

Pastoral Identity

ARE YOU CALLED OR DRIVEN?

“Early in the morning, Jesus went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. When [the disciples] found him, they exclaimed: ‘Everyone is looking for you!’ Jesus replied, ‘Let us go somewhere else’” (Mark 1:35-38).

I was en route to my first congregational assignment when the question hit me like a ton of bricks: *What have I gotten myself into?* There were many things I did not know. There was one thing, however, for which I was especially ill prepared. How would I deal with the wide variety of expectations that the people in my congregation would have for their pastor?

One of the things I really wanted to know as I began my charge (at least I *thought* I wanted to know it) was *What do these people really need from me?* So (and this is where my naiveté showed up) I asked them!

I’d meet someone in the church and they would say to me, “Oh, we are so glad that you’ve come to be our pastor.”

I’d say, “I’m so glad too. I hope we have a wonderful time together. Please tell me, what do you need from your pastor?”

“Well, that’s easy. We need our pastor to be a preacher of the Word, to rightly divide the word of truth. Give us spiritual food that will nourish our lives in Christ. We want you to spend adequate time in study and reflection so that when you step into that pulpit on Sunday it will be obvious that you’ve been with God and into his Word.”

I thought, *Well, OK. I like the sound of that. I can do that.* And I went on my merry way thinking, *This is going to be fun.*

Then I met another person, and that person said to me, “Oh, we are so glad that you’ve come to be our pastor.”

I said, “I’m so glad too. I hope we have a wonderful time together. Please tell me, what do you need from your pastor?”

“Well, that’s easy. We need our pastor more than anything to love us and care for us. Please get to know us and spend time with us. We need you to be available to visit us and to know what’s happening in our lives. You can be the greatest preacher in the world, but if you aren’t a loving shepherd to us, it really won’t make much difference.”

I thought, *OK. I need to be a good preacher, but I also need to spend a lot of time with the people. That sounds like a big job, but OK. I think I can do that.* And I went on my merry way thinking, *I hope this is going to be fun.*

Then I met another person, and that person said to me, “Oh, we are so glad that you’ve come to be our pastor.”

I said, “I’m so glad too. I hope you like me.” Then I swallowed hard and said, “Uh, what is it that you need from your pastor?”

“Well, that’s easy. We need our pastor more than anything to be a strong leader. We want you to be decisive, energetic, and creative. Be a visionary, for you know that without a vision, the people perish. We need you to be organized and on top of things, make the thing run well—you know, budgets paid, buildings up to snuff, staff members happy and productive. A smooth-running ship.”

I thought, *Oh. Well, let’s see now. I need to be a good preacher, spend time with the people, and be a great manager. Wow!* And I went on my way thinking, *What have I gotten myself into?*

Then I met another person, and that person said to me, “Oh, we are so glad that you’ve come to be our pastor.”

I said, “I was, too.” Then I braced myself and said through clenched teeth, “Tell me, what do you need from your pastor?”

“Well, that’s easy. We need our pastor to be an evangelist. You know, to be out in the community, meeting people, and leading them to the Lord. To model for us, of course, how we should all be doing the same thing.”

I thought, *Now let’s see. I need to be a good preacher, a loving pastor, a great administrator, and an effective evangelist. Hmmm. This is beginning to look like a 70- or 80-hour week.*

Then I met another person, and that person said to me, “Oh, we are so glad that you’ve come to be our pastor.”

And I said, “What do you want?”

It didn't take very long before I knew I was facing a critical decision: Would I live by what others expected of me, or would there be some other guide? How do you deal with the reality of people's expectations in pastoral ministry?

It was about that time that the above verses from the Gospel of Mark came alive to me in a new way. In his characteristic breathless style of narration, Mark (in the space of only 34 verses) gives us the meteoric rise of Jesus from virtual obscurity to national fame. Jesus was a hero. This nobody carpenter's son from Nazareth had become the hottest ticket in town. You'd think Jesus would be thrilled with the progress. He's only a couple of days into his ministry, and already he has the attention of the whole town. I know if it had been me, I would have felt on top of the world—successful and competent.

Early in the morning Jesus found a quiet place to pray. When the disciples woke, they became anxious because Jesus was nowhere to be found and the people wanted more. Isn't that the point at which we would jump to respond to the needs of the people? We do it all the time.

But listen to this: The disciples said, "Everyone is looking for you." And Jesus said, "Let's go elsewhere." How could he say that? Did it come from frustration with the people? No. Listen to the reason: "So I can preach in the nearby villages also. That is why I have come." Purpose. Mission. Focus. Calling.

As I look at the contrast between how Jesus responded and how I would have responded, I am confronted with the difference between being *called* and being *driven*. Drivenness is the insatiable drive to do more and to be more. It's a drive that is often masked by sacrificial motives, but in reality it comes out of deep feelings of inadequacy.

Jesus was clearly and securely focused on what the Father had asked him to do. He knew his calling. He understood his mission. And that's why, when the crowd was clamoring for his attention, he was able to say, "Let's go another way." It wasn't out of unconcern for the crowd. It was out of a crystal-clear vision of what he had been given to do by the Father.

Do you have a clear and secure understanding of who you are

in Christ and what he has asked you to be and to do? If you do not, you will be deterred by the expectations of people.

The only way to take all that you are as a person, throw it into the mix of a congregation, and expect a pastoral ministry to emerge is if you have a strong pastoral theology. *What is it that God is asking me to be and to do in this place, in this time, and for the sake of these people?* Every decision we make about our work must be placed against that call.