

Were You 'Sent' or Just 'Went' Into Ministry?

Today there are many people in the independent evangelical and Pentecostal movements who start churches merely because they feel led to do so.

If there were a way to statistically track the outcomes of these self-ordained pastors, my educated guess, based on years of experience, is that most of these churches and/or ministries fail to last more than a few years.

In our American culture we glorify independence and self-determination. These values are great when it comes to our entrepreneurial spirit, which is why our nation will probably always take the lead in creativity and wealth creation and our economy will continue to rebound in spite of what the federal government does to us. But when it comes to functioning properly in the body of Christ these values can be harmful.

Unfortunately, the way many of our brothers and sisters have "called themselves" to start churches or launch ministries mimics Hollywood movies more than biblical protocol! I am thinking of movies that depict independent fundamentalist evangelicals like *The Apostle* (starring Robert Duvall) and *Elmer Gantry* (starring Burt Lancaster). The former highlights a man who baptizes himself and calls himself an apostle, while the latter features a man who conducts tent crusades without any ministerial training or affiliation to a church, association or denomination.

A telling scene in *Elmer Gantry* involves a group of pastors and a newspaper reporter asking evangelist Elmer Gantry and a lady evangelist a simple question: Who trained and ordained you? Their response: "God" did.

These movies demonstrate that even secularists understand

there is something wrong with this way of doing ministry. It is as ridiculous as sending yourself to Afghanistan to fight Islamic terrorists without the covering, protection, training or the strategy of the U.S. military. I have had experiences in my own church in which a person left the church without proper training, communication or protocol with plans to start a church in their home. My primary question to people such as these is "Who sent you?"

I tell our church members that when they meet a minister or pastor for the first time, the number one question they should ask is "Who sent you?" or "Who do you submit to?" If the minister or pastor says "God" then run from them as fast as you can! Many have started local churches for the same reason some entrepreneurs start their own small businesses instead of working for a larger company: they simply don't want to submit to anyone else or have someone over them telling them what to do!

One of the greatest chapters in the Bible is the priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17 in which Jesus is praying to the Father before His crucifixion. In this prayer Jesus constantly refers to the fact that He was "sent" or "given" things to Him by His Father to do the work He gave Him to do. This shows He never called Himself to minister; Jesus needed to be sent or given ministry by someone higher than Himself for His ministry to be legitimate, even though He is God the Son (John 17:2-4, 6-9, 11-12, 18, 21, 23-25).

If the Son of God didn't call Himself into ministry then others who feel called ought to pattern themselves after His protocol for confirming the timing of a genuine call into ministry. Furthermore, the Bible tells us in Hebrews 5:1, 3-6 that Jesus didn't call Himself into the priesthood; he waited until the Father called Him. This was patterned after the Old Covenant in which a person could only serve as a priest if his physical father was a priest of the tribe of Levi from the priestly line of Aaron (Exodus 28:1). Thus, if we don't have a

father who ordained us into the ministry (in the New Covenant this includes spiritual fathers) then we have a “bastard” ministry and have no biblical legitimacy to fulfill our calling.

The early church also functioned with this concept of sending as a methodological background. For example, even though Saul and Barnabas had already felt called by God into ministry they didn’t dare send themselves until the leaders of the church in Antioch also received a confirming word from the Lord to send them. (Read Acts 13:1-2, in which the tense of the original Greek wording shows that God had already called Saul into the ministry before the leaders of the church received the confirming word.)

In another instance, Paul the apostle submitted the gospel of grace he was preaching (to the Gentiles) to the leading apostles of the Jerusalem Church (Peter and John) for fear his work was in vain (Galatians 2:2, 9). This shows even Paul, the great apostle, needed the right hand of apostolic blessing to be considered legitimate.

Paul also shows it was part of the protocol of the early church that a person wouldn’t preach or minister unless they were officially sent and, by implication, sanctioned by the church. (Read Romans 10:15 which says “How shall they preach unless they are sent?”)

In spite of this biblical precedent, many ministers I meet have started their churches from no more than a subjective “leading of the Lord” without the training, blessing or sending of a local church body. If a person cannot go through the grid of submitting to a process of biblical training, character development, and theological and ministerial training in the context of a local church, then how can they be properly prepared to shepherd a flock under God? Most of the time when someone has no personal submission to spiritual authority it illustrates a deeper issue within them of

rebellion against God! Jesus said that if we receive the one He sent then we receive Him. Conversely, by rejecting the spiritual authority He sent then we reject Him (Matthew 10:40)!

I have experienced everything I have written in this article the hard way! For example, when I first received a calling from the Lord to enter full-time ministry (in October 1980) the first thing I did was submit my revelation to my pastor, Benjamin Crandall. Even though I felt called to start a church I submitted to his counsel which included sitting under his tutelage for several years until he licensed me for ministry. It was four whole years of preaching in my community before he finally came to me and told me it was time to start a church, which I did in 1984. I believe that, because I submitted to his spiritual authority as my spiritual father, our church has been blessed with having no church splits in 26 years and unity amongst all of our elders and pastors. Also, I sense a special anointing and grace upon me to teach on spiritual authority and church government. Conversely, some I know who started churches about the same time as me have experienced multiple church splits because they didn't submit to the biblical process involved in a ministerial calling. This includes training, ordination and submission to spiritual authority in the context of a local church or ministry.

Furthermore, when some bishops in my city approached me in 2005 about consecrating me as a bishop, the first thing I did before allowing such a consecration was to have them call several local and national bishops who knew me well to obtain feedback before we continued. If those leaders didn't agree that I was already functioning as a bishop then I didn't want to proceed! (They received confirmation from several bishops which then began a one-year process in which I submitted to a rigorous grid in which they interviewed apostolic leaders, my elders and my family to verify the legitimacy of my calling as a bishop.)

In spite of the above, I believe there are exceptions to these protocols especially in certain places in the world where there are no local churches or apostolic leaders, or where there are no spiritual fathers willing to process and release younger ministers into the ministry. But, in this nation it is very easy to find someone willing to mentor, train and release a person into the ministry.

The first place to look is in your own local church. Most times there is a biblical process that is either structured or informal that a person can go through to be sent out into full-time church ministry. However, if you want to start a church, you should first prove yourself by either running a successful home group that rapidly multiplies or oversee a ministry in your local church that successfully nurtures and trains leaders. If you cannot prove your pastoral calling with the blessing of a senior pastor in your local church then that is a good sign you will not be successful as the founding pastor of a new local church.

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