

# Questioning the Call

Marc Cortez



Sitting on the dock, looking out over the still, dark waters of the lake, I just knew. It wasn't surprising; I'd been toying with the idea for almost a year. But now, after much prayer, and at the end of an especially meaningful retreat, everything was clear. My mind relaxed, the decision made: I was going into ministry.

I can still remember that easy certainty, the calm assurance that this was what I supposed to do. In hindsight, it's a little surprising how quickly I set aside my other plans and launched into ministry preparation. At the time, though, nothing could have been more obvious.

Three years later, everything was different.

It was late, well after midnight, and the church was empty. All the kids had gone home hours ago. But I was still in my office, alone with my questions: Is this really what I'm supposed to be doing with my life? Why is it so hard? Why am I so drained? Am I cut out for this?

At first I was so sure. But now, just a few short years later, that quiet confidence eluded my anxious grasp. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I shouldn't be here. Maybe I was never really *called* to ministry.

## The "Call" to Ministry

I'd been around long enough by then to know that you're not supposed to be a pastor unless you've received "the call," that overwhelming experience of God telling you go enter the ministry: your "burning bush" moment.

I'm sure the experience is a little different for each person, but the general characteristics of the call seem pretty consistent. It is **divine**, **personal**, **clear**, and **powerful**. The call to ministry is a summons from God himself ([Heb. 5:4](#)) that comes to particular individuals (e.g. [Jer. 1:5-10](#)) and leads to an overwhelming conviction that this is what you need to do with your life. Indeed, the call to ministry is usually viewed as so strong that it becomes nearly impossible to see yourself doing anything else.

My problem, as I sat in my office that night after youth group, was that I had never experienced this kind of call. Three years before, I'd decided to enter ministry for a variety of reasons, but not because I had some kind of overwhelming mystical experience making it clear that this was God's plan for my life. No bush burned for me.

So now I wondered. Maybe I was never supposed to be a pastor. Maybe I'd jumped the gun. Maybe I wasn't one of the called.

### **A Different Kind of Calling**

Someone else I know had a very different experience. Unlike me, he was never sure that he was cut out for vocational ministry. As a matter of fact, he didn't even *want* to be a pastor. Quite the opposite. Given a choice he would have preferred to hole up with his books and a few close friends, making eye contact with as few other people as possible. More than anything, he wanted to study philosophy. But he became a pastor anyway.

The turning point for him was his church. He never *felt* a call to ministry. No bush burned for him either. But he was still convinced that he'd been called into ministry: by the church. It was the church that saw his gifts, recognized his potential, and discerned his vocation. They made it clear that they thought God had created him to be a pastor and that he should respond accordingly. I wouldn't say that they *forced* him to become a pastor, but it was close.

That is how Augustine of Hippo became a pastor. And he served that church faithfully for over thirty years, becoming one of the most famous pastors in the history of the church.

### **3 Fatal Flaws in the "Call to Ministry"**

Augustine's story challenged my paradigm of "the call" in at least three important ways. And it was those three flaws that led to my ministerial crisis that late night after youth group.

#### **1. The call looks the same for everyone.**

After reading Augustine's story, I looked back over the biblical qualifications for ministry. And you know what I found about the "call"? Nothing. The Bible never once says that a person must have some kind of burning bush experience to be qualified for ministry. Instead, the Bible offers a lot of guidance on how the church can and should discern those who have been gifted for leadership in the church.

To be more precise, then, I think we should say that all pastors should experience a call, but that call can come in many different forms. I'm sure that some people do have the kind of direct encounter with God that many of the biblical stories describe. But others get called more like Paul and Barnabas in [Acts 13](#), where God spoke through the church to appoint them for ministry. And still others get called when someone like Timothy recognizes their faithfulness and giftedness ([2 Tim. 2:2](#)).

God rarely locks himself into one way of doing things. So we should stop trying to do it for him.

#### **2. The call is individualistic.**

My biggest concern with how I understood the call back then was with its inherent individualism. The call is supposed to be something that God speaks to you directly. And my crisis came when I was no longer personally sure of that call. What was missing in the entire process was the church. It never even occurred to me that the church's invitation to be one of their pastors could actually be my call to ministry. God normally

works through his people, so why should it be any different here?

For many, the flip side of this individualism is the idea that others cannot question your call to ministry. If you've received a direct message from God that you should go into ministry, you simply can't allow that to be challenged by anyone. I didn't realize how ingrained this view of calling was until I approached a few seminary students about whether they were really cut out for ministry. To me, it was pretty obvious that they should consider other vocational options, preferably ones that didn't involve living people. But they couldn't even entertain that possibility. They'd been *called*. Who was I to question that?

We do need to leave room for the possibility that God is calling an unlikely person into ministry. He does that a lot. But let's think twice, even thrice, before giving our call to ministry the stamp of divine mandate. Too many people have led churches tragically astray by thinking that they alone knew what God wanted. In the garden, God declared that it was "not good" for us to be alone. And I think he probably had some good reasons for that.

### **3. The call is only for pastors.**

I find it interesting that we only talk about "the call" in the context of pastoral ministry. Why is that? Everyone recognizes that God has called all [Christians](#) to be ministers of the gospel. Indeed, when the Bible talks about God calling people, it's usually referring to [salvation](#) (e.g. [Rom. 1:6](#); [1 Cor. 1:2](#)). So why restrict "the call" to one particular vocation?

I think a lot of our language about calling still reflects a tendency to drive a wedge between full-time pastoral ministry and other forms of ministry. So, when I began to entertain thoughts that maybe it was time to pursue a different vocation, that meant I was questioning my call. I had no paradigm for the idea that I might just be pursuing a different calling.

### **Crisis Averted, Kind Of**

I survived my late night crisis, but not for the right reasons. I'd been around long enough to experience the emotional ebbs and flows of ministry life. And this wasn't the first time I'd wrestled with such thoughts after a long and draining day of youth ministry. So I went to bed hoping that things would be better in the morning.

But I still hadn't resolved the question of my calling. That wouldn't come until much later. Because I continued to think of "the call" as a direct, divine mandate, a burning bush experience that all pastors must have in order to be *real* pastors, that question sat on my shoulder like some kind depraved woodpecker, poking me repeatedly with the nagging doubt that maybe I wasn't really one of the called.

I wish I had read Augustine's story earlier.

*Marc Cortez is a [theology](#) professor and Dean at [Western Seminary](#), husband, father, & blogger, who loves theology, [church history](#), ministry, pop culture, books, and life in general. Visit him at [marccortez.com](#).*