

Calling to Ministry:

A Young Pastor's Perspective

Levi Friesen¹

Abstract: This article seeks to accomplish three purposes. First, to articulate my understanding of the heart of Christian ministry as a young adult just beginning in this kind of work. Second, to show there is both a general and particular call to Christian ministry. Third, to present to other young adults considering ministry the significance of receiving formal pastoral and theological training, particularly within a Canadian context.

Keywords: vocation, ministry, theology, worldview, pastoring, Scriptures, training

Introduction

There are many ways in which people have spoken about being called into vocational ministry over the years. Some have helpfully outlined what are often the defining experiences of a genuine calling into ministry, as has been done by Charles Spurgeon.² However, that is not what this article seeks to do. Rather, it will consider the Scripture passage that has been significant for me as I understand my being called into ministry, and to consider how all Christians, but young adults in particular, are called to engage in this

¹ Levi Friesen is a Pastoral Intern at Northview Community Church in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

² Charles Spurgeon, "The Call to Ministry," in *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954), 22–41.

kind of ministry, potentially through formal training in pastoral and theological areas.

The Nature of Ministry

My understanding of what “doing ministry” entails has shifted the more I have learned about the way Scripture describes ministry. Early on, my definition would have sounded something like “being paid by the church to teach, preach, and counsel.” While this is certainly a general survey of the tasks of ministry, I have come to understand that this definition is inadequate. Ephesians 4:11-16 articulates well the overarching call of Christian ministry.

“[God] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11).³ Here is expressed the range of those who are given to the church, and the purpose for which they are given. Those who engage in ministry do so in diverse ways, yet having a single purpose: “for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11). The success or failure of any ministry will be measured—in no small part—by this criteria. This is a marked shift from my initial perception of ministry work, but it is a shift that corrects the errors of an overly numbers-oriented approach to ministry. The goal is to build the church.

Paul also describes ministry as “building up the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:11b-13). To see ministry as a call to simply meet pragmatic metrics—like an increase of people, financial targets, or even a number of churches to be planted—is to have a rather superficial view of “building up the body of Christ.” John Stott articulates this by saying that “the church’s goal is... its own maturity in unity which comes from knowing, trusting and growing up into

³ Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotes are taken from the ESV translation.

Christ.”⁴ To grow a church in any way other than growing up into Christ is like growing a body without a skeleton or muscles; such a church is doomed to never be faithful and healthy. Scripture sets the goal for us to strive toward. Building the church looks like growing its members in maturity.

This, in particular, is what drew me into ministry. I have long had a desire to learn and deepen my understanding of God and His word, but that in and of itself did not constitute a compatibility for ministry. Seeing that the Scriptures call me to use my knowledge and experience to help others follow Jesus was where I recognized a clear calling to ministry. That calling was affirmed upon realizing that this is a significant way I could contribute to the building of the church (Eph. 4:11). The desire I have to learn and grow fuels my ability to help lead others to grow in maturity.

The need for Christian maturity is also placed before us in this passage. We are to mature “so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (Eph. 4:14). Here Paul diagnoses the situation around the church; we are in the midst of a stormy sea, facing all kinds of different teaching, each claiming to be the way we ought to follow. We need knowledge of both the waves themselves and how to sail through them. Those who are called to ministry are called to be able to assess the treacherous conditions and reach the shore safely. We are to discern between false and good teaching as we minister in the tides of the world, because this is a life-and-death situation. People believing false doctrine is not merely an academic issue; it has eternal ramifications. Thus the call to ministry is a call to participate in the means God uses to keep His children from drowning.

This unique contour of Ephesians 4:11-16 is what embedded my call to ministry at a heart level. As I looked at friends of mine who have walked away from their faith and have ended up believing all kinds of things that will not sustain them when difficulties come their

⁴ John Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, vol. 44 of *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 169.

way, I saw that there is a tremendous need for people to be taught good and solid doctrine in a manner that speaks not only to their intellect, but also to their heart. I know that there are people in every church who are sinking and do not realize it, who need to be taught what is good and true. I also know that every church has people who are unaware of the nature of the drowning hazards around them, who likewise need to be warned of the danger and taught the truth. This is the primary way that I see Ephesians 4:11-16 shaping my calling to ministry. Having pastors and leaders who have given their lives to serve a congregation by teaching these people true doctrine and warning about false doctrine is absolutely essential to the life of the church.

Paul contrasts being tossed by the waves with “speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph. 4:15-16). Both message and manner matter to Paul; truth and love are needed together. The church finds its anchor in Christ, anticipated in the God-breathed Old Testament, presented in the inspired apostolic writings of the New Testament. The truth of Christ is of the utmost significance for the Christian. In Christ, the church is joined together—a community reconciled to God. This joining work necessarily creates a new social situation, wherein there is a life of love that reflects how it was God’s love that formed the church in Christ. This is the life of love that the church “builds itself up in” (Eph. 4:16b). Thus the call to ministry is neither a call to exclusively present and defend truth, nor a call to only train people to love—it is both at once. The truth of who Jesus is and what He has done necessitates a response of love in those whom He has saved. The call to ministry is a call to equip the saints to be a self-perpetuating community that embodies the truth and love of Jesus, and this is the very call that has warmed my heart towards pastoral ministry.

The Scope of the Call to Ministry

There are two levels, in light of the nature of ministry described in Ephesians 4, at which we ought to consider who is “called to ministry.” At one level, we are all called to ministry. Ephesians 4 speaks of a general kind of ministry that all believers are called to, as we all do the ministry of “speaking the truth in love [in order that we] grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph. 4:15). The whole body grows as the whole body speaks the truth in love. We all do this “in different ways, in different contexts and with different levels of effectiveness, but the basic methodology of body growth is that all the members ‘speak the truth in love,’ one to another.”⁵

The rationale for this level of ministry is that it is the natural response to the truth and love we have received in Christ. When we are made to see ourselves for what we really are—created by God, plunged into darkness by our sin, redeemed in Christ, renewed by the Spirit—how can we do anything but speak this truth? When we see that this whole story—which finds its culmination in the Son of God dying a sacrificial death in place of His people—unfolded as it did because of God’s love for His people, how can the manner of our truth proclamation be anything but loving? All who are God’s are called to this ministry.

The second level of ministry is defined more narrowly as those who “equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:12). These are those who are gifted and called by their church to train the saints to speak the truth in love. It is their work that undergirds the general ministry of all the saints, defining what truth and love are, over and against the waves that crash around us.

These are two aspects of the single ministry of God’s people—the general call to speak the truth in love as youth leaders, parents, siblings, Sunday school teachers, and small group leaders, and the specific call to equip the people of God to do that general ministry well. The church needs both.

⁵ Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine* (Youngstown: Matthias Media, 2009), 45.

The Significance of Training for Ministry

In light of those two levels, there is benefit to be found in formal training for all Christians. At the general level of Christian ministry, formal training of all kinds will reveal the many aspects of the “truth” (Eph. 4:15) that we are to speak. The reality of who God is and what He has done impacts every aspect of our existence, and the total nature of this truth is one that is inexhaustible. Formal training helps to show the breadth and depth of this truth, as one examines how it is articulated in the Scriptures through the work of Biblical interpretation, and considers the overarching teachings of the Scriptures through the work of theological reflections.

This is also the case with what is meant by “speaking the truth *in love*” (Eph. 4:15, emphasis added). Formal training helps with the task of understanding the kind of love that Christians are called to in the Bible. In this way formal training is immensely practical, as it ensures that we see and understand the world around us in a way that lines up with reality, and teaches us how to engage in the world with biblical love, day by day.

Returning to the dominant metaphor of Ephesians 4, the context in which we build up the body and mature believers is in the midst of waves which toss “to and fro” (Eph. 4:14). There are a number of ways that formal ministry is a tremendous buoy for those who minister in these stormy seas. First, given the unique nature of our context in Canada, formal ministry helps us consider the types of waves that we are encountering, which is especially helpful for young adults, who simply have not seen much of the world or been able to think deeply over long periods of time. Philosophical and theological training allows us to engage with the nature of the truths claims communicated through all aspects of our society, whether communicated explicitly through legislation and activism, or implicitly through our storytelling mediums of movies and music. It teaches us to understand the beliefs that underlie the various actions of our culture. This is as true of the thinking of the atheistic world as it is of the many other modes of thinking that are represented in our Canadian context.

Second, in addition to helping us understand the waves we are facing, formal training also helps us know how to follow the good path set for us through the waves. It equips us to integrate those cultural messages with what we find to be true in the Scriptures. We need to be equipped “to spell out the bearing of these epochal events [creation, fall, incarnation, Jesus’ death and resurrection, the coming of the Spirit, and the final judgment and consummation] on how we should think about the relations between Christ and culture.”⁶ As noted earlier, this kind of education deepens and broadens our understanding of the heart of the Christian faith, which is truth and love.

Formal training also helps us to minister among the waves by leading us to consider how our ministering to our unique Canadian context in the present can be informed by those who ministered amidst their own waves in past generations. Formal training intentionally exposes us to those who have walked the pastoral path before us, such that we can learn from both the wealth of wisdom and Spirit-inspired work that characterized their ministry, as well as the various errors and imbalances that they stumbled into. Even if the waves they faced are not the exact waves we face today, formal training shows us that we are not treading unprecedented ground, and that we are surrounded by many who have done this important work we are embarking on.

Conclusion

The Bible calls all the people of God to ministry. All are called to a general level of ministry, wherein we all build up the body of Christ by “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). Some are called, like I have been, to a further level of dedicated ministry, wherein their lives are spent “equipping the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:12), such that the church will no longer be “tossed to and fro by the waves” (Eph. 4:14). Thus, formal training is valuable for all

⁶ D.A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 44.

Christians, and especially so for those young adults who are called into the second level of vocational ministry.