

# Serving God, Not Men or Women

BY EMILY ROW PREVOST

Sometimes, despite our best attempts to hear ministry direction from God, we just get it wrong. When we are trying to discern a calling from God, we may be surrounded by people with the best of intentions who help us get it wrong.

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Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.... Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

*Galatians 1:1, 10*

**W**e often get it wrong. How often have God's people, with the best of intentions, gotten it wrong? Samuel, the Lord's prophet, was about to anoint the next king of Israel. If he went with his first inclination, we would have grown up reciting in Sunday school that the first two kings of Israel were Saul and Eliab. Then there are the apostles, who lived and walked with Jesus, and yet chastised Peter for going to eat with Gentiles (Acts 11). And let us not forget the prime example: the religious leaders who had awaited the Messiah only to end up putting him to death. Sometimes, despite our best attempts to hear from God, we just get it wrong.

I spent half of my life trying to discern a calling from God while surrounded by people with the best of intentions who helped me get it wrong. When I first began to discern that God was calling me to serve in vocational

ministry, I had never seen a woman youth minister, children's minister, or music minister, and I had definitely never seen a woman pastor. What was I to conclude, then, but that I was obviously hearing incorrectly? Gratefully, my church and several ministers I knew quickly helped me figure it out. "You will make a great pastor's wife," I was told on more than one occasion. In fact, this idea was floated so often that I finally determined this was clearly my only option. I needed to become a pastor's wife. Whew. Good. That's settled. Or was it?

Several years later, while trying to discern how to proceed in ministry as a single female, I came to the unsettling realization that maybe we had all gotten it wrong. Perhaps I did not need to be married and a pastor's wife in order to serve in ministry. Surrounded by a whole new crop of God's people in a different place, I found that a woman could serve in all kinds of church ministries. Whew. Good. That's settled. Or was it?

Lately as my doctoral studies draw to a close, I have been inundated with a new round of questions about how I will live out my calling. When I indicate that I am still committed to serving in church ministry, the question frequently comes, "As a pastor?" I often watch faces drop as I respond, "No, I really think I want to work with children." One dear friend went so far as to say, "Why would you waste your seminary training teaching first graders?" For what it's worth, there is no better place for me to use my seminary education. After all, Jesus said that only those who become as little children will enter the kingdom of God.

I am grateful to have been surrounded my entire life with people who wanted to support me: I have been prayed for and encouraged to live out God's calling in my life. It's just that more often than not, those people have had pretty strong ideas of what that calling ought to look like.



The Apostle Paul (or "Saul" as a young man) seems to have had the same problem in his attempts to preach the gospel. Saul's life was pretty well drawn out for him. As he excelled in his religious studies, don't you know that the religious leaders were proud of him?

Can you hear them mapping out the plan for his future? "That's our boy, Saul," they thumped, and "He will become a great protector of the integrity of our tradition."

I can imagine the discussions between Saul and his teachers. "Saul, you are going to make a great defender of the faith." "But what does that mean?" he asks. "Saul, it is clear that God's hand is upon you. You must eliminate false teaching and those who would draw people away from truth."

Saul lived up to expectations. He did everything that would make him look good in the eyes of the religious leaders: kept the tradition, quoted

Scripture, stood by in support while they stoned Stephen, and relentlessly persecuted the followers of the Way.

Saul knew what his life was supposed to look like. Saul, set apart from birth by God, knew exactly what his ministry would be. Or did he?

Well, if not from the start, then surely after Jesus revealed himself to Saul on the road to Damascus. After all, from that day forward they said of

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him, “The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy” (Galatians 1:23). Even Ananias got the word from day one that Saul would be preaching to the Gentiles (Acts 9:16). Unfortunately, not everyone heard this word from God and was ready to wholeheartedly support this ministry.

But, by this time, Paul had learned that he was not sent by people, but by God. Paul makes this clear when he declares that he is “an apostle – sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead” (Galatians 1:1). In case people misunderstood or thought that somehow Paul had twisted his message or his purpose to fulfill the cause of humans, he asks them outright, “Do you think I’m trying to win the approval of people? Does it look like I’m trying to please you?” (cf. Galatians 1:10). Paul learned that it was better to take his direction straight from God, lest he end up getting rid of the true followers of God again.

Paul was done with human-pleasing. He was done with preaching only what looked good to the people around him. He was even done preaching only to those who fit the agenda of his Christian brothers and sisters. So Paul did an unexpected thing: he preached to the Gentiles. He even stopped asking what others expected. Rather than consulting with the apostles, he went straight to Arabia to seek a word directly from God (Galatians 1:15-17). When he did get together with Peter and James, it was not for long and it was not to seek their approval for what he had been sent to do. No, Paul knew that God had sent him directly to the Gentiles and while it would not make sense to the people around him, Paul knew that he had to obey.



I long for the day when we as the Church stand up and support people to live out their calling no matter what it looks like. I am anxious for the

next generation of young men and women to grow up in congregations that have stopped trying to put the work of God in a box or to pre-determine that ministry must look or sound a certain way. In that day we will encourage men and women to stand up and live out the calling of God in their lives as doctors, teachers, accountants, preachers, and even children's ministers. But until that day, and even after that day arrives, I am grateful for the example of Paul who reminds us that we do not serve people. We serve God.

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