

Pastoral Turnover And The Call To Preach

—
Paul V. Harrison*

[* Paul V. Harrison is pastor of Cross Timbers Free Will Baptist Church in Nashville, TN and adjunct professor of church history at Free Will Baptist Bible College, 3606 West End Avenue, Nashville, TN 37205.]

One of the problems facing contemporary Christianity is pastoral turnover. On the average about every three or four years a U-Haul backs up to the parsonage, and minister and family relocate to another field of work. These ministerial changes have traditionally been viewed as blights upon the churches involved. As Richard Mather (1596–1669) noted: “... when such things doe often and frequently fall out, it is doubtlesse a Judgement of God upon such a people to have so many changes in their Ministers.”¹ Whether resulting from divine judgment or not, in general, pastoral turnover is a bad thing, causing untold harm to God’s churches and God’s servants.

First, it is harmful to the individual churches involved. Church members suffer during the interim period. They often have strife over the selection process in acquiring a new leader. The immature in the faith often become discouraged and drop out, sometimes joining the congregation down the street but often quitting church altogether.

Another way that churches are harmed through frequent pastoral turnover is that people fail to establish deep relationships with their pastors. They are therefore often unwilling to share their innermost problems. They even come to expect pastoral turnover with some regularity. As a result members of the pastor’s family are many times viewed as outsiders, visiting for a time to fill the need of the congregation. If the people like the minister and his family, they guard against becoming too attached because they know that he will in all likelihood in a few short years break their hearts and leave. If they dislike him, there is no need for them to become overly upset, for no doubt he will be replaced before too long.

1 1. Richard Mather, *Church-Government and Church Covenant Discussed in an Answer of the Elders of the Severall Churches in New-England to Two and Thirty Questions, Sent over to Them by Divers Ministers in England, to Declare Their Judgements Therein. Together with an Apologie of the Said Elders in New-England for Church-Covenant, Sent over in Answer to Master Bernard in the Year 1639. As Also in an Answer to Nine Positions about Church-Government, and Now Published for the Satisfaction of All Who Desire Resolution in Those Points* (London: n.p., 1643) 40.

Churches are also hurt through pastoral turnover in that the minister's roots into the unchurched community are severed. Pastoral transitions generally diminish effectiveness. Win Arn wrote that it is foolish

to think of a physician, dentist, or other professional moving his/her place of practice from one city to another every four years, and expecting to have a

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growing and loyal customer base. What makes us think pastors can expect any long-term influence on a community by moving every four years? Of course, pastoral longevity, by itself, does not produce growth. But there is little doubt that rapid pastoral turnover prevents it.²

Representing an earlier era, Richard Baxter of Kidderminster (1615–91) made the same point as he reflected on his ministry:

And it much furthered my success that I stayed still in this one place... . For he that removeth off from place to place may sow good seed in many places, but is not like to see much fruit in any unless some other skillful hand shall follow him to water it.³

These moves are also harmful to ministers and their families. Many ministerial wives never feel that they can settle down and nest. Many children of relocating ministers suffer, being regularly uprooted and replanted. Moving, after all, is quite traumatic. Ministers themselves face the repeated frustrations of starting all over again, never finding out what it is like to pastor a people whom they really know.

Most will probably admit that the three to four-year stay of ministers is less than desirable. Proposing solutions to the problem, however, is much harder. This paper examines some of the factors that have led to brief pastoral stays, including a critical analysis of the prevailing understanding of the call to preach. Building upon these findings, the paper concludes with a few suggestions toward a possible solution.

I. Current Approach To Pastoral Selection: A Critique

One factor leading to these short-term pastorates is the way churches go about filling pulpits. When First Church is without a pastor, it looks to two basic sources

2 2. Win Arn, "Discovering Columbus," *The Win Arn Growth Report* (Monrovia, CA: Church Growth, n.d.) 2.

3 3. Richard Baxter, *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1931) 83-84.

to meet its need. On the one hand, it may look to “free-floating” ministers, those who, whether ordained or not, are unattached and therefore readily available to take on pastoral responsibility. These are usually young and inexperienced, often fresh out of college or seminary. On the other hand, the church may look to the pulpits of other churches. For most churches this is the preferred approach, since such ministers have at least some pastoral experience and their present work provides the opportunity for firsthand observation of how they are performing.

This approach to meeting churches’ pastoral needs is inherently flawed. First, the Biblical evidence suggests a different method. More will be said of this below. Second, calling pastors from other pulpits tends to violate the Golden Rule on a church level. Connecticut pastor Timothy Tuttle in 1861 published an article titled “A Permanent Ministry.” He described the practice of his day:

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Strong and wealthy parishes also do wrong in inviting a minister from one that is weaker. Sometimes they send spies to hear one preach, concerning whom a good report has reached them; and if the spies, after hearing, recommend him, then a call is extended to him forthwith. This is not acting in accordance with the Savior’s golden rule, not doing to others as they would that others should do to them.⁴

Many times these pastors who are pursued to fill vacancies are laboring effectively where they are, and their churches grieve and suffer when they leave. How might a happy pastor-people union be broken up? Since happiness is never complete, many a pastor can be lured away, especially on Mondays when Sunday did not go so well. Maybe the present difficulties in ministry are God’s way of leading elsewhere, he thinks. Then again, other grass tends to look greener.

Third, calling pastors from other churches easily sets up a stepping-stone mentality, where pastors, ambitious for bigger and more prestigious works, set their sights on climbing the ecclesiastical ladder of success. Ministers are not beyond such worldly ambition, as the history of the church teaches. Philip Spener (1635–1705) wrote of ministerial ambition he witnessed in his day: “Behold how they seek promotions, shift from parish to parish, and engage in all sorts of machinations!”⁵

The Council of Nicea’s (325) fifteenth canon addressed this issue:

4 4. Timothy Tuttle, “A Permanent Ministry,” *Contributions to the Ecclesiastical History of Connecticut: Prepared under the Direction of the General Association, to Commemorate the Completion of One Hundred and Fifty Years since Its First Annual Assembly* (New Haven: William L. Kingsley, 1861) 241.

5 5. Philip J. Spener, *Pia Desideria* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) 45.

On account of the great disturbance and discords that occur, it is decreed that the custom prevailing certain places contrary to the Canon, must wholly be done away; so that neither bishop, presbyter, nor deacon shall pass from city to city. And if any one, after this decree of the holy and great Synod, shall attempt any such thing, or continue in any such course, his proceedings shall be utterly void, and he shall be restored to the Church for which he was ordained bishop or presbyter.⁶

Henry Percival, a student and translator of this council's proceedings, concluded that

[t]he grounds on which such prohibition rested were usually that such changes were the outcome of ambition, and that if tolerated the result would be that smaller and less important sees would be despised, and that there would be a constant temptation to the bishops of such sees to make themselves popular with the important persons in other dioceses with the hope of promotion.⁷

A fourth problem with calling pastors from other churches is that this method is quite impractical. It actually leads to less than ideal short-term pastorates. Calling ministers from other pulpits regularly plays out something

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like this. First Church needs a pastor and calls the pastor of Second Church. Now Second Church needs a pastor, so, following the same method, it calls the pastor of Third Church. This domino effect sometimes goes on and on.

These short-term pastorates are fueled not only by calling ministers from other pulpits and setting in motion the chain reaction described above but also by uniting individuals and congregations who are relatively unacquainted with each other. The following scenario is quite common. First Church hears about Preacher Jones, invites him to visit the church, preach, meet with the board, etc. Preacher Jones comes all excited about the possible leading of the Lord. He puts his best foot forward and perhaps delivers a better sermon than he could prepare week by week in a busy pastorate. The prayerful church likewise puts its best foot forward. Soon a ministerial wedding takes place. Some time later, both the church and minister discover, for better or for worse, whom they married. Sometimes this leads to joy, sometimes to despair and inevitable divorce. This common approach to joining church and minister is much like rolling the dice. Much is left to chance.

II. Colonial New England Approach To Pastoral Selection

⁶ 6. *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, NPNF 14.32.

⁷ 7. Henry R. Percival, "Excursus on the Translation of Bishops," in NPNF 14.33.

The churches of colonial New England offer a model for improving the current situation. These Puritan-like churches called men in such a fashion that the result was often lifelong pastorates. This is seen in the following chart which indicates the number and length of ministerial settlements in the colonial period.⁸

	Number of settlements	Average tenure		Number of settlements	Average tenure
1620–1624	1	9	1685–1689	26	22
1625–1629	3	4	1690–1694	33	19
1630–1634	17	10	1695–1699	42	28
1635–1639	54	15	1700–1704	30	22
1640–1644	27	17	1705–1709	38	25
1645–1649	15	15	1710–1714	54	29
1650–1654	17	21	1715–1719	61	28
1655–1659	17	31	1720–1724	73	28
1660–1664	33	18	1725–1729	88	25
1665–1669	31	23	1730–1734	80	30
1670–1674	26	25	1735–1739	81	27
1675–1679	17	18	1740–1744	105	28
1680–1684	37	22	1745–1749	63	27

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Perhaps a look at a section from these years will better illustrate the stays many of these ministers experienced. From 1745–1775 some 221 Yale graduates became ministers. Of these, 156 or 71 percent labored their entire pastoral career

⁸ J. William T. Youngs, Jr., *God's Messengers: Religious Leadership in Colonial New England, 1700-1750* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1976) 143.

at the very church where they were ordained.⁹ Taking a broader sweep that covers “Yale College classes from 1702 through 1794, 550 graduates entered the Congregationalist ministry. Of these men, 392, or 71 percent, ministered for their entire career to only one church. . . . Only 21, or 4 percent, of the 550 served more than three pastorates.”¹⁰

These general statistics, of course, represent individual churches and their ministers, each with its own history. To offer one example, Valentine Wightman (1681–1747), a Six-Principle Baptist (Arminian), organized the first Baptist church in Groton, Connecticut, in 1705 and pastored that congregation for forty-two years until his death. After a nine-year interval, the founding pastor’s son, Timothy Wightman, became pastor of the church and served until his death forty years later. He was succeeded by his son, John G. Wightman, who pastored the church from 1800 to 1841, when he died. Altogether, the Wightmans, father, son, and grandson, served this Baptist church a total of 123 years.¹¹

A number of factors entered into such long-term pastorates. Surely, the ethos of the day was toward permanence and stability. People in general were not nearly so mobile as they are today.¹² But there was also an aim at this stability, both by the churches and the ministers. Longevity did not just happen, as historian Donald Scott observed: “The ideal that pastors and congregations alike worked toward was permanence, the occupation of a single pulpit for one’s entire ministerial career.”¹³

Also, the ministerial education of these men prepared them well for their work. Harvard education, for example, where for some time around half the students were ministerial trainees, entailed careful study of languages (including Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac), philosophy, science, and divinity. The training was arduous, and completion of the degree in and of itself pointed to stability.¹⁴ Following formal schooling, aspiring ministers commonly apprenticed

9 9. Donald M. Scott, *Pastors and Providence: Changing Ministerial Styles in Nineteenth-Century America* (Evanston, IL: Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1975) 4.

10 10. Donald M. Scott, *From Office to Profession: The Transformation of the New England Ministry, 1750–1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1978) 3.

11 11. Henry Jones, “On the Rise, Growth and Comparative Relations of Other Evangelical Denominations in Connecticut to Congregationalism,” *Contributions to the Ecclesiastical History of Connecticut* 262; and *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, s.v. “Wightman, Valentine,” by H. L. McBeth.

12 12. See David Wells, *No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 42–43.

13 13. Scott, *Pastors* 4.

14 14. Mary Latimer Gambrell, *Ministerial Training in Eighteenth-Century New England* (New York: Columbia University, 1937) *passim*; and David D. Hall, *The Faithful*

for several months to a year under a seasoned minister. Richard Baxter had done this in England and helped to perpetuate

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the idea. Over a fifty-four year ministry at the Congregational Church in Franklin, Massachusetts, Yale graduate Nathaniel Emmons (1745–1840) trained ninety such ministers.¹⁵

When churches called pastors, they usually had them serve an extended time on probation. Three months was the minimum, but a year was not uncommon. During this time, both the candidate and the church examined each other closely. One young man under such observation complained in a letter to his fiancée that “the people watch me as narrowly as a mouse is watched by a cat.”¹⁶ Being watched may have been uncomfortable, but it contributed to the stability sought after. The ministers also watched the congregations carefully, seeking to determine whether they and the people fit each other. The result of this scrutiny, according to J. William T. Youngs, was “the tendency of ministers to settle in cultural and geographical regions that suited their background and temperament.”¹⁷

Cotton Mather (1663–1728) actually detailed the practice in his area along these lines. Since electing a pastor was “of Great Consequence,” certain steps should be taken to get a good man. First, the candidate should be examined on “expected articles” by four or five settled pastors. These “expected articles” include: (1) inquiries about whether he leads a blameless life; (2) why he desires to preach—does he have “Love to CHRIST and souls”? (3) abilities in three learned languages; (4) preaching a probationary sermon before at least three of the pastors; (5) examination as to “What Authors in *Theology* he has read; and he shall particularly make it evident, That he has considerably read, *Ames* his *Medulla Theologiae*”; (6) abilities in refuting errors; (7) adherence to the Westminster Confession of Faith. After the candidate has passed this trial, at his ordination he should answer questions of elders and messengers of area churches which are invited. These questions related to his “Capacities and Inclinations, to serve the kingdom of God.”¹⁸

When these churches elected a pastor, they had an ordination service, often including a fast, which was the formal installation into the pastoral post. Once

Shepherd: A History of the New England Ministry in the Seventeenth Century (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1972) 178.

15 15. Gambrell, *Ministerial* 101–103.

16 16. Scott, *From Office* 4.

17 17. Youngs, *God’s Messengers* 29.

18 18. Cotton Mather, *A Faithful Account of the Discipline Professed and Practised; in the Churches of New-England* (Boston: S. Gerrish, 1726; reprint ed., New York: Arno, 1972) 118–121.

installed, only a formal and detailed course of action could sever the bond. When a church was organizing and calling its first pastor, especially in New England's first-generation churches, they gave land for a house and helped construct it. Often when a church made subsequent calls, money was given to the minister for the same purpose.¹⁹ Such significant investments on the church's part (forfeited if a pastoral change occurred) reflected the expectation of a long term of service. This practice served as an

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“important check on the people,” discouraging them from “moving for a dismissal of their pastors.”²⁰

This expectation of lifelong ministry also shows up in the language used to describe the calling of a pastor. The minister was “settled.” It was common for terms of matrimony to be used of the pastor-people union. Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), for example, preached from Isa 62:4–5, making the main point that “the uniting of faithful ministers with Christ's people in the ministerial office, when done in a due manner, is like a young man's marrying a virgin.”²¹ Such thinking harked all the way back to Athanasius (c. 296–373), who viewed the connection between minister and people to be like that in a marriage. Citing the Pauline injunction “Are you married? Do not seek a divorce,” Athanasius argued: “For if this expression applies to a wife, how much more does it apply to a Church, and to the same Episcopate; to which whosoever is bound ought not to seek another, lest he prove an adulterer according to holy Scripture.”²²

With this analogy in mind, it is not surprising that the New England churches that needed ministers did not as a rule call pastors from sister churches. To “violate the sanctity of another church's settled pastorate,” to “raid” another pulpit, was to destroy the idea of permanence for which all were laboring.²³ Scott explained another reason these churches avoided sister churches' pastors:

Permitting a minister to change pastorates because there was an opening in a wealthier community or in one of the several pulpits that automatically made its occupant a colony wide clerical and social leader would have meant opening the ministry up to precisely the worldly ambitions for wealth, fame, and power that

19 19. Hall (*Faithful Shepherd* 102–103) noted that churches regularly required a five-year stay or so before claim could be made to the land.

20 20. Parsonages and Permanent Funds,” *Contributions to the Ecclesiastical History of Connecticut* 230–232. This unsigned article explains how the churches shifted to parsonages as frequent pastoral changes became the order of the day.

21 21. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: With a Memoir by Sereno E. Dwight*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1834) 2.19.

22 22. Athanasius, *Defence against the Arians*, NPNF 4.104.

23 23. Scott, *From Office* 6.

were thought to be antithetical to both the spiritual and the public character of the office.²⁴

What this meant, of course, was that when an established pulpit was left empty, for whatever reason, the church generally had no choice but to look to fresh ministerial graduates who had no pastoral experience whatsoever. They might find some unattached former pastor, though such a status carried with it suspicion, but, more likely than not, inexperienced youths were the candidates. The Northampton Church in Massachusetts makes an interesting case study. The founding pastor was Eleazar Mather, who was ordained on June 18, 1661 and died July 24, 1669. Learning of Solomon Stoddard, a 1662 Harvard graduate, the church invited him to minister to them, barely reaching the young man before he sailed back to England. He received

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a unanimous call to the church on March 4, 1670, and four days later married his predecessor's widow, Mrs. Esther Mather. For some reason he was not ordained until September 11, 1672. He served as pastor of the Northampton Church until his death in 1729. Stoddard, during his nearly sixty years as pastor there, established one of the loftiest reputations in New England. His grandson, Jonathan Edwards, succeeded him as pastor, having served the last two years of the old man's life as assistant in the church. This was Edwards's first pastorate. In the course of his twenty-one year stay, he established himself as the greatest theologian in America.

Edwards was dismissed from his congregation in 1750 as a result of a theological dispute with his people over whether the unregenerate should partake in the communion service. This left the church needing a minister. Consider their situation. They have just enjoyed back-to-back the ministries of arguably the two most prominent ministers in all of New England. How would they now go about filling their pulpit?

Edwards knew the custom of the day, and so he expected them to look to fresh ministerial graduates. This is seen in his farewell sermon to his people, delivered June 22, 1750. After twice referring to the yet-to-be-secured pastor as "young," he prayed:

May God bless you with a faithful pastor, one that is well acquainted with his mind and will, thoroughly warning sinners, wisely and skillfully searching professors, and conducting you in the way to eternal blessedness. May you have truly a burning and shining light set up in this candlestick; and may you, not only for a

24 24. Idem, *Pastors* 8.

season, but during his whole life, that a long life, be willing to rejoice in his light. ²⁵

Edwards's memoirs give us the names of the candidates who were considered by the church. They brought in a "Mr. Farrand, a young gentleman from New Jersey college" (now Princeton). ²⁶ Surely this is Daniel Farrand, born in Milford, Connecticut, in 1722, who graduated from New Jersey College in 1750. The Northampton Church "contended much about him," according to Edwards, so he left them, eventually being ordained August 12, 1752, in Canaan, Connecticut, where he stayed until his death in 1803. ²⁷

Edwards recorded that the Northampton Church next "sent for a young preacher, a Mr. Green of Barnstable." ²⁸ This was probably Joseph Green, Jr., who had been born in Barnstable, Massachusetts, and graduated from Harvard in 1746. Green also did not work out at Northampton, eventually settling at Mansfield, Massachusetts, where he was ordained in 1753. ²⁹

Eventually the Northampton congregation settled on twenty-five-year-old John Hooker, a fresh 1751 Yale graduate, again with no pastoral

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experience. Hooker stayed at Northampton until his death from smallpox twenty-four years later. ³⁰

For Northampton to consider calling these inexperienced men and eventually actually to call one of them after having enjoyed such ministerial giants is an amazing fact. It speaks, however, of the intense commitment the Christian community had to guarding the pastor-people relationship against any corrupting influence.

Following or adjusting such a model would surely improve the current pastoral situation. It has at least much to commend itself to us: solid ministerial training, a period of apprenticeship, a probationary period at churches, and a refusal to call men from sister churches. A better model, however, exists. While God has not handed down an ecclesiastical manual that details every situation, the

25 25. Edwards, *Works* 1.ccvii.

26 26. Ibid 1.cxlvi.

27 27. Frederick Lewis Weis, *The Colonial Clergy and the Colonial Churches of New England* (Lancaster, MA: n.p., 1936; reprint ed., Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 1977) 82.

28 28. Edwards, *Works* 1.cxlvi.

29 29. Weis, *Colonial Clergy* 96. It is possible, though I think highly unlikely, that the Mr. Green of Barnstable is Joseph Green, Sr. He was born in 1701, settled at East Church in Barnstable, and served there from 1725 until 1770 when he died.

30 30. Weis, *Colonial Clergy* 109.

Scriptures do offer critical insight into how churches are to function. This insight extends to who should be called to pastor and to what constitutes a call.

III. New Testament Approach To Pastoral Selection

So what do the Scriptures say about who should be called to fill the pulpits of God's churches? The Biblical pattern for churches seeking to secure pastors is for them to look within their own membership for such leaders.

Two passages in particular point to this conclusion. First, when Paul planted churches in his missionary activity, he involved himself with the church in selecting individuals from within the churches for the leadership positions. Having evangelized Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, Paul and Barnabas looped back and revisited the converts. Acts 14:21b–23a reads:

Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

Verse 23 narrates the ordination or the "appointment" of elders "in each church." This appointment surely involved the input, if not the outright election, of the congregation, as the selection of the Seven in Acts six suggests and as the word *ceirotonevw* pictures (literally "hand-outstretching"). But important to this discussion is the fact that these selections were obviously made from within the newly planted churches. A. T. Robertson, while noting that they "may not have been ideal men for this service," stated that "they were chosen from the actual membership in each instance, men who knew local conditions and problems."³¹ Roland Allen in his *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* found this fact most significant:

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... St Paul ordained as elders members of the church to which they belonged. He did not establish a provincial school to which all candidates for ordination must go, and from which they might be sent to minister to congregations in any part of the province, at the bidding of a central committee or at his own. The elders were really *of* the church to which they ministered. They were at home. They were known to the members of the flock.³²

31 31. A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1930), 3.218.

32 32. Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 100.

Most noteworthy in this regard are Paul's instructions to young Timothy in 1 Timothy 3. There he details the requirements of the "bishop" or "overseer" (επίσκοπος). He states simply: "If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be . . ." He goes on to cite various requirements. While the list includes reference to the individual's standing with those outside the church, that is, unbelievers, the emphasis is, as William Hendriksen observed, upon "the reputation which the man has among church-members."³³

Now while Paul's instructions to young Timothy do not preclude a church's reaching outside its walls to acquire a pastor, they do seem to assume the choice's being from within each particular Christian community. Perhaps nowhere does this become more obvious than in the verses which follow this listing of pastoral qualifications. Leaving the overseer's role, Paul immediately plunges into the qualifications for the deacon, presenting Timothy with a similar list to that which has gone before. Current practice and the practice down through the centuries has been to select deacons from among the local church's membership. In fact, most would likely be up in arms if a church began choosing her deacons from among the leading laity of a sister church. Churches are commonly expected to select deacons from among their own membership. It appears that the same approach was in Paul's mind for the overseer as well.

The pattern seems to have been something like this. The gospel was preached and various people responded with faith and were baptized. As it became evident to the church and Paul that certain individuals possessed the gifts requisite for spiritual leadership, they were formally chosen by the congregation and thus installed as elders. It seems reasonable to conclude that this was Paul's practice church by church and not just in the churches mentioned in Acts 14. We might also assume that such an approach was in Paul's mind when he told Titus (1:5) to "appoint elders in every town, as I directed you."

Carl Volz argued that this calling from within the congregation was the most common practice of the early post-apostolic churches.³⁴ The comment

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of R. C. H. Lenski, no doubt, helps to explain why the early churches would have fallen in line with apostolic practice:

33 33. William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles* (New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957) 119.

34 34. Carl Volz, *Faith and Practice in the Early Church: Foundations for Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983) 164. In a personal letter Professor Volz wrote: "The common practice of filling a pastoral vacancy was to find someone from within the congregation to serve as bishop. This is especially true before the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D." Personal letter to Paul Harrison, September 16, 1992.

While these historical points regarding the first organization of the apostolic church are of utmost interest, they constitute no law for the Christian Church which binds us to repeat every feature and method. But the example of the apostles stands for all time as having been given under the direct influence of the Holy Spirit.³⁵

One should not conclude from this that the selection of these leaders was by man and not by God. The early church was Spirit-led and understood her actions to be guided by Heaven. For example, Acts 15 records the discussion at the Jerusalem Council where the issue of how Gentiles were to be admitted to the churches was debated. The various speeches are recorded, and the decision arrived at is noted. All was obviously done out of concern for what God wanted for his church, but there is no mention of any special or immediate revelation from God's Spirit about what to do. Yet, when the letter detailing the decisions was drawn up, it stated: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements" (15:28). This is probably how one should understand Paul's statement to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28 when he charged them to keep watch over "all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." They were probably "appointed" as at the other churches, but these appointments were understood to have been made under the leadership of God's Spirit. As Matthew Henry (1662–1714) put it, "The Holy Ghost also directed those that chose, and called, and ordained, them to this work in answer to prayer."³⁶ Herv-Marie Legrand explained the early church's understanding of elections held by local churches: "The consent of the church in the election was regarded as a gift of the Spirit, and once the bishop had been elected and ordained, he was received by the church as one designated by the Spirit."³⁷

As would be expected of a Biblical pattern, this approach of securing ministers from within each congregation has many advantages. The men being called know thoroughly the congregation to which they are to minister. They do not start out at ground zero. Likewise, the congregations thoroughly know the people they are calling. If a time of trial is needed, there is no uprooting of a family in the process. Of course, this approach eliminates the pastoral turnover that goes along with calling pastors from sister churches. It also strikes a blow to the ambition some entertain of climbing up the ecclesiastical ranks.

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35 35. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1944) 586-587.

36 36. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.) 6.266.

37 37. Hervé-Marie Legrand, "Theology and the Election of Bishops in the Early Church," *Election and Consensus in the Church* (ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Anton Weiler; New York: Herder & Herder, 1972) 34.

IV. Popular Understanding Of Being Called To Preach

This idea that churches should generally choose ministers from among their own membership can be accepted while still maintaining the current common understanding of what constitutes a call to preach. This theology of “the call,” however, also needs reevaluation. In 1956 the prevalent thinking on this subject was described by Robert Michaelson:

It has been generally characteristic of evangelical Protestantism in America to single out a special call as fundamental. This call has been conceived as a summons from God made known to the individual through an identifiable and distinctive personal experience.³⁸

This personal experience has regularly been described as resulting in an “abiding conviction on the part of the candidate that he is God-called.”³⁹ With this understanding that God directly calls individuals into ministry, many individuals simply “announce” their call. “I have been called to preach,” they say.⁴⁰

This special call, sometimes referred to as an internal or an extraordinary or a direct call, has a strong pedigree. Many certainly have embraced this understanding of calling. Francis Wayland (1796–1865), fourth president of Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, detailed what Baptists in his day meant by this call:

We believe that there is such a thing as a call to the ministry; that is, that a man is moved to enter upon this work by the Holy Spirit. This call is manifested in two ways; first, in his own heart, and secondly, in the hearts of his brethren. So far as he himself is concerned, it appears in the form of a solemn conviction of duty resting upon him with such weight that he believes it impossible for him to please Christ in any other way than in preaching the

38 38. Robert S. Michaelson, “The Protestant Ministry in America: 1850 to the Present,” *The Ministry in Historical Perspectives* (ed. H. Richard Niebuhr and Daniel D. Williams; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956) 271.

39 39. H. E. Dana, *A Manual of Ecclesiology* (2d ed. revised by L. M. Sipes; Kansas City, KS: Central Seminary, 1944) 270. For an extended discussion of such an understanding of call, see D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971) 104-111.

40 40. I here skip over the fascinating subject of what constitutes preaching and who should do it. It should be noted, however, that the NT does not equate preaching with pastoring nor restrict the activity to a specialized clergy. The early church also made neither this equation nor restriction.

gospel. He dares not enter upon any other pursuit until he has made every effort in his power to be admitted to this work.⁴¹

Such descriptions of the special call from several denominations could be compounded. Belief in a special call dates back at least to John Calvin, who, though generally revealing a belief in an ordinary call, did speak of “that special call, of which each minister is conscious before God, and which does not have the church as witness.”⁴²

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Several points should be noted about such an understanding of calling. First, it is special in that non-ministers do not receive such a call to their varied professions. Most would think it strange to hear one say that God had called him to be a plumber. Likewise, advocates of a special call do not think of Sunday school teachers or even deacons as being called by God in the same sense as ministers are.

Second, the call is considered special in that it is not mediated through any human agency. God directly communicates his will to the called. In practice, most require that one have this call confirmed by others, a church, for example. Yet the call is understood to have come straight from God without mediation, and the call can be and often is announced before a church or anyone has counseled the person regarding ministry. After all, why is confirmation from flesh and blood needed when God has called?

Finally, this understanding of calling readily lends itself to abuse and mistakes. Such mistakes are easily made because the ultimate determination of calling is solely between the individual and God. An external call to a particular ministry may be and usually is required before ordination is performed, but this is taken to be nothing more than a recognition of what God has done already in calling the individual.

Abuse is also obviously possible. On a humorous note, Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) recounted such an occurrence. He told of the story of

a coloured man in Alabama, who, one hot day in July, while he was at work in a cotton-field, suddenly stopped, and, looking toward the skies, said: “O Lawd, de cotton am so grassy, de work am so hard, and the sun am so hot dat I b’lieve dis darky am called to preach!”⁴³

41 41. Francis Wayland, *Notes on the Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman & Co., 1857) 103.

42 42. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.1063.

43 43. Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside, 1900) 128.

Other abuses are not hard to find. George Blaurock, a sixteenth-century Anabaptist, once blocked the preacher from entering the pulpit, stating, “Not thou, but I, have been called to preach.”⁴⁴ Abuse can also take much subtler forms.

V. Biblical Critique Of Being “called To Preach”

The question should be asked as to how this understanding of an internal call accords with Scripture. Does the Bible teach such a call? Many would unequivocally say yes. The Scripture, however, does not present such a cut-and-dried affirmation.

The Bible consistently refers to the divine call as a summons to salvation, usually translating some form of *kalevw*. Thus the church is the *ekklhsia*, the gathering of those who have been “called out.” Jesus said: “I have not come to call [*καλέω*] the righteous, but sinners” (Matt 9:13b). Paul wrote: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called [*καλέω*] you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel” (Gal 1:6). The author of Hebrews urged: “Therefore, holy brothers, who

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share in the heavenly calling [*κλήησις*], fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess” (Heb 3:1). Peter wrote: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called [*καλέω*] you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet 2:9).

There are other Biblical references to call, however, which relate to ministry. Jesus “called” his twelve disciples (Matt 10:1). Paul referred to himself as “called to be an apostle” (Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1, etc.). Two other passages are of special interest. In Acts 13:2 God tells the leaders of the church at Antioch: “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” In Acts 16:10 we are told that after Paul had seen his Macedonian vision, he and his companions concluded “that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.” In light of these references to apostolic calling, one might expect to find the term used in the Septuagint of the calling of the prophets, but, interestingly, it is never so used.⁴⁵

To summarize, there is not one NT reference in which the language of calling is used of anyone other than the apostles unless the calling is to salvation. Not one pastor is referred to as having been called by God to ministry. One should not therefore assume an analogy to exist between apostolic calling and ministerial office. The Scriptures at least make no such connection. The case is the same with the prophets of the OT. Their call was admittedly supernatural and extraordinary,

44 44. Timothy George, *The Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988) 256.

45 45. *NIDNTT*, s.v. “call.”

but there is no Bible-based analogy drawn between their calling and the pastoral office.

If the exact wording is missing, however, this does not mean that the concept of a direct call from God is absent from Scripture. Perhaps the idea is presented indirectly. Several passages suggest themselves. Eph 4:11 (note the parallel text in 1 Cor 11:28) states: “It was he [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.”

One might think this means that God picked “some” specifically to be pastors and others specifically to be prophets and so forth. But this does not appear to be the focus of the verse. Paul is not saying that certain individuals have been assigned to serve in these roles. He rather asserts that these roles, as gifts from God, are set apart by him for his church. In other words, the focus is on the roles and not on the individuals.⁴⁶ But even if the verse did point to individual role assignments, it would lend no support to the idea of an internal call since it does not address the subject of how such assignments should be accomplished.

A second passage to examine is Heb 5:4. Speaking of the office of high priest, the writer states: “No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be

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called by God, just as Aaron was.” He goes on to show that Christ, our high priest, did not take this position upon himself but was given it by the Father. One might, as Matthew Henry did,⁴⁷ take this passage as offering instructions on the Christian ministry, but the sense of the text will not sustain this reasoning. The verse and context point plainly to a singular application and that to the high priesthood. Albert Barnes (1798–1870) made this point well:

This has no reference to the call to the work of the Christian ministry, and should not be applied to it. It should not be urged as a proof-text to show that a minister of the gospel should have a “call” directly from God, or that he should be called according to a certain order of succession.⁴⁸

46 46. This same argument is made by William Williams, *A Painful Ministry: The Peculiar Gift of the LORD of the Harvest to Be Sought by Prayer, and Acknowledged with Thankfulness, Shewn in a Sermon at the Ordination of Mr. Stephen Williams, to the Office of Pastor of a Church in Springfield, October 17th, 1716* (Boston: B. Green, n.d.) 7.

47 47. Henry, *Commentary* 6.909. Though he tied general ministry and this passage together, Henry understood pastoral calling to be “in an ordinary way.”

48 48. Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament, Explanatory and Practical* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1949) 113.

This conclusion drawn by Barnes is the consensus among expositors. However, even if somehow this verse could be taken to apply to Christian ministers, it would hurt the cause of buttressing the ministry rather than supporting it. John Owen (1616–1683) explained this forcefully:

... the things disputed by expositors and others from this place, about the necessity of an ordinary outward call to the office of the priesthood, and, by analogy, unto the ministry of the gospel, though true in themselves, are foreign unto the intention of this place; for the apostle treats only of the first erection of a priesthood in the persons of Aaron and Christ, whereunto an extraordinary call was necessary. And if none might take on him the office of the ministry but he that is called of God as was Aaron, no man alive could do so at this day.⁴⁹

Another passage taken to support the internal call to ministry is Acts 20:28. As noted above, Paul here asserts to the Ephesian elders that “the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (ἐπίσκοπος). But again, we have every reason to think that these leaders had been appointed and elected and that these actions were understood to be directed by the Holy Spirit. Arthur Maclean explained:

Yet the phrase “the Holy Ghost hath made you bishops” (Ac 20:28) cannot be pressed to mean a direct authority of the presbyters received from God without human intervention, such as St. Paul himself had (Gal 1:1). God works through human means; and the analogy of 6:3f [and] 14:23 will lead us to suppose that, though the people probably elected their presbyters, St. Paul appointed them. St. Luke is not accustomed to repeat details of this nature.⁵⁰

This should not be understood in such a way as would undermine the truth that these individuals were installed in their church positions through the leadership of the Holy Spirit. The text plainly states that God’s Spirit

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had done so. But having stated this, it still remains to determine how this Spirit-leadership should be understood. Richard Baxter (1615–1691), in *The Reformed Pastor*, offered what seems to be a reasonable interpretation of the text:

The Holy Ghost makes men bishops or overseers of the Church in three several respects: By qualifying them for the office; by directing the ordainers to discern their qualifications, and know the

49 49. John Owen, *An Exposition of Hebrews*, 7 vols. in 4 (Evansville, IN: Sovereign Grace, 1960) 3.478.

50 50. *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, s.v. “ministry.”

fittest men; and by directing them, the people and themselves, for the affixing them to a particular charge. All these things were then done in an extraordinary way, by inspiration, or at least very often. The same are done now by the ordinary way of the Spirit's assistance. But it is the same Spirit still; and men are made overseers of the Church (when they are rightly called) by the Holy Ghost, now as well as then.⁵¹

Certainly a source for this belief that God “made” overseers is found in Paul's discussion of the gifts of the Spirit. According to 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12, Christians were entrusted with different gifts, so that some taught, some prophesied, and so on. In application to office, 1 Timothy 3 and Acts 6 suggest that the church was to determine which members had the gifts necessary for certain functions and to appoint them accordingly to those positions. From this perspective, the church understood the appointments to be by God, who had given the gifts.

The last passage to examine is 1 Tim 3:1. It states: “Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task.” Here the door is opened to one “desiring” a ministerial position. Paul employs two different words here. “Sets his heart on” translates *ojrevgw*, which means “*to stretch one's self out in order to touch or to grasp something.*”⁵² “Desire” translates the more common *ejpiqumevw*, which regularly refers to desire, good or bad.

Some, equating desire with a call, understand that these references to desire teach us that such an attitude is foundational to a call into the ministry. Charles Spurgeon, for example, though never citing this passage, appears to have had it in mind when he lectured:

The first sign of the heavenly call is an intense, all-absorbing desire for the work. In order to be a true call to the ministry there must be an irresistible, overwhelming craving and raging thirst for telling to others what God has done to our souls.⁵³

With all due respect to Spurgeon, that is not what the text or any Biblical text states. The verse does not say this desire, assuming its existence, is the *first* sign of a call. It does not say that the desire is “intense,” “all-absorbing,” “irresistible,”

51 51. Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (ed. William Brown; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974) 129-130.

52 52. Joseph Henry Thayer, *The New Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. $\sigma\rho\epsilon\gamma\omega$.

53 53. Charles Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Lectures to His Students* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1945) 29.

“overwhelming,” or “raging.” Spurgeon is being more rhetorical here than exegetical.

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In fact, the verse states the matter of desire only as a possibility: “If anyone sets his heart on . . . ” It may indeed be true that in Paul’s mind such a desire was likely (it is a first class conditional sentence), but, then again, such may not have been the case. Jas 3:1 (“Not many of you should presume to be teachers”) should perhaps counterbalance our understanding of 1 Tim 3:1. Even if desire was expected, the text does not equate this feeling with a call to ministry. Surely the emphasis in this passage is upon qualifications and not upon desire or inclination. The Genevan scholar Francis Turretin (1623–1687), citing this verse, argued that

he [Paul] does not mean the administration of the sacred ministry undertaken by one’s own will without a call or by a violent intrusion into this office or a calling unlawful and obtained by evil arts. . . . But he means that ordinate and pious desire by which a man voluntarily devotes himself to the church, commits the judgment concerning himself to others and waits for a lawful call.

⁵⁴

Turretin went on to explain that this desire to pastor “is rather a disposition of mind to receive the call than a call properly so called.”⁵⁵

To summarize this point, to desire ministry is not a call. It does not make one a minister any more than a desire to be president makes one president. And this is not a mere quibbling over words so that whether one labels it a call or simply desire, the result is the same. The difference in the words and their meaning is vast.

If a direct or internal calling into the ministry is not taught in Scripture, then what does constitute a call? First, as noted above, Scripture never applies the concept of calling to pastors, so perhaps the best approach would be to employ another term altogether. If we take the question about what constitutes a call to mean what properly makes one a pastor, the answer is the formal and proper choice of the gathered church. One is called, if we must use the term, when one is elected. This is what is often referred to as an “ordinary” or “indirect” calling. William Ames (1576–1633) explained: “They [pastors] are called ordinary because it is according to the order established by God that they may be and usually are called to minister.”⁵⁶

54 54. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997) 3.213.

55 55. *Ibid.* 3.215.

56 56. William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology* (ed. and trans. John D. Eusden; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968) 190.

This understanding of calling appears to be precisely what Luther (1483–1546) taught. While he maintains that the preacher must “be certain that his calling is from God,” he explained this to mean an indirect call by the church. In his comments on Gal 1:1 [“Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ . . . ”] he stated: “God calleth in two manner of ways: by means and without means. He calleth us all to the ministry of his Word at this day, not immediately by himself, but by other means; that is to say, by man.” He continued:

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So when a prince or magistrate or I call any man, that man hath his calling by man; and this is the general manner of calling in the world since the Apostles’ time. Nor ought it to be changed, but magnified, on account of the fantastical heads, which contemn it and boast of another calling, whereby they say they are impelled by the Spirit to teach.⁵⁷

Luther, in fact, saw all Christians as priests before God and, to some degree, saw the calling of the pastor as nothing more than a practical necessity. In his *On the Councils* he quipped: “The whole group cannot do this [the ministry], but must commit it, or allow it to be committed, to just one. Otherwise, what would happen if everyone wanted to speak? . . . ”⁵⁸ Of course, an important part of the Reformers’ teaching was that all Christians share a sense of vocation.

As a corollary to this, Luther also understood that the church’s calling could be revoked. This contrasted and conflicted with the Catholic understanding of an indelible mark which taking Orders placed upon a man.⁵⁹ This same reasoning was maintained in the next century by Increase Mather (1639–1723) who contended:

Pastor and Flock are Relates, and therefore one cannot be without the other. . . . To say that a *Wandering Levite* who has no Flock is a Pastor, is as good sense as to say, that he that has no Children is a Father, and that the man who has no Wife is a Husband.⁶⁰

57 57. Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1958) 32-33.

58 58. Quoted in B. A. Gerrish, “Priesthood and Ministry in the Theology of Luther,” *Church History* 34 (December 1965) 414.

59 59. Luther asserted this in his *Concerning the Ministry*. See Alister McGrath, *Spirituality in an Age of Change* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 36.

60 60. Increase Mather, *The Order of the Gospel, Professed and Practiced by the Churches in New-England, Justified by the Scripture, and by the Writings of Many Learned Men, Both Ancient and Modern Divines; In Answer to Several Questions, Relating to Church Discipline* (Boston, 1700), *Increase Mather Vs. Solomon Stoddard: Two Puritan Tracts*, Research Library of Colonial America (New York: Arno, 1972) 102.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, let me summarize the findings of this study:

1. There are inherent flaws in the way most churches now go about selecting pastors.
2. These flaws contribute to the undesirable result of frequent pastoral turnover.
3. The Scriptures present a picture of pastors being selected from within each congregation, this selection being understood to have been overseen by God.
4. There is no clear Biblical evidence for what is commonly referred to as a call to preach.

These conclusions, of course, carry with them practical and tangible implications. Both the conclusions and their implications should be carefully analyzed as to their Biblical foundation. If the conclusions are accepted as Biblical, changes would be called for in how many churches secure pastors. The following list states some of those changes:

1. As a general rule, churches should select their ministers from their own church body.
2. To have qualified individuals from which to choose, the church should be vigorous in training the congregation. Of course, this should be the case anyway, but this approach demands a well-trained church.
3. Individuals who feel inclined toward ministry should pursue their inclinations without announcing that God has called them to preach.