military draft once it leaves the marketing department. Countless young men have pulled a quaking hand from the mailbox with a draft notice—a government summons obligating them to report for duty.

Regardless of the situation, a summons is a call away from one thing and into another. This book is about a particular kind of summons, and I believe it’s one of the most glorious and strategic a Christian man can experience: the call to pastoral ministry.

Who’s This Book For?

But hang on. Before going further, I need to be straight up about whom this book is written for. *It’s written for men who may someday be pastors.* You may be hungering to plant a church—

this book is for you. Maybe you're in Bible school or seminary right now—yep, it's for you too. You might be in a good job but wondering if you're called to preach and lead, or perhaps you're in a job you hate, or you have no job at all. Pull up a chair; you're in the right place. College student wrestling with a calling? Teenage boy trying to interpret some stirrings? Glad you're here. You might be doing campus ministry, or missions, or some other vocational Christian work. You da man. You might even be a pastor wondering if you really should be doing what you're doing. This book is also for you.

But don't get me wrong. This isn't a book for everybody. It's not a general book on Christian leadership, though if you're a leader you might benefit from it. I don't expect this book will gain much traction in the Christian women's market, and neither does my publisher! You see, I believe the Bible clearly teaches that the call to pastoral ministry is only for Christian men. I know you may disagree, and I know we live in a culture where limiting opportunities for pastoral ministry to one gender relegates one to the category of quaint relic, right next to juke boxes and black-and-white TV. I'm not going to enter the fray of the argument about whether to ordain women—that's someone else's book.

But I would love for some women to read this book, women who aspire to support godly pastors and use their gifts to build the church under biblical leadership. And my wife, Kimm, wants every woman who's a pastor's wife, or wants to be, to read this as well.

One thing you'll notice about this book is that it's full of stories—tales of real men who heard and wrestled through their

summons in different ways. Some are famous folks you may know; others are regular Joes just like you and me. But I want you to know something. The stories aren't here just to keep you from nodding off while you read. They're portals through which we see a vast ocean of grace for a man called to ministry.

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*God isn't haphazard in whom he calls
or what he calls a man to do.*

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You see, God isn't haphazard in whom he calls or what he calls a man to do. He doesn't appoint bureaucrats over his church; he appoints men—flesh-and-blood, bone-headed mistake factories like you and me. He takes an ordinary guy, carves out his character, grants some grace, trains him with trials, zaps him with zeal, and corners him in his circumstances. Then you've got a pastor. That's a story worth telling—a story about grace.

How do I know? Well, let me tell you my story.

God's Project

Raised in a traditional denomination, I knew God was real. He just seemed sort of irrelevant. The church I attended did little to persuade me otherwise. An organ, plenty of gray-haired folks singing from hymnals, and a twenty-minute sermon typically left me wishing I had my twenty minutes back. In my pubescent mind, this ensemble had “snore” written all over it.

So I bailed. I did the jock thing through high school and

partied my way straight into college. I was a rock-n-roll lovin', Steelers-rootin', homework-avoidin' dude. Rowdy friends and great weekends made for average grades. I don't have grand confessions of destruction and despair. In fact, my conversion story starts with a pretty unspectacular theme: I was having a great time living my life my way.

And it worked for me—for a while. But a life of self-indulgence is like a steady diet of Oreo cookies. Sure, it tastes great, but it never really satisfies the appetite. Crazy times and couch crashing eventually started to get stale. I began to starve for something more. Questions of meaning began knocking on the door of my party with annoying regularity. If there really is a God, what does that mean for me? What should I do with the life I've been given? What really surprised me—even haunted me—is that the questions were God questions, questions that didn't leave when I turned out the light—because it was God himself doing the asking.

In 1979, I was converted. Don't ask me when or where—I honestly don't know. I'm sure those answers will be supplied shortly after I shed this mortal shell. For now, I've got the year right. I think. Maybe it's more important to say I've sought to follow Christ faithfully for something like thirty-three years. Twenty-six of those years have been in full-time ministry. And that's the story I really want to tell here.

As a new believer, I was pretty full of myself. You're probably thinking, "Of course he was proud, he was under thirty!" Nah . . . it was, shall we say, slightly more pronounced. I figured God scored a pretty serious asset in converting me. In Dave's world, where reason and humility rarely came out of hiberna-

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tion, I was God’s first-round draft choice, a serious acquisition. I was gonna be a playmaker from day one. I mean, just imagine what a C-average, ex-jock could do to the kingdom of darkness. The mere possibilities made Satan shudder, or so I thought.

In other words, I had issues. I was arrogant, self-indulgent, selfishly ambitious, impatient, and instinctively rebellious against authority—and again, this was post-conversion!

And you know that internal device that prevents people from saying the sinful or stupid things they’re thinking? Mine was busted for years. Once the pastor of our church wisely inquired why I only attended the church but never joined. “I don’t do commitment” was what I said. And I said it like I was imparting some profound insight. Truth be told, his question struck me as absurd. I hadn’t yet realized that I dealt in absurdity like Facebook dealt in friends. It was my constant companion.

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*I was arrogant, self-indulgent, selfishly ambitious,
impatient, and instinctively rebellious.*

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I was a project. But slowly I began to see I was God’s project. The gospel was “bearing fruit and increasing” in my life, as Paul says in Colossians 1:6. As I allowed God’s Word to abide in my life, I began to live more and more like a disciple in John 15 fashion. Holiness toward God began to matter to me. Loving God and loving others became an increasing preoccupation. Maybe most significantly, I just wanted to know the Savior, to learn how to worship him with my life.

Strong Stirrings

But there were other stirrings—vague and formless at first, but potent enough to press questions upon my mind. They first took shape in the local church I was “attending.” Somehow I ended my sojourn, came into camp, and actually joined the church. And I really liked it! I started not just attending meetings and spouting opinions, but connecting with brothers and sisters and catching a vision to build life together. Older guys began to speak into my life, helping me see the wretch in me and the grace in others. I started to grow as a Christian. And I began to serve in the church—doing little things, unnoticeable things, because that’s all they trusted me with. And I liked that too—which freaked me out. I started to realize that what I brought to the game didn’t really matter, but what we did together built things that last.

The stirrings, the vague questions, kept coming up in my mind. It was freaky. A church planter or pastor would step up to the pulpit to preach God’s Word. Across the room I could hear the rustling of Bibles and the muffled sounds of people preparing to listen. Some leaned forward, eager for a choice helping from Scripture. Others were almost fearful, opening their Bibles with a desperate sense of need for God. Still others sat back, ready to rate the preaching, enjoy a story, or laugh at a clever joke. But something different was happening in me. Watching the preaching drama unfold, I was thinking: *How does he do that?*

Now you may respond, “Every person who’s ever heard a decent sermon has asked that question.” But this was different. This wasn’t theoretical. It was personal. Watching men

in ministry ably function in their gifts caused me to mentally project myself into their place. I had dreams of marinating in God's Word so that I too could stand and deliver the results. In fact, I used to practice preaching when I was alone or out in the woods. You know, just to give voice to things about God that were stirring in my soul. There were no woodland conversions, but it fed a desire to preach God's Word.

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This wasn't theoretical. It was personal.

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And these experiences began to poke at a deeper question, a question of calling, a question that inched into my personal space: *Am I called to do that?*

Where's a guy supposed to go with that? I didn't know where to start. Was the answer found in some knock-you-to-the-ground Damascus Road experience? Hey, I was wide open to seeing the Lord and chatting about my future. In fact, as long as I had his attention I might add other agenda items to the conversation. But that never came for me. In fact, over my twenty-six years of ministry, I've discovered it doesn't come that way for most men.

How do you know if you're called to plant a church or be a pastor? I remember a church member who sat across from his pastor testifying that he'd received "a call to ministry." He went on with no little verbosity, informing his pastor of how humbled he was to receive the call and how awed he was to be chosen. Never asked a question, never invited any evaluation.

Then he informed the pastor he would be leaving the church in search of his ministry. So is that what happens? God speaks so loudly to a man that the others' voices become unnecessary?

I wondered if getting into ministry was like applying for a job—you know, matching qualifications with the right opportunity. If someone's good with teens and great on his feet, and there's a need for a youth worker, then presto! You got the job! Qualifications plus need equals ministry, right?

And then there was the question of Bible college or seminary. Those schools exist to confirm a man's call and get him into ministry, correct? Well, that wasn't a live option for me. You see, I had more issues. I had one called "college-debt-and-no-daddy-trust-fund-to-pay-it." I had another called "forgot-to-think-about-the-future-because-I-was-having-too-much-fun-in-school." And I had a third issue called "I-met-this-great-Christian-girl-and-we-want-to-get-married-NOW!" Those three issues combined to deliver me into the wacky world of being a security guard. In my book, that wasn't exactly Pauline preparation for ministry.

And I was still left with the stirrings, with a desire to be in ministry. What was the next step? How did I know if God was calling me to be a pastor?

A Weighty Adventure

God answered those questions for me. I want to tell you more about my journey in the following chapters, because this book is my answer to those questions. Those questions are important, and they're not unique to me. They may be essential to your future. I hope you keep reading.

Perhaps your exploration has moved you from curiosity to earnestness to all-out desperation. Believe me, I hear you. This process is an adventure—one that gets pretty serious and requires desperate prayer. Charles Spurgeon thought so as well: “How may a young man know whether he’s called or not? That’s a weighty enquiry, and I desire to treat it most solemnly. O for divine guidance in so doing!”¹ That’s the kind of appropriate sobriety and divine dependence worth locking down as we begin this journey.

If you’re looking for entertainment, you’re going to be disappointed. Yes, I want this book to engage and inspire you, but we must never lose sight of the weight of this inquiry. The summons of a man into pastoral ministry has always been treated as a solemn thing. The people of God depend on the right man leading them in the right way. So I want to provide answers to the real questions you have as you ponder pastoral ministry.

Along the way I have several goals. First, as you read this book, I want you to connect your call to ministry to something far greater: the identity you have in Christ. As John Piper has said so well, “Brothers, we are not professionals.” So many men have gone into Christian ministry and lost who they are as Christian men. I’m glad God relentlessly came after my heart (and does to this day) rather than shooting me through an impersonal ecclesiological pipeline. I want to help you be who you are in Christ as you respond to the call to serve him.

Another of my goals is to set the call to pastoral ministry in the context of a glorious vision for the church. The pastoral ministry, and therefore the pastoral call, doesn’t exist apart from its expression in a biblically defined local church. I’m glad

God ruined me with a love for the church. I want to help you see that you need the church as much as the church needs you.

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*I want you to connect your call to
ministry to something far greater.*

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I also want to help you diagnose your call through the biblical qualifications for God's shepherds, right up front. There are many ways a guy can set himself apart in people's minds—personality, political savvy, brains, selfish ambition. But God's Word's is surprisingly specific about what it takes to lead his people. I'm grateful the Bible hems me in as a pastor. I want to offer you six simple questions that should be answered by every man who feels called to ministry.

I want to help you not only do the hard work of self-evaluation, but also prepare for daily evaluation from others. Ministry can be a lonely and frustrating experience. We need others in our lives to help us get there and stay there. I'm so glad God placed men around me from the beginning who have helped confirm, define, and support my call. I want to help you embrace what it means to have your call confirmed.

Finally, I hope this book teaches you how to prepare. You'll see there isn't a magic highway into ministry. Often the road is not of our own choosing. Sometimes we're not even sure we're going in the right direction. I'm so glad I can look back and see how the Lord used all my experiences as preparation; and he's

still doing that today. I want to help every man in this process learn how to wait in faith and prepare in wisdom.

Excited yet?

Spurgeon had it right: it's weighty stuff. Not simply because it involves our personal future—it's way bigger than that! This is weighty because it involves the proclamation and protection of the gospel. It's weighty because it calls for care for God's people. It's weighty because this world needs strong churches planted and built for the glory of God.

Are you being summoned? Before we can consider our call, we need to consider the One who calls. That's the best place to begin our journey.

Before each of the remaining chapters in this book, you'll see short profiles like the following. Each man profiled is a hero of the faith. Together, they're a diverse group, representing a variety of religious traditions. Some were formally trained for the ministry; others acquired their doctrine through rigorous self-training. Some were known for preaching, others for leadership, others for wisdom, others for sacrifice. I hope you'll find a kindred spirit among them. But it's what these men have in common that's most important. First and foremost, they all loved the gospel and the doctrines of grace. Not only was each man unswerving in his commitment to the gospel, but he also made it the cornerstone of his ministry call. Second, all of them walked out their call in local church ministry.² While theologically astute, none made their mark in the world of academia. While mission-minded, none traveled the world starting new works. And while renowned preachers, all wrote and spoke first for the local congregation to whom they were committed. In

short, they were pastors—first-rank pastors to be sure, but local church men just the same. Most served only one primary church for their entire ministry lives; their ministry tenures to their primary local churches averaged more than thirty years. All these men have passed on into glory; their race is done, and now we can consider the full fruit of their responses to God’s summons to ministry, as a stimulus to our own faith.

For Additional Study

The Cross and Christian Ministry, D. A. Carson

Biblical Eldership, Alexander Strauch

Lectures to My Students, Charles H. Spurgeon