

Ambition in the Ministry

Some years ago a colleague and friend asked me this question: “So how long are you going to keep doing this association thing?”

The question came from someone who is a fairly big deal in the broader evangelical world. (I use “evangelical” here in its older sense of “sincere disciples of Jesus with certain doctrinal and missional distinctives” and not in its current debased sense of “a political tribe nominally connected to Christianity.”) The questioner had in fact taken a number of steps “up” in his ministry career to higher profile positions with larger spheres of influence. I have no reason to think he did so without seeking and following the Lord’s will. But his question implied that I might be settling for a less significant ministry than I should, that in fact I should be preparing to move on to bigger and better things.

Have you ever felt both complimented and annoyed by the words of another? That is how my friend’s question struck me. It gave me a bit of an ego boost that he thought me capable of “greater” things. At the same time, I was insulted by his insinuation that my current ministry was not a sufficiently big deal. After sorting through those feelings, I realized the question I needed to grapple with was this: “What *should* my ambition be in ministry?”

That’s a tricky one. Where is the line between godly ambition and ego-driven ambition? I suspect it’s found somewhere in the depths of the individual soul, not easily observable from the outside or even by the individual himself or herself. How do I know it’s the Lord who is directing me and not my own pride? Doesn’t the very concept of ambition imply some degree of dissatisfaction with my current situation? That is a problem if in fact the Lord called me here.

What should I do, then, with this whole business of ambition? To not have any feels wrong, like I am just coasting along with no goals or passion or Spirit-led vision. But too much of it or the wrong kind of it would certainly fuel the sinful flesh.

So here is where I have landed. One, there is no such thing as a “small” place if you are where the Lord has called you. Two, my overarching ambition should be faithfulness, which I define as “doing what the Lord has called me to do in a way that honors him until he calls me to heaven or another place of ministry.” Three, I should concern myself with the depth of my ministry and let the Lord worry about the scope (see John 12:24). And four, if I am trying to discern a possible new assignment from the Lord that would supersede my present one, I shouldn’t do it alone. I should do it with the prayers and counsel of other disciples who know me well and who have faithfully walked with Jesus for a long time. I shouldn’t trust myself alone in such a weighty matter whether it’s a move “up” or a move “down.”

Have you grappled with the question of ambition? I’d like to hear your thoughts. God bless you, dear sisters and brothers. May your ambitions be perfectly in sync with His!