

Encouraging Men in Ministry

By John Muhlfeld 1/17/20

Jesus displayed a passion for ministerial development. He focused His attention on twelve disciples, training them through an intense three-year program of lessons, demonstrations, and supervised field work. The result was a company of men whose lives had been changed by grace and who were prepared to exponentially reach others with the good news (2 Tim. 2:2).

In Matthew 9, we catch a glimpse into Jesus' heart for the lost as well as His zeal to see His Father send new laborers into His harvest field. He said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Matt. 9:37-38). He then sent the twelve to engage in the very work for which He prayed (Matt. 10:1-15). Later he commissioned the seventy-two with the same exhortation to pray for still more laborers (Luke 10:2). Jesus summons us to both pray and work toward the development of new harvesters.

How might we share Jesus' passion for ministerial development and work toward that end? A good starting point is to encourage young men to prayerfully consider gospel ministry. For most boys of high school age or younger, the idea of serving as a pastor or missionary hasn't even crossed their radar. It's not even visible by satellite. When STEM subjects are mentioned, no one is thinking about systematic theology, exegesis, and missions. Science, technology, engineering, and math increasingly dominate the vocational horizon. But why not encourage young men to also consider what Thomas Aquinas called the "Queen of the Sciences," namely theology?

We need to approach this starting point realistically. If most adult congregants balk at the notion of leading a four-week Bible study, you can be sure that the average teen will balk at the idea of considering the ministry as a vocation. But when you observe a young man in whom the Spirit of God is clearly working and who exhibits nascent gifts for ministry, why not tell him so and encourage him to prayerfully reflect on Jesus' call in Matthew 9? Never underestimate the power of a single word of encouragement. Every minister has at least one pivotal person who helped to clarify his call to the ministry. That person might be you.

Once potential ministers have been identified, we may share Jesus' passion for their development by fostering local church environments where rudimentary gifts may be tested, developed, and financially supported. Most churches are understandably wary of entrusting teenage boys with too much responsibility, with the frequent result being that they are not entrusted with any responsibility at all. Yet, how can the church gauge a man's giftedness for greater ministry unless he is given smaller opportunities to test his gifts under supervision (Matt. 25:23)? Areas such as greeting, ushering, accompanying an elder on visitation, assisting with children's ministry, and helping with service projects, athletic outreaches, or mission trips all provide avenues to test and develop potential ministerial gifts.

Congregants must also let their leaders know that they are willing to invest sacrificially in long-term leadership development. When a vision for Christ's broader church grips a congregation, it becomes willing to allocate funds for partial or full seminary scholarships, bear patiently with students whose skills are (sometimes painfully) still developing, and support interns who may not remain in their host congregation. Just as Paul encouraged the Corinthians to look beyond their immediate setting and invest in the needs of sister churches, so we must view ministerial development as an investment in the broader work of Christ over the long haul (2 Cor. 8:1-15).

After men have begun formal training for the ministry, it is essential that we continue to assist their development by praying for their purity, humility, and tenacity. Seminary enrollment offers no protection from sexual temptation. In fact, the combination of academic pressure and relational isolation often heightens such temptation. I have encountered many ministerial candidates who have struggled in this area and need the prayers of God's people as they strive to walk in purity. Pray that our candidates will realize that even though they were once bound by such things, they have now been washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of Christ by the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 6:11).

We must also pray for our candidates' humility. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8:1 that knowledge (like learning Hebrew and Greek) puffs up. Not a few ministers have fallen into the sin of Diotrephes, who loved to be first (3 John 9). One wonders if the term "super-apostle" was a self-designation (2 Cor. 11:5). We need to ask the Lord of the harvest to send us men who are not only gifted, trained, and knowledgeable, but who have been shattered by their own sin and rebuilt by the hands of Christ. Such men will bear the fragrance of their Master, who came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28).

Finally, we must pray for our candidates' tenacity. Perhaps no virtue is more necessary in gospel ministry than a God-given endurance that simply refuses to give up, give in, lash out, or retreat. Just as our Lord endured mortal hostility from the hands of sinful men on His way to the cross, so our candidates must fix their eyes on Him and run with perseverance the race set before them (Heb. 12:1-3). But how can they do so unless we help them through our prayers? If even the apostle Paul needed the intercession of God's people to complete his task (Rom. 15:30-31; Eph. 6:19-20; Col. 4:3-4), how much more do our candidates need our prayers for the Lord to galvanize them against all doubt and opposition (Jer. 1:18)?

Like all of us, Jesus had limited time and energy during His earthly ministry. Despite these obstacles, He chose to emphasize ministerial development. From Bethany near the Jordan to Gethsemane near the cross, He poured His life into a group of men who would reach others with the good news of the gospel. Do we share His passion? Are we willing to work toward His ends? The harvest is still plentiful. Let us pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send more laborers into His field.

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