

## **Avoiding Infinite Mischief: Assessing Your Calling to Pastoral Ministry**

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The nineteenth-century English pastor Charles Haddon Spurgeon never cowered from speaking candidly to young men concerning their call to the Christian ministry. In his delightful chapter on this topic in *Lectures to My Students*, Spurgeon warns the aspiring minister,

When I think upon the all but infinite mischief which may result from a mistake as to our vocation for the Christian pastorate, I feel overwhelmed with fear lest any of us should be slack in examining our credentials; and I had rather that we stood too much in doubt, and examined too frequently, than that we should become cumberers of the ground.<sup>2</sup>

He goes on to provide hopeful direction for how his hearers might avoid such “infinite mischief” and not burden (“become cumberers”) the people of God.

There are not lacking many exact methods by which a man may test his call to the ministry if he earnestly desires to do so. It is imperative upon him not to enter the ministry until he has made solemn quest and trial of himself as to this point.<sup>3</sup>

Avoiding infinite mischief requires careful examination.

What does this solemn quest entail? How should you assess your own sense of pastoral calling? How should church leaders test someone else’s calling?

Let me state my thesis up front: I believe that a “call” to be a pastor in our day is not a mystical or thunderbolt experience, but a sober, honest, Spirit-led assessment, based on scriptural

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<sup>2</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 23.

guidelines, to be done jointly by both the aspiring pastoral candidate and God's people who know and observe him. Both subjective and objective factors enter into this examination. And it is never made apart from the discerning eye of a local church, or several churches.

Before we consider four criteria for weighing a pastoral calling, let me mention two key assumptions that undergird my approach in this article. First, based on passages like Acts 20:17, 28 and 1 Peter 5:2-4, I believe that the New Testament teaches that the position of a “pastor” (or “shepherd”) is synonymous with that of an “elder” or an “overseer.” The three terms seem basically interchangeable:

- Acts 20:17, From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. 28 “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds [pastors] of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”
- 1 Peter 5:1, To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: 2 Be shepherds [pastors] of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers. . . .

Hereafter I will usually refer to this office by its most frequent name, “elder.”<sup>4</sup>

Second, I believe that the proper biblical paradigm for the call to be a local church elder in our post-apostolic day is *not* God’s direct, immediate (i.e., without human mediation) voice—audible or internal—as we see in the calling of an Old Testament prophet like Jeremiah or a New Testament apostle like Paul. Instead, the calling of the elder comes from God as God works in the life of the candidate and through other godly men.<sup>5</sup> In the days of the apostles, Paul and Barnabas (e.g., Acts 14:21-23) or special Pauline apostolic representatives like Timothy and

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<sup>3</sup> Spurgeon, 23. While Spurgeon’s outline differs from mine, I have incorporated the same essential truths below.

<sup>4</sup> The nouns elder and overseer are more common than the noun pastor. The latter more frequently appears as a verb to describe the task of elders/overseers. The term overseer is sometimes translated “bishop,” but that translation carries in our day unwarranted connotations of authority over other elders and local churches.

<sup>5</sup> On this topic of guidance I recommend Garry Friesen with J. Robin Maxson, *Decision Making and the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View*, rev. ed. Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004, and other writers like Jay E. Adams, James C. Petty, Sinclair Ferguson, and Bruce Waltke.

Titus (e.g., 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1)<sup>6</sup> apparently selected or confirmed elders. New Testament scholars debate the extent to which the congregation was involved. Nevertheless, in our day, the local church as Christ's body should play an active mediating role in confirming God's leading by assessing and calling men as elders.

What criteria should we as church leaders use to assess someone's—maybe your own—call to pastoral ministry?<sup>7</sup> Let me suggest four: Desire, Christian Maturity, Ability, and an Actual Calling.<sup>8</sup> It is incumbent on both the aspiring pastor and his church to examine him carefully along these biblical lines. Nor do we stop there. We must continually make this assessment in ongoing ways for as long as the man serves as an elder. In other words, an elder does not hold a tenured post but serves at the will and pleasure of his boss, Jesus, the King and Head of the church, as Jesus mediates his authority through the other elders and the congregation.

**1. Desire.** Does the candidate have the right desire and commitment to do the duties of an elder, a desire born from proper motives and from a realistic understanding of the office?

Consider two aspects of this desire. First, does he have proper motives? The apostle Paul tells us that the pursuit of the pastoral office is a good thing, a worthy ambition. “Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task” (1 Tim 3:1). But the Bible also makes it plain that this pursuit must be born of right motives:

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<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of a model of calling pastors in our day, it is questionable to what extent we should view Timothy and Titus as pastors/elders, as opposed to special Pauline representatives or legates, handpicked by the apostle in ways that congregational and presbyterian churches do not. It does not follow, of course, that they did not do pastoral ministry; so did the OT prophets and NT apostles (e.g., 1 Peter 5:2), whose callings are not paradigmatic for our purposes in this article. I am making a distinction between office or position and actual function, and I am not prepared to view Timothy and Titus as models for how we today should call pastors/elders.

<sup>7</sup> While the four criteria herein refer to the call to eldership, I believe these principles can be adapted in lesser degrees to other forms of Christian ministry. We certainly want adult teachers and small group leaders to reflect similar criteria.

<sup>8</sup> I have adapted these four criteria from the audio teaching series, “A Call to the Ministry,” by Albert N. Martin, former longtime pastor of Trinity Baptist Church, Montville, NJ. Series available from [www.tbcnj.org/sermons](http://www.tbcnj.org/sermons).

- Not out of compulsion, against his will (1 Peter 5:2, “not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be”);
- Not for the sake of personal profit or improper financial gain (1 Peter 5:2, “not greedy for money, but eager to serve;” cf. John 10:11-13);
- Not out of pride or for the praise of people or the attention and honor that comes with leadership (1 Peter 5:3, “not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock;” Matt 23:5-7);
- Not to please people, including one’s parents, friends, pastors, or professors;
- Not out of obligation because the church “needs” more elders. Whether that perception is real or merely imagined, a need in the church does not constitute a call on your life.

Ultimately, a biblically-called pastor is motivated by one passion: to please God and to serve Him with his life in the best capacity he can, in light of his gifts and calling.

Second, does he have a realistic understanding of the pastoral ministry, especially its duties and hardships? The elder must not naively entertain romantic notions; serving as an elder can be burdensome. It can bring frustration (Phil 2:16; 2 Cor 6:11-13; 10-13; Heb 13:17). It requires labor (1 Thes 5:12-13; 1 Tim 5:17). It involves accountability—before both God and man (Heb 13:17; Jas 3:1; 1 Tim 3:6; 5:19-20).

Idealistic notions can emerge from many sources: imbalanced testimonies of visiting pastors or missionaries, glamorous biographies (“hagiographies”) of famous Christian workers, undiscerning or selective reading of the Old Testament prophets or the book of Acts, or even longstanding fantasies. Spurgeon’s personal illustration here is instructive:

When living as a child at my grandfather’s in the country, I saw a company of huntsmen in their red coats riding through his fields after a fox. I was delighted! My little heart was excited. . . . I have always felt a natural taste for that sort of business, and, as a child, when asked what I would be, I usually said I was going to be a

hunter. A fine profession, truly! Many young men have the same idea of being parsons as I had of being a hunter—a mere childish notion that they would like the coat and the horn-blowing; the honour, the respect, the ease; and they are probably even fools enough to think, the riches of the ministry. . . . The fascination of the preacher's office is very great to weak minds. . . .<sup>9</sup>

Idealistic dangers loom large. I recently read a reference form from an experienced pastor who was less than enthusiastic about a seminary applicant he knew. In his candid remarks, the pastor questioned if this member had a realistic grasp of what it means to be a pastor. I don't know if that pastor spoke to his member, but we would certainly wish that all church leaders would be discerning enough to question those who hastily fancy the pastorate and honest enough to act prudently on their concerns.

Where does this kind of pastoral desire come from? Ultimately, of course, we pray that these desires are God-given, the fruit of the Spirit's work in the candidate's soul. Passages like Psalm 37:3-4 teach us a vital dynamic, "Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart."<sup>10</sup> The man who trusts in the Lord, obeys the Lord, and delights himself in the Lord—note the parallel terms to describe our connection to God—will find his heart desires being formed by the Spirit of the Lord and will find that he desires the things that God values. If such a God-seeking man desires from the heart to do the noble task of pastoral oversight (1 Tim 3:1), we can more easily affirm in his life this first criterion of a pastoral call. As the glories of Jesus, the hopelessness of lost people, the harassed and helpless condition of the Lord's sheep, and the sweetness, simplicity, and profundity (e.g., Ps 119) of the life-giving Gospel grip the candidate's heart—his mind, will, emotions, and affections—a pastoral passion often emerges.

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<sup>9</sup> Spurgeon, 24.

<sup>10</sup> I'm grateful for this insight from my friend, Dr. Bob Burrelli, Senior Pastor of Grace Bible Church.

How do we measure this desire? Referring to that indispensable criteria of a “warm and earnest desire to be employed in this service,” John Newton observed that “the man who is once moved by the Spirit of God to this work, will prefer it, if attainable, to thousands of gold and silver; so that, though he is at times intimidated by a sense of its importance and difficulty, . . . he cannot give it up.” Newton then suggests a helpful test: “I hold it a good rule to inquire in this point, whether the desire to preach is most fervent in our most lively and spiritual frames, and when we are most laid in the dust before the Lord? If so, it is a good sign.”<sup>11</sup> He then warns that a pastoral desire that arises when one’s heart is not warm toward the Lord is likely a selfish desire, not the fruit of God’s Spirit.

In light of Spurgeon’s above caution that “the fascination of the preacher’s office is very great to weak minds,” may God grant to his church men with strong minds to discern the sober cost of pursuing pastoral ministry, and may He curb all improper motives and create Spirit-wrought ones within men aspiring toward eldership.

**2. Christian Maturity.** Does the candidate evidence well-balanced, growing spiritual maturity, as described in the graces listed in passages such as 1 Timothy 3:1-12 and Titus 1:5-9?

The starting place to assess this, obviously, is genuine conversion and a growing relationship to Christ. It was concerning those who actively ministered in Jesus’ name that Jesus uttered those tragic words of Matthew 7:22-23:

Many will say to me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?” Then I will tell them plainly, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!”

The history of the Christian church records too many ministers whose profession of faith later proved to be phony.

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<sup>11</sup> John Newton, *Letters of John Newton* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 55.

Christian maturity, of course, must be defined by the Bible, not personal preferences, local traditions, or cultural moral standards. We might start with the requirements listed in passages like 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. Aspiring pastors, and those who advise them, would do well to study carefully these qualifications, along with similar leadership lists in 1 Timothy 3:8-13; Acts 6:3; and Exodus 18:21. Beyond that, general inventories of godly qualities incumbent on every Christian—e.g., Galatians 5:22-23; Colossians 3:12-17; 1 Peter 3:8; and 2 Peter 1:3-9—must mark those called to the ministry.

Five observations about the 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 lists seem prudent. First, while such qualities are commanded for *all* believers—most of the 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 traits appear throughout the New Testament—they are both commanded *and required* for elders/overseers. Note the verb *must* in both 1 Timothy 3:2 (“Now the overseer must be. . .”) and Titus 1:6 (“An elder must be. . .”). In other words, a person can certainly be a genuine Christian even if he might lack some of these qualities. But he cannot be an elder.

Second, we must not insert perfectionist adjectives before these qualities. The text does not require elders to be *sinlessly* temperate, *flawlessly* hospitable, or *perfectly* gentle. Not until he is glorified will any aspiring elder—including the most mature pastor—reflect Jesus so radiantly. The apostle James reminds us in James 3:2, “We all stumble in many ways.”

Third, while these qualities need not be exhibited perfectly, all of them—not just some or most—must be seen in definite, observable ways. The “must” in both 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6 governs the entirety of the lists; none of the qualities are dispensable. They must characterize the would-be elder. (Ask yourself which quality you would want your pastor to lack.) Neither can a church assert that the absence of biblical quality X, Y, or Z in one elder candidate can be

tolerated just as long as the other elders possess them. Each elder must characteristically reflect each quality.

Fourth, these qualities must be visible to others. God's people around him must be able to see the man's mature, growing Christian spirituality. While self-assessment is needful, it remains insufficient. No wonder Jesus warns, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them . . ." (Matt 7:15-16a). The hopeful pastor must humbly recognize that God gives his church the right and responsibility to judge the behavioral fruit of anyone who believes he is called to be an elder. For this to happen, however, the aspiring candidate needs to be closely involved with other believers. He must open up his life to other people. In the pastoral training and assessing process, there is no room for isolation. Moreover, the man needs to invite and encourage his church leaders and other mature men and women to evaluate him honestly, without flattery. For this reason I plead with my seminary students to remain in close communication with their home church, to become actively involved in a local church nearby during their seminary residence,<sup>12</sup> and to seek the counsel and evaluation of both church bodies. While a healthy seminary community can play a vital role in a student's ministerial formation, it must never replace the local church. My message to my ministry students is simple: "If you don't love the local church now, don't assume you will develop such a love after you graduate. And if your motivation to active church service now is money, then John 10:12-13 indicts you as a hired hand and not a true shepherd."

Fifth, these qualities must be exemplary for other people. The apostle Peter exhorts elders not to lord it over their flock, but to be examples to them (1 Peter 5:3). Here we may admit

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<sup>12</sup> My church has a cooperative program with our seminary that allows us to provide four pastoral ministry training courses for select church members/seminary students who are active in the life and ministry of our church.

degrees of subjectivity, i.e., that a prospective elder's spiritual maturity may be sufficiently exemplary for a less mature congregation but insufficiently so for a more mature body. In Acts 14:23, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in several churches, although these elders were apparently only six-months-old in the Lord! (How many half-year converts would your church consider—in light of 1 Timothy 3:6, 10; and 5:22—as elder candidates?) Yet here the apostles apparently recognized these six-month-old converts to be relatively more mature than the other six-month-old converts that constituted these newly-planted churches.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps in these cases, along with assessment of current spiritual maturity, the local church must also assess the seeming trajectory of the prospective elder: Is he teachable, growing in knowledge, willing to submit to more mature fellow elders in the church, willing to seek the counsel of more experienced pastors from other churches, etc.?

**3. Ability.** Does the candidate display Spirit-given ability to carry out the duties of a pastor? The man must be able to do the work of pastoral ministry. As John Newton noted,

Besides this affectionate desire and readiness to preach, there must in due season appear some competent sufficiency as to gifts, knowledge, and utterance. Surely, if the Lord sends a man to teach others, he will furnish him with the means. I believe many have intended well in setting up for preachers, who yet went beyond or before their call in so doing. The main difference between a minister and a private Christian seems to consist in these ministerial gifts, which are imparted to him, not for his own sake, but for the edification of others.<sup>14</sup>

If a call to pastoral ministry stems ultimately from the Head of the church, then by His Holy Spirit that Head will fit the elder. In the absence of these abilities, the call should not be confirmed.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> While some commentators suggest these men were Jewish synagogue elders converted to Jesus (thus possessing some foundational maturity), the text is silent on this, and cautious Bible readers should not assume this.

<sup>14</sup> Newton, 55

<sup>15</sup> Although Newton in the above letter does go on to discuss how these abilities might later emerge.

How might we summarize the needed eldership abilities? While there are many ways to slice the pie of the biblical material, I observe five main categories that comprise biblical ministries of shepherding and oversight:

- Teaching (Heb 13:7; 1 Tim 5:17; Eph 4:11; 1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9-11);
- Governing (1 Tim 3:4-5; 5:17; 1 Thes 5:12; Heb 13:7,17);
- Caring for (1 Tim 3:5; Jas 5:14; Acts 20:28);
- Protecting/guarding (Titus 1:9; Acts 20:28-31); and
- Modeling Christlikeness before the flock. (1 Peter 5:3; Heb 13:7)

What might we say about the candidate's pastoral ability? First, it is ability that has already been proven, not merely potential ability. Since this ability is a function both of spiritual gifts and of training, we must inquire about both. Eldership is not a "testing ground" for future senior pastors. Neither is the pastoral call to be determined by spiritual inventory tests or academic achievements.<sup>16</sup> It is ability that has been observed, experienced, and confirmed by God's people. In light of this, the aspiring elder and the church that evaluates him should rightly ask: What ministerial fruit has been borne? Whose lives have been changed? What unbelievers have been converted? What believers have been strengthened?

Second, it is ability based on the gifts and empowerment of the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:7-12; 1 Cor 12; Rom 12; Acts 20:28) and fueled by faith (John 15:7,16; Rom 12:1-6). The aspiring pastor must possess some basic level of Spirit-given confidence that God has used him to minister to people in his non-elder role and will use him in an elder role. For this reason, ministry involvement as a believer is invaluable. The apostle Paul's concurrent conversion and divine apostolic call in Acts 9 are exceptional; we see the norm for pastoral calling in passages like Acts

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<sup>16</sup> At the same time, while formal seminary training may not be required, I personally believe that to pastor effectively in our generation a man needs to demonstrate *M.Div.*-level knowledge, even if he doesn't have that degree or attend an accredited institution. There are also benefits that come from the rigorous discipline of *M.Div.* studies and from classroom and campus interactions with professors and peers that cannot usually be replicated

14:21-23; 20:28; 1 Timothy 3; and Titus 1. (In fact, even Paul's initial extraordinary call from Jesus in Acts 9 was not his final calling. It was several years later, in the context of the Antioch church in Acts 13, that Paul was set apart for his first missionary trip.)

Third, it is ability to minister to this specific body in this specific setting at this specific time with the requisite specific abilities. We can be certain that a man who cannot speak Spanish has not been called to pastor a Hispanic congregation. An uneducated man would not minister effectively in a university town. That leads us to our fourth mark.

**4. An Actual Call** – Has a particular local church of Jesus Christ actually recognized the above qualifications and issued a call to the man to be one of the church's pastors?

Here, of course, the Old Testament prophet/New Testament apostle paradigm clashes with the New Testament pastor/elder/overseer paradigm I have advanced in this article. Because I believe we should look to the latter and not the former, I also believe it is improper for a man to declare, "I *am* called to the ministry," if no church has yet called him. The better stance is to say, "I believe God *is calling* me to, or I believe God is leading me to prepare for, pastoral ministry, but I will await confirmation from a local church at the proper time to declare that I am indeed called." If one has been truly called by God, we would expect that God will, in His good timing, open the door of pastoral ministry in one of His true local churches. (Whether or not that position is a salaried or a voluntary/tentmaking position is a secondary matter for our purposes in this article.)

Let's return one more time to Spurgeon's sage counsel to his young ministry students, as he reinforces our fourth point.

The signs and marks of a true bishop are laid down in the Word for the guidance of the church; and if in following such guidance the brethren see not in us the

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through self-study, unless a local church or association of churches engages seriously and intentionally in this training and mentoring task.

qualifications, and do not elect us to office; it is plain enough that however well we may evangelize, the office of the pastor is not for us.

Spurgeon continues with admirable realism:

Churches are not all wise, neither do they all judge in the power of the Holy Ghost, but many of them judge after the flesh; yet I had sooner accept the opinion of a company of the Lord's people than my own upon so personal a subject as my own gifts and graces. At any rate, whether you value the verdict of the church or not, one thing is certain, that none of you can be pastors without the loving consent of the flock and therefore this will be to you a practical indicator if not a correct one.<sup>17</sup>

John Newton affirms this same truth:

That which finally evidences a proper call is a correspondent opening in Providence, by a gradual train of circumstances pointing out the means, the time, the place, of actually entering upon the work. And till this coincidence arrives, you must not expect to be always clear from hesitation in your own mind.... If you had the talents of an angel, you could do no good with them till his [the Lord's] hour is come, and till he leads you to the people whom he has determined to bless by your means.<sup>18</sup>

Stated starkly, you have *not* been “called” to be a pastor if *no church has called you to be its pastor!* Even if the churches you might desire to serve may be wrong in bypassing you—beware of hidden pride in that judgment—if they do not call you as an elder, then you are not called at that point to be an elder. In fact, a single man might have more success telling a single woman that “God has called me to marry you” against her will—even if he might be an excellent husband for her—than for you to declare to your church, or another church you dream of serving, that God has surely called you to pastor them. Such a convinced mindset reminds me of the humorous greeting of a dear older woman in my previous pastorate. Aunt Dymple, whom we affectionately called “aunt” because of her fervent love for the church’s children and her tireless labors in the church nursery, would enter a room with her familiar salutation, “Hello, you lucky people, here I am!” Aunt Dymple meant that as a joke; I fear for the seminarian who means it when he visits a church. Humble submission to God is your only recourse.

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<sup>17</sup> Spurgeon, 30.

<sup>18</sup> Newton, 55.

I thank God for teaching me these truths and guiding me as a young seminarian some twenty-five years ago. After several summers of student ministry in college and during seminary, I approached the pastors and lay leaders of my home church in Asbury Park, NJ. They assessed my pastoral desires, abilities, and character, and they licensed me to preach the gospel. In addition, the pastors and lay leaders of both my seminary church in Deerfield, IL (where I did a part-time internship), and another church in Boyden, IA (to which I relocated midway in my seminary training to do a full-year internship) assessed and confirmed this pastoral direction. In other words, the Lord used three churches of three differing denominations (Baptist, Evangelical Free, and Reformed) to guide me. With this combination of subjective and objective confirmation, and the encouragement of my pastoral mentors, I believed God was calling me to pursue a fulltime pastoral role. That process eventuated in an actual call twenty-five years ago from Grace Fellowship Church in Hurricane, WV. At that point, but not before, I was called to the pastoral ministry.

Let me address two more issues surrounding the actual call. First, what happens when a man who was properly called to serve as an elder in one church relocates for legitimate reasons to another church? Does the recognition by the first church carry over to the next church? Or must the person start from scratch? Perhaps a mediating approach seems best: The new church should contact the man's previous church to inquire about his calling and conduct as an elder in that church, and then factor that report into their assessment of his present call to be an elder. At the same time, for the new congregation to be able to follow the oversight and lead of this new elder, they themselves need to assess his desires, Christian maturity, and abilities. Ultimately these believers must be able to affirm Jesus' hand on the man and corporately call him to serve as one of their pastors. Of course, the common practice of one church calling a man from another

church to serve as a vocational pastor complicates the above. It requires some combination of recognizing the recommendation from the candidate's current church (and other references he might provide) and of assessing him directly through telephone and onsite interviews, "trial" sermons, written documents, etc.<sup>19</sup>

Second, even within one church, does a call to elder ministry last a lifetime? Do we endorse a "once an elder, always an elder" outlook? In light of the absence of evidence of elder term limits in Scripture, it seems safest to assume that an elder should remain an elder for life, barring the emergence of disqualifying criteria in the above categories or physical or mental decline. Of course, this would not mean that an elder cannot continue as an elder while concurrently enjoying occasional sabbatical periods or a diminished workload within the plurality of the eldership team.

### Conclusion

What can you do to halt and reverse the infinite mischief that Spurgeon warns about? If you yourself aspire to be a church elder, then take two steps. First, review the four criteria above, study the Scripture passages cited, and ask God to help you grasp and apply these criteria to your own life and to guide your pursuit accordingly. Spare no pains here—for your sake and for the sake of any congregation you should (or should not) serve as an elder. Consider trusted guides to help you, like the Spurgeon and Newton writings footnoted above. Second, share this article with your church leaders and your spiritually mature friends, and invite them to assess you honestly in light of these four criteria. Remind them that for your own sake, and for the sake of any congregation you might serve, their honest evaluation is needed, lest infinite mischief be

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<sup>19</sup> In my opinion, the best case scenario for both the candidate and congregation, after initial interviewing, would be a Sunday-through-Sunday candidating time, with multiple opportunities on both Sundays to preach and a full week in between for the aspiring pastor to meet with leaders and members in various settings. This will give the body a clearer picture of the potential elder's fitness to serve them. See Jay E. Adams, *Shepherding God's Flock: A*

perpetrated! Plead with them to be candid, per Proverbs 27:5-6, “Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.” Or Psalm 141:5, “Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him rebuke me—it is oil on my head. My head will not refuse it. . . .” In other words, ask them to befriend you biblically, and heed carefully their perspectives about you.

If you are a church leader or the friend of someone who desires to become an elder, then I recommend three similar steps. First, review the four criteria, study the Scripture passages, and ask God to give you wisdom and courage in your role of overseeing and guiding (or at least advising) the prospective pastor. Second, if you are a church leader, share this article with your fellow leaders and propose to them that as a team you prayerfully study these matters and adopt this article as a tool to use with those aspiring to ministry. Third, ask the aspiring elder candidate to read and study this article, to prayerfully and searchingly examine himself in light of it, and then to discuss it with you. If you are not one of his pastors then urge him to share this article with those who are over him in the Lord.

With God’s help, we can assist aspiring pastors, and their church leaders alike, to avoid the tragedies of unqualified men serving as elders—the tragedies of infinite mischief.

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*Handbook on Pastoral Ministry, Counseling, and Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) for useful suggestions on vocational pastoral candidating.