

# Philosophy of Calling Church Staff

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Perhaps nothing is more intimidating to a group of people than bearing the responsibility of calling a senior or supporting pastor. The process is always long and complicated, and will be evaluated long after it is finished. Those entrusted with so great a task often are given no clear direction on how to fulfill it. Even when a process is established beforehand by others, the group, if they hold their role with integrity, must ask, "Is the process given to us the right one?" Fortunately, this assignment is not arbitrary or subjective. There are objective principles in God's Word that can give direction and guard from error.

## How Not To Do It

Most churches looking for a staff member start by forming a "Search Committee." Then they attempt to get many résumés, and begin the daunting task of weeding through them to find the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Prospects march before them with their best foot forward as the field is narrowed. When the "most qualified" is identified, the committee makes its move. Hopefully, they can agree on one who hopefully still wants them. If the vacancy is successfully filled, we assume "mission accomplished," but was it? According to Southern Baptists, the average pastorate doesn't last four years—barely past the "honeymoon."<sup>1</sup> Other denominations report similar difficulties. "While pastors are leaving churches at a more rapid pace than ever, numerous studies have concluded that the most productive years for the pastor may depend on longevity. Lyle Schaller found that the greatest growth of churches occurred in years five through eight of a pastor's tenure. Kirk Hadaway, whose research was limited to Southern Baptist pastors, concluded that the most productive years were three through six. And George Barna's data point to increasing productivity for pastors between years three and 15."<sup>2</sup> Could it be that we are using the wrong process? The résumé approach may successfully hire a salesman, but it is closer to the world than the Scriptures. I believe it turns the process into a beauty pageant with the biblical concept of "calling" shoved to the side. The focus centers on the person more than God. Every church I know has endured some messy mistakes. Maybe we get the wrong answer because we ask the wrong question – "Who is the most qualified?" instead of "Who is God calling?"

## What is a "Calling"?

A specific concept emerges with Paul's self-description to the Romans: "*called as an apostle.*"<sup>3</sup> The Greek word *kletos* can be used generally (e.g. "called" by God as believers). Sometimes however, it points to a specific calling and task. Paul told the Corinthians he was "*called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.*"<sup>4</sup> He was not self-appointed. The Sanhedrin search committee had quickly affirmed his chosen vocation as a persecutor of the church. The "called" concept though, speaks of God's selection. The human side of the task is not making our choice but discerning His choice and affirming that. Understanding this might have helped Korah. He argued others were just as qualified to lead as Moses. To use modern terminology, he was saying, "Our résumés are just as good as yours." Reading the story of Korah's rebellion in Number 16, we see that Moses' defense said nothing of being "most qualified." His only credential was "*...the LORD has sent me to do all these deeds; for this is not my doing.*"<sup>5</sup> If we selected Jesus' disciples by résumés, I doubt any of the twelve "*uneducated and untrained men*"<sup>6</sup> would have made it. We would have opted instead for experienced Pharisees.

## The Problem with the Résumé Method

Look at résumés isn't inherently wrong, but they tell you little of who someone really is, and less of what they will become. One danger is their invitation to focus outwardly rather than inwardly. Consider

1 - see *Southern Baptists Churches Today*, Phillip B. Jones, February 2001, [www.namb.net](http://www.namb.net), page V.

2 - *Ten Tough Questions for Church Leaders, Part 2*, Thom Rainer, [www.rainergroup.com/rainergroup/10questions\\_part2.asp](http://www.rainergroup.com/rainergroup/10questions_part2.asp).

3 - Romans 1:1

4 - 1 Corinthians 1:1

5 - Numbers 16:28

6 - Acts 4:13

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the résumés of Saul and David. Saul's was great. He came from good stock – the son of a “*mighty man of valor*.” He was the best looking man in Israel and a foot taller than all the competition.<sup>7</sup> What his portfolio didn't disclose however, was his selfish pride,<sup>8</sup> rebellion,<sup>9</sup> jealousy,<sup>10</sup> cowardice,<sup>11</sup> and tendency toward being a people-pleaser.<sup>12</sup> He was everything Israel wanted in a king, but did they want the right things? They were looking for a strong, visible leader instead of God's choice. Scariest is the reality that God let them have their way, and Saul turned out to be a dismal failure.<sup>13</sup>

Consider a second résumé. This baby of a farm family had tended sheep, but had no sheepskin hanging on the wall. He fought major battles, but alone with only small towns to talk about. He had a heart after God's heart, but how do you list that in your accomplishments? As a physical specimen he didn't hold a candle to Saul. He didn't even stand out among his own brothers. When Samuel asked to review Jesse's sons, David's own father discounted him as a candidate and left him tending the sheep. But God was able to see past this deficient résumé. You see, such forms record the past, but not the future, and reflect the outside, but not the inside. They may catalog how many fights the man has been in, but not how much fight he has in him.

When God appoints a new king over Israel we see the right process in action. First, Samuel sees the need and God lays a direction on Samuel's heart (Jesse, the Bethlehemite). Then He has Samuel look at each of Jesse's sons one at a time. When Samuel sees Eliab, the oldest, he thinks, “Here is the man.” God corrects Samuel's wrong thinking by saying, “...*man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.*”<sup>14</sup> It isn't until David is brought before him that Samuel hears God say, “This is the one.” What a difference this process produces! With Saul, Israel was looking outwardly, and they got exactly what they asked for. The problem was, they were asking for the wrong thing. With David, Israel got what God was asking for, “...*a man after My heart, who will do all My will.*”<sup>15</sup> If a church is asking for the wrong thing, God may just give them a Saul, but pretty soon they will have to start looking again.

### Identifying the Process

First of all, Samuel comes to an awareness of a need. 1 Samuel 16:1 indicates Samuel is grieving over Saul. He recognizes the need for godly leadership. Even then, however, it takes the revelation of God for him to see that what is needed is a new king. Second, God gives Samuel a direction to look. Notice that it is God who sends Samuel to the family of Jesse.<sup>16</sup> Samuel doesn't start looking for the man until he starts looking at God. Third, Samuel looks at Jesse's sons one at a time. He doesn't make a beauty pageant out of it to see who looks best out of the group. He doesn't compare the candidates to each other, but one-by-one places each before God. Notice, Samuel doesn't look at the next candidate until he has heard from God about the one before him. Fourth, Samuel has to start looking for the right things. Samuel has some learning to do, for the Lord has to rebuke him because he is looking for the wrong things. If we are looking for the wrong things, we may find what we are looking for without ever finding what God wants. God's admonition is to look at the heart. We'll address that further in a minute. Recognize the change after the Lord rebukes him about Eliab. No longer are Samuel's eyes looking at the man. Now they are looking to God about the man. The difference is significant. Fifth, it is not Samuel who is calling. When Jesse brings Abinadab before Samuel, his response is, “*Neither has the*

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7 - 1 Samuel 9:1-2

8 - see 1 Samuel 15:12

9 - see 1 Samuel 15:11, 22-23

10 - see 1 Samuel 18:8-9

11 - see 1 Samuel 10:21-22; 1 Samuel 17:11

12 - see 1 Samuel 15:24

13 - Israel having a king is not wrong (see Genesis 49:10; Numbers 24:17; Deuteronomy 17:14–20), but first they must recognize God's Lordship and rule in their lives. Until that happened, a king would not meet their needs.

14 - 1 Samuel 16:7

15 - Acts 13:22

16 - 1 Samuel 16:2

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*Lord chosen this one.*” It is God who calls, not man. A church does not call a pastor; it merely affirms the Lord’s call. When a pastor is called, he is not called to serve a congregation, but to serve the Lord at a particular congregation. This not only shapes the calling process, but also the serving process. Sixth, when Samuel didn’t find what he was looking for, he didn’t “make do” with the best of what was available. He kept looking until he found God’s man.<sup>17</sup> Seventh, once Samuel knew God’s man, all he had left was to anoint him, and publicly affirm what God had already revealed. He did this in front of David’s brothers so that everyone would know that Samuel, the prophet of God, stood behind him.

### A Man After God’s Own Heart

Clearly what is most important to God in a man is his heart. When a church considers a candidate, his heart is what must catch its attention. Not only is this issue of the heart communicated clearly in the Old Testament, but it is also placed as paramount in the New Testament. Scripture has a lot to say about appointing elders (pastors).<sup>18</sup> The criteria for selecting church leaders are extensive, but in each list the focus is not on abilities, but character.<sup>19</sup> Again, we see that what is inside the man is most important. Take a few minutes to read through 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9. You’ll see that of the two major passages on church leaders, neither says anything about his training except as it relates to the Word of God. 1 Timothy 3:2 says he must be “*able to teach*,” and in Titus 1:9 we are told that he must be able to “*...exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.*”

### Affirmed By The Sending Church

Up to this point, we have said a lot about the calling church, but where does the sending church come into the picture? Are they simply the losers in this equation? While most churches do not consider this dimension, to God sending is just as important as calling. We see this principle illustrated beautifully at Antioch.<sup>20</sup> Here we see Barnabas and Saul (Paul) called out by the Holy Spirit to a new work. The Lord revealed His calling not just to Barnabas and Saul, but to all the leaders at Antioch. The calling of God was affirmed through the sending out of them by the leadership. This supports the common practice of a man being ordained by the sending church, not the calling church. Who knows this man better than those where he had been? If God is truly calling a man, then everyone ought to be able to rejoice in the new task, including those he is leaving. Not only does involving the sending church become a safeguard for anything unknown about the man, but it also draws everyone’s eyes to God for the transition process. As we look at Paul and Barnabas after this sending out, clearly the relationship with Antioch does not end there.<sup>21</sup> Beware of a man who doesn’t want a relationship with the place he is leaving.

### A Biblical Job Description

Once a man is called by God and this is affirmed by the local body, the job is not finished. We must make certain that he is given a Biblical job description. What does God expect a pastor to do? The one passage where the term “pastor” is used in the New Testament is the most overlooked when it comes

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**17** - 1 Samuel 16:11,12

**18** - The English word “pastor” appears only once in the New Testament (Ephesians 4:11). The Greek work translated “pastor” appears elsewhere, but is always translated “shepherd” and does not directly point to a church leader in those instances. The more common term used for a church leader is “elder” (appearing 67 times in the New Testament) or sometimes “overseer” (appearing 2 times).

**19** - 1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:6–9 The primary proving ground of his abilities as a shepherd is not his previous churches, but his own family. Titus tells us he must have “*children who believe*” (v. 6). 1 Timothy 3:4,5 is even more emphatic: “*He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)*.” If you want to know about a man’s character, look at his family. His reputation is what other people think he is. But his character is what his family knows he is. His family life speaks volumes about his heart. If a man has a shepherd’s heart to his family, he’ll have it to his church. If his family life suffers because of his ministry, neither is properly balanced.

**20** - Acts 13:1-3

**21** - Acts 14:21, 22, 26–28; 15:30–35; 18:22, 23

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time to define his job description. Ephesians 4 is very specific not only about what he is to do, but also what he is not to do. Verses 11 and 12 tell us: “*And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.*” A pastor’s main job is to equip the saints to be effective in their service to the Lord. It is not his job to do all the work of service. A church which sees the pastor as the minister and the congregation as spectators will accomplish little for the kingdom. A pastor, more than anything else is called to be an equipper. This is true regardless of his appointed role. A youth pastor needs to equip leaders to minister to the youth. An education man needs to spend his time equipping his teachers. All pastors are to be equippers, but if they don’t equip they aren’t pastors regardless of what we call them. How does the pastor equip? He equips by ministering the Word. In 2 Timothy 3:17 we see that it is the Word of God which equips us for every good work. We see this priority illustrated beautifully in the first century church. When there was a need for more ministry, the church leaders didn’t neglect their primary task in order to meet the need. Instead, they equipped and unleashed the laity. James addresses the need by saying, “*It is not desirable for us to neglect the Word of God in order to serve tables. But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the Word.*”<sup>22</sup> The result of these right priorities was that “*...the Word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem.*”

### Wrapping it Up and Taking it Home

Where do we go from here? Whoever are entrusted with the task of looking for a church staff member must understand the dual-focus of their role. They are responsible to hear from God, and to communicate with the body what they are hearing from God. The first dimension of their focus is to hear from God. Plurality and unanimity are essential to this. While Samuel was the sole person with the task of calling David, it would not be wise to do it that way today unless there is a prophet in your midst with direct access to God. What God did through individual representatives in the Old Testament, He chooses to do through a plurality in the New Testament.<sup>23</sup> Whether that plurality is a group of elders or a committee, they will answer to the body they serve and to the Lord whom they seek.

Plurality brings accountability to the process and decentralizes power. This group will need the strength and sensitivity of each other as they bear the responsibility of hearing God—and they must understand that their task is not to give opinions but to hear God. This is why you want people of spiritual maturity and discernment to make up this group. This is also why their decision should be unanimous. God will not be saying two different things. If the committee is divided, some or all of them have not heard God yet, or perhaps God has not spoken. The second dimension of their focus is to communicate what they are hearing to those who trusted the task to them. The confidence people will have in the outcome of the process will be directly related to how well that process is communicated to them as it plays out. For the process to be most effective, it should be shared as it happens, not just at the end. The following principles from the process of David’s call should move this philosophy into the practical realm.

**PRINCIPLE #1: God showed Samuel to start looking.** When God rejected Saul, Samuel grieved, but it took revelation to see it was time for a new king. When a preaching pastor leaves the need is obvious. However, if growth means there ought to be a children’s pastor, that need may not be as evident. Sometimes God has to show that need, but even that is not enough by itself. Have you looked to God for what is needed (and when)? We want to look to God about everything, but sometimes we get focused on needs and miss opportunities.

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<sup>22</sup> - Acts 6:1-7

<sup>23</sup> - Virtually every time church leadership is mentioned in the New Testament it is in the plural. The term “elder” (presbuteros) always appears in the plural except when John uses it of himself in 2 and 3 John and when Peter uses it of himself in 1 Peter 5:1. The term “overseer” (episkopos) is always used in the plural. The term “pastor” is used only once in Ephesians 4:11, where it is plural.

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**PRINCIPLE #2: God showed Samuel where to look.** Once Samuel saw the need, God sent him to the family of Jesse, the Bethlehemite.<sup>24</sup> That ought to be our starting point – to ask God where to look. How can you employ this principle? Pray fervently, asking for divine sensitivity. Look to the Lord about the man before looking for the man. Let God guide you in a direction to look.

**PRINCIPLE #3: Samuel considered the candidates one at a time.** Of all the principles to glean from David's anointing, this is paramount. Samuel didn't gather Jesse's sons together and pick the best one. If he had, he'd have stuck with Eliab, the oldest, and missed God's person. Considering a group, our focus becomes finding the best or most qualified among them, and we turn the whole process into a beauty pageant. Our goal though, is not to find who looks best in a bathing suit.

**PRINCIPLE #4: Samuel held each candidate before the Lord.** One look at Eliab and Samuel thought "*Surely the Lord's anointed is before Him.*"<sup>25</sup> If Samuel leaned on his own understanding, the process would have ended there, but God intervened and redirected. With each son after Eliab, Samuel's answer was "*Neither has the Lord chosen this one.*"<sup>26</sup> He held each before the Lord. If we don't want to miss God, we must do this. We can't consider the next candidate until we have heard from God about the present one. Implicit in Samuel's approach was the recognition that it was God's job to call the king. His was to identify and affirm the one God called, and it is ours as well. If Christ is the head of the church, and He says "*I will build My church,*"<sup>27</sup> then we better be wary of affirming someone He isn't calling. We better not lean on our logic. Samuel's logic was impressed with Eliab, but David was God's choice.

**PRINCIPLE #5: Samuel let God change what he looked for.** Samuel almost picked the wrong person by focusing only on outward appearance and the present task. Through his relationship with the Lord he was redirected in what to look for. David was young, but God saw the future potential of him growing into the role. His heart for God qualified him. Like Samuel, we can put too much stock in externals and undervalue the heart. Skills, training, and experience matter, but I've learned that when a person has a true heart for God, you can always add the training. If the heart isn't there, no amount of training, skill or experience can compensate. We need to consider the heart first, and we need to ask the Lord, "Are we looking for the right things?"

**PRINCIPLE #6: Samuel continued until he found God's choice.** When Jesse was finished, Samuel wasn't. Jesse apparently had already written off David as being too young. Were a church committee in charge of this process they might have been tempted to look at the seven candidates they had seen and settle for the best of the group instead of looking for David. No matter how long the process takes, you have to wait until you hear from God. You may not think you have time to keep looking, but if you get the wrong person, you'll have to make time to start looking again.

**PRINCIPLE #7: Once he found God's choice, he affirmed him publicly.** Once Samuel identified David, God had him to anoint him with oil "*...in the midst of his brothers.*" It is significant that it was not until he had been anointed by Samuel and publicly affirmed in his new position as king-to-be that "*...the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.*"<sup>24</sup> I believe there is an important principle here. Once you have found God's man, be willing to stand firmly behind him and support him publicly. He needs this as does everyone else. Don't "waver and wonder." Trust what God has done through the process.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the most important aspect in calling church staff is keeping our eyes on God. If we focus too much on the candidate or the need and lose sight of God, we are prone to mistakes. We must do it God's way, for the world's way won't take us where we want to go. We should continually ask ourselves, "Do we want a Saul, or a David?"