

Faith Pulpit

Volunteers or Draftees?

Several times recently I have heard pastors ask for volunteers to take care of certain ministries in the church. While the impulse seems reasonable enough, it deserves some Biblical scrutiny. It is hard to find a passage in the Gospels where Jesus asked for people to come and volunteer their efforts. The accounts we have of his calling disciples come with a command and usually offer a promise, as, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” He did offer the invitation, “Come unto me, all ye that labor,” but the context offers more rest than ministry. He did say “If any man will come after me,” but He was offering terms of discipleship, not asking people to come to perform specific tasks. To the volunteers in Luke 9:57 and 61, the Lord all but drove them off.

With the Apostles we see a similar pattern. In Acts 6 they needed men to take care of the relief kitchen, but they did not ask for volunteers. Rather they stated qualifications for the job and asked the church to come up with the names. We may take this as the definitive pattern for finding church workers.

Paul seemed to have a similar idea. In Acts 13:2 the Spirit picked him and Barnabas. In 15:40 he chose Silas. In 16:3 he drafted Timothy. Luke doesn’t tell how he himself joined the group.

What does this suggest to us? If we need workers, we need to get them, not wait for them to offer. The Scriptural pattern is to select workers, and by such steps as these.

I. Make A Pool From Which To Draw

Jesus had an immediate ministry to the Twelve, and He had a parallel ministry to the crowds. This second ministry seems to include making disciples, because from the larger group he sent seventy out to preach. This suggests a pool from which to draw workers, a larger pool than just the twelve. After the fall of Judas, the Apostles were able to find a replacement from the others who seemed to fit the terms (Acts 1). This again suggests a pool of possible workers from which to draw.

For the pastor, this suggests that whatever else, his pulpit ministry ought consciously to be preparing people for service. He must teach the basics of the work, such as self-denial, cross-bearing, and obedience. He needs to teach the Bible, so that ideally all, but at least some, of his people may be complete, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. He must teach the spiritual life, since that, along with wisdom, was a key qualification in Acts 6.

II. Find The Qualifications

We probably agree that the qualifications are not the same for treasurer as for parking lot superintendent. The helpers in Acts 6 were to be spirit-filled and wise. Paul added to the list in I Tim. 3:8–13, giving specifics. Whatever the abilities that a youth leader or choir director might need, these items would seem to be indispensable.

The next part of this step is to match the qualifications to the people. We can all think of people who were coerced into, say, teaching, and had a wearisome time of it. Why? Not because they were drafted against their will or better judgment, but because they were not qualified. The Scriptural pattern is to draft the people we need, but also to assure ourselves that they have the qualifications for the position.

What of the person we hope will grow into the job? Perhaps Timothy is an example; if he already had been mature in every way, we might not have the two epistles to him. But if possibly he did not seem fully capable of the missionary task—Mark had already gone back—Paul must have seen no red flags. Luke says that Timothy was a disciple and that he was well reported of. If we hope that our draftee will grow into the job, he will probably do so if he has these minimum qualifications and if we help him, by carrying out step #3.

III. Train For The Task

After Jesus called his disciples, He gave them the advantage of being close to Him. They were first to watch how He ministered. When He got ready to send them out, He instructed them in what they were to do. After they had a chance to do the work, He had them come back and report.

That suggests how we should train people. First they must see how we carry out a given ministry. Then with our example before them, we need to give specific instruction in how to do it. When it comes to building a Sunday school, a weekly training class for the teachers is worth more than a fleet of buses. Little wonder so many teachers dread Sunday's coming, when we have not taught them how to teach a class. After training them, we put them to work, perhaps first with our help, but then on their own. It has helped new teachers by each week going over the lesson with them and discussing ways to get the material across. Finally give them a chance to report on what they have accomplished.

But do not pastors volunteer for the pastorate? Still no. At ordinations we rightly ask what reason the man has to believe that God has called him to this ministry. Most of us would say with Paul that

necessity is laid upon us, that we didn't volunteer. Most pulpit committees would agree to the principle; they invite the man. If he becomes pastor, it is because the church recognizes God's call and acts accordingly.

To recap, if we need workers, there may be justification sometimes to wait for them to volunteer. The Biblical approach, however, seems to be to school our whole church, to hand-pick the persons with the abilities and marks we need, and then to train them for the job. If the church situation seems to require it, let the members figure out who fits the qualifications and vote them in. Either way, you are not waiting for volunteers to offer themselves.

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