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A KING LIKE THE NATIONS

*How the American Pastor-Search Industry Selects Leaders, and
How God Does — A Troika Ministries Position Paper*

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ABSTRACT

American pastoral hiring has become an industry with an economics, a consolidation curve, and a published quality standard, built from a verbatim sample of more than one hundred qualification bullets across forty-plus live and recent lead-pastor postings and the search firms' own methodology. Nearly eight in ten of those postings gate on years of experience; more than half gate on prior church attendance; the industry's most universal criterion, present in the large majority of postings, is communication and stage presence. Character appears in every posting as an adjective and in almost none as something actually measured. This paper argues that the American church has, without quite noticing, adopted Israel's exact request in 1 Samuel 8 — "a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have" — and traces that pattern through Saul's disqualifying résumé, David's disqualifying one, how Jesus chose the Twelve, and what 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 actually enumerate as qualification. It states plainly, and answers fully, the strongest biblical case for experience-based screening before proposing what a formation-governed search would look like instead. It closes not with the industry, but with the pastor the industry's own numbers were never built to find.

I. Belonging Before Expectation

Before a word of critique: this paper is written for the pastor who will never clear the threshold. The one shepherding a hundred and forty people in a town most search firms have never heard of. The one who was faithful in a hard place for eleven years and has no growth curve to show for it. The one whose name never appears in a placement announcement because no algorithm was built to find him, and no instrument was built to see what the Spirit has actually done in him.

Belonging before expectation. Invitation before instruction. Grace before growth. If you are that pastor, this paper is not primarily about an industry. It is about the fact that the criterion God uses to choose leaders has never once been the criterion you have been screened against, and that this is not your failure.

II. The Thesis

American pastoral hiring has quietly adopted a market's criteria for a shepherd's office, and the market's criteria are, verifiably and by name, the two criteria Scripture rejected first. "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him" (1 Samuel 16:7) is not an

obscure verse. It is a direct rejection of the two most common screening categories in American pastoral search today — platform presence and prior institutional scale — stated three thousand years before either had a name. This paper is not an accusation aimed at any single firm, church, or search committee. It is a documented pattern, verified against the industry's own published language, held up against the only place Scripture gives an explicit, enumerable list of qualifications for the office.

III. The Landscape — Who Decides Who Leads

Pastoral placement in America is now an industry with an economics, a consolidation curve, and a published quality standard. Vanderbloemen Search Group, the category leader, was founded in 2009 by a former senior pastor who went on to serve in HR at a Fortune 200 company; the firm now describes itself as "our Houston-based executive search firm specializes in serving churches, schools, nonprofits, and values-driven businesses." Its own published metrics are worth reading slowly, because they reveal what the firm believes it is optimizing: over forty thousand candidates sourced in the last six months, nearly twenty thousand salaries analyzed, and a rate "40% faster" than industry standard. It sells four assessment products — a personality-and-wiring index, a culture assessment, a "Bad Hire Calculator" quantifying the financial cost of turnover, and a succession-readiness tool. Not one of the four measures character, formation, or fruit. This is not offered as an accusation; it is offered as a limitation worth naming plainly. Wiring can be assessed in ninety minutes. Formation cannot.

Chemistry Staffing, the most methodologically distinctive competitor, runs a 125-point assessment across five "Essential Elements" — theology, culture, personality, skills, and chemistry — and reports that it eliminates ninety to ninety-five percent of applicants before a church ever sees a name. Its own postings, reviewed directly, contain no published qualifications section at all: no years, no degree, no attendance threshold, narrative only. The screening has moved entirely behind a consult call. Whatever is inside those hundred and twenty-five points, and it may well be excellent, no pastor can be formed toward it, appeal it, or be told why he failed it.

One document in this research deserves to be named for its honesty rather than its typicality. A Southern Baptist state convention's own search-committee handbook tells its churches, in print, free of any commercial stake in the outcome: "Resist the urge to nail down a specific age range, or an exact degree

obtained. While these are important considerations and must be discussed, they are not to form a rigid basis for exclusion of candidates," immediately followed by, "The Bible is very clear about the character of the man who holds the office of Pastor." That instruction exists. It is being ignored across the very market that has grown up beside it.

IV. What Is Actually Required — The Verbatim Record

Years of experience is present in roughly seventy-nine percent of postings that state any quantitative requirement at all, the single most consistent screen in American pastoral hiring. A Lead Pastor posting for a mid-sized Ohio congregation asked for "at least 7-10 years of proven successful leadership in a pastoral position of a large growing multisite church with multiple staff." Across the sampled postings, the distribution runs from three years to fifteen or more, with five as the modal floor and ten as the large-church floor. Not one bullet, anywhere in the sample, defines what those years were supposed to have produced in the person. Not one says ten years in which a pattern of repentance became visible, or five years of proven refusal to lord it over those entrusted to him. Duration is treated as though it were formation. It is not. Pressure reveals formation; it does not create it, and neither does the simple passage of time.

Attendance thresholds appear in roughly fifty-four percent of postings, and this is the finding this paper most wants a search committee to see. A congregation of two thousand asked for "five or more years of experience in an executive leadership role at a church of a similar or larger size, diversity and/or complexity." A congregation of nine hundred asked for "5+ years high-level church leadership experience (900+ weekend attendance)." Name the logic out loud: to lead a large church, a candidate must already have led a large church. It is a closed loop, closed by a number that measures nothing about the person. Attendance is a function of geography, demographics, denominational density, and the sovereignty of God. A pastor in a town of two thousand people cannot reach nine hundred in attendance if every man, woman, and child in the county converts. He is not underqualified. He is rurally located.

Communication and stage presence is present in roughly eighty-three percent of postings, the single most universal criterion in the entire sample, and the one that escalates furthest into performance. One large multi-campus church's listing asked for a candidate who "delivers dynamic, educated, and authoritative

teaching at weekend services that connects with a sharp, professional audience" and who is "highly extroverted and relational, capable of pastoring C-suite professionals." Another asked simply for a "vibrant, lively, energetic, and motivated personality." These select for temperament. Temperament is not fruit.

V. The Asymmetry — Character Asserted, Competence Measured

Every posting in this research asks, in some form, for integrity, humility, maturity, and Christlike character. Not one specifies how any of it is measured. Meanwhile, years of experience, attendance figures, degrees, staff counts, and budgets are verified in granular, auditable detail. The most rigorous character instrument in the majority of American pastoral hiring is a criminal background check; everything else is self-attested on a résumé and confirmed by references the candidate himself selected. What gets measured is what gets credentialed, and character, by every publicly available account, is not being measured at all.

VI. "Such as All the Other Nations Have"

Israel's request was not manufactured from nothing. Samuel's own sons, appointed as judges, "turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice" (1 Samuel 8:3). The elders' grievance was real, and it was a character failure in existing leadership. What they proposed in response was a structural remedy: "Now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have" (8:5). Character failure, correctly diagnosed, answered with an institutional fix. That is the exact modern pattern, and naming it changes the whole reading: the American church is not screening pastors on scale because it is careless about character. It is screening on scale because it has been badly burned by character failures and has reached for the only remedy a market knows how to build — a harder, more professional, more thoroughly credentialed filter. The impulse is protective. The instrument is wrong. A structural fix cannot produce what only formation produces.

God's own reading of the request is not procedural but theological: "It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king" (8:7). And the warning that follows hammers a single verb through six consecutive verses — "he will take" — your sons, your daughters, your fields, your servants, your flocks, until "you yourselves will become his slaves" (8:11–17). A leader chosen by

cultural comparison will be sustained by extraction, the exact inversion of the standard Peter would later give elders: "not greedy for money, but eager to serve" (1 Peter 5:2). And then the verse that should be read aloud in every search committee meeting in America: "The LORD answered, 'Listen to them and give them a king'" (8:22). Divine permission is not divine endorsement. A church can run a professional search, verify every credential, install the best-qualified candidate available, celebrate with a shout, and receive the judgment rather than the gift. The installation is not the verification. The fruit, over years, is the verification.

VII. Saul — The Résumé, and What It Could Not Hold

Scripture introduces Saul by exactly the criteria a modern search would recognize: family standing, five generations of verifiable lineage, and physical stature — "as handsome a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel, and he was a head taller than anyone else" (1 Samuel 9:2). At his public presentation, the acclamation is explicitly visual: "Do you see the man the LORD has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people" (10:23–24). Update the résumé and it reads like the industry's own language: a man of standing becomes leadership experience at a church of a given size; a head taller than anyone else becomes "socially poised and confident," "vibrant, lively, energetic," "capable on the platform." The categories have not changed in three millennia. Only the units have.

The irony must not be skipped: Saul was genuinely Spirit-anointed and divinely changed (10:6, 9). He won real battles. His collapse cannot be explained by any deficiency a better screening process would have caught, which makes him a far more useful, and far more frightening, case study than the usual reading allows. The pastor who destroys a church is very often not the unqualified one. He is the gifted one whose character did not grow at the speed of his platform. When the pressure came at Gilgal, Saul assessed the situation accurately, acted decisively, and disobeyed a direct command, offering a sacrifice he had no authority to offer because his men were scattering and the prophet was late (13:8–12). Every element of that failure would read as competence on a résumé. It was competence deployed outside of obedience. And the single most diagnostic sentence in the entire narrative is Saul's own: "I was afraid of the men and so I gave in to them" (15:24). The tall man, the anointed man, the publicly acclaimed man, governed in the end by the crowd's approval.

VIII. David — The Counter-Criterion, Stated Once and for All

Even Samuel, who anointed Saul and personally delivered God's verdict against him, nearly repeats the error: seeing Jesse's oldest son, he thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD" (16:6). Experience did not cure the bias. It required explicit divine correction, out loud, in the moment: "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (16:7). God names Saul's exact two credentials and rejects both, in a single sentence.

Score David against any modern search: youngest, with no seniority; not even summoned by his own father to the gathering; "tending the sheep," menial and unwitnessed work with no platform and no attendance figure; absent from the room where the decision was being made. He would not have been sourced by any firm in this study. He is the ninety-five percent a modern screen eliminates before a human being reads the file. Two disciplines of honesty matter here, and neither should be skipped. First, David was also good-looking (16:12) — the text does not teach that God prefers the unimpressive, only that appearance is not the criterion, neither qualifying nor disqualifying. Second, the fullest biblical summary of David's calling pairs two things deliberately: "He chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens... And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them" (Psalm 78:70–72). Integrity of heart is named first and is the ground. Skillful hands are named second and are genuinely required. And note where the skill was formed: in unwatched, small-scale, low-status faithfulness, killing a lion and a bear with no one watching, long before any platform existed to notice.

IX. How Jesus Chose the Twelve

If 1 Samuel establishes the criterion, the Gospels establish the method, and the method is further still from the market than the criterion is. "Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them" (Luke 6:12–13). No interviews. No portfolio review. Not one search firm in this entire study publishes prayer as a formal step in its methodology. And the order of purpose is explicit

and sequential, not merely thematic: Jesus appointed the Twelve "that they might be with him and that he might send them out" (Mark 3:14). Being precedes sending. Presence precedes proclamation.

The résumés that followed: fishermen with no theological education; a tax collector, a collaborator with the occupying empire, whose occupation was a byword for corruption; a Zealot, a nationalist revolutionary put on the same team as the tax collector he would ordinarily have wanted dead. No selection process optimizing for cohesion or culture fit produces that roster. And when the Sanhedrin, the most credentialed body in Judaism, later conducted its own credential audit on Peter and John, it found nothing: "They were unschooled, ordinary men... and they took note that these men had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). The one credential the text names is presence.

Honesty requires naming Judas directly. Jesus prayed all night and chose him too. What Judas does not prove is that heart-based selection is a reliable predictive instrument — if that were the claim, one verse refutes it. What Judas does prove is that agency is real, that a right criterion is not a warranty, and that proximity is not immunity. Judas had three years of presence and fell; Peter had three years of presence, fell publicly and shamefully, and was restored and commissioned. The variable was not credentials, gifting, or exposure. It was what each man did with his own failure. No posting in this entire study asks a single question about how a candidate has handled failure. Peter and Judas are the case study proving which question actually predicts anything.

X. The Honest Counter — The Best Case for Experience-Based Screening

Presenting the case above without its strongest opposing argument would be advocacy, not honesty, so the case for competence-based screening deserves its full statement before any answer.

Scripture itself requires competence alongside character. When a logistics crisis threatened the early church, the apostles did not respond with prayer alone; they created an office and required candidates "known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom" (Acts 6:3), publicly attested capability, not merely piety. Exodus 18 institutes selection explicitly tiered by scale: "select capable men... and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens" (18:21), Jethro's own stated concern being sustainability, not merely output. Paul's instruction that an overseer must not be "a recent convert" (1 Timothy 3:6) is, formally, an apostolic

experience-based screen. Jesus himself commends prudential capacity assessment: "Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost?" (Luke 14:28). Institutional stewardship of donated funds, children's safety, and legal compliance genuinely requires administrative competence, and incompetence there produces real harm to the vulnerable. And Paul himself, the New Testament's most formidable theological mind, was rabbinically trained under the leading teacher of his generation, and God plainly used that training on every page of his letters.

Every one of these points should be conceded fully: competence is a real biblical requirement, not a concession to modernity; assessment before appointment is commanded, not merely permitted; scale-appropriate matching is biblical; sustainability is a genuine pastoral concern. Where the case does not reach, however, is in what it is being asked to justify. Acts 6:3's seven had no prior administrative track record at all — the office did not exist until that moment, and Stephen, appointed to wait tables, immediately became the church's most powerful apologist and first martyr. Exodus 18's tiers are keyed to the population's need, not the official's prior achievement; there is no indication anyone earned the "thousands" tier by first succeeding at "tens." "Not a recent convert" names the danger of conceit, not a deficiency of skill. Luke 14:28 sits inside a passage on the total cost of discipleship and concludes, "those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples" (14:33) — it is an argument for radical surrender, not institutional gatekeeping. And Paul's own verdict on his own credentials settles the matter more decisively than any external argument could: "Whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ... I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:7–8). His training was not useless. It was never his qualification.

The honest synthesis is not a fifty-fifty balance. It is an ordering with a threshold. Character is the qualification — what Scripture enumerates at length and never waives. Competence is a threshold to clear, never a ranking to maximize; Scripture never says "the most able," only "able to teach." And scale is not a criterion at all. It is an outcome. The only scale test Scripture gives runs small to large — prove it in a house, be trusted with a church — and the market has built the test backward for twenty years without appearing to notice.

XI. What a Formation-Governed Search Would Actually Look Like

Diagnosis without an alternative is complaint, so here is the alternative, offered as a working proposal rather than a settled program. Character comes first, as a gate, not an adjective: the roughly two dozen character requirements of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, assessed from multiple witnesses over time, not self-attested on a résumé. The household comes second, not as a private matter politely inquired after but as the qualifying exam Scripture actually makes it — how is he with his wife when the day has gone badly, what do his adult children say about him now that they owe him nothing. Doctrinal fidelity comes third, the one place the market already performs reasonably well. Competence comes fourth, as a threshold to clear rather than a score to maximize: can he teach, shepherd, and steward what he is being handed, not can he outperform the other candidates. And fit for this flock and this specific load comes fifth, sized honestly to what this congregation can offer and this leader can carry, which is a different question entirely from what he has carried somewhere else before.

Certain things belong out of every posting entirely: every attendance threshold, without exception, since there is no biblical warrant for a single one; every "similar or larger size" clause, since it is a closed loop measuring geography rather than fitness; any requirement that a candidate personally drive growth metrics, since God is the one who makes things grow (1 Corinthians 3:6–7); and language selecting for temperament — dynamic, vibrant, authoritative — since temperament is not fruit. And certain things belong in every posting that appear in none of the forty-plus reviewed for this paper: a direct question about failure — describe a time you were wrong, who told you, and what changed, then call that person; a direct question about extraction — who has told you no, and what did you do, with references chosen by the search committee rather than the candidate; a question about the unwatched years, since David's actual résumé at Goliath was a lion and a bear no one saw him kill; and prayer, named as a scheduled, non-negotiable step before any shortlist is drawn, not appended after the fact.

A properly built formation instrument belongs somewhere specific in this process, and its builders must be as honest about its limits as this paper has tried to be about the industry's. It belongs as a mirror held up to a candidate and to a congregation, before and during discernment, never as a published cut line in a job posting. The moment a formation score becomes a threshold a candidate must clear to be considered, the instrument has become a better-dressed version

of exactly the system this paper indicts. No instrument prevents a Judas. Jesus prayed all night and chose him anyway. Formation is never a ladder to climb for status, and any tool built to measure it must say so as clearly as it says anything else about itself.

XII. For the Pastor Who Will Never Clear the Threshold

You have been screened out by a number that measures the population of your county. Hear the record straight. Saul had the résumé and lost the kingdom, because he was afraid of the men and gave in to them. David had no résumé at all — youngest, unsummoned, out with the sheep, not even in the room where the decision was being made — and God stopped the entire proceeding and made a prophet wait for him. Peter and John were audited by the most credentialed body in Judaism, found to be unschooled and ordinary, and the only credential anyone could identify was that they had been with Jesus. A tax collector and a revolutionary were put on the same team by the only perfect selection committee that has ever met.

The lion and the bear were not on David's résumé. He killed them where nobody was watching, and that was the preparation that mattered. You are not underqualified. You are unmeasured. The years you spent being faithful in a hard place with no growth curve to show for it are not a gap in your file. They are the sheep pens, and Scripture says plainly what God does with the men he forms there: "He chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens" (Psalm 78:70).

XIII. Conclusion

Divine permission is not divine endorsement, and that is the sentence this entire paper has been building toward. A church can run a professional search, verify every credential on the list, install the most impressive candidate available, and celebrate with a shout, and still, in the most sobering sense Scripture offers, receive the judgment rather than the gift. The installation was never the verification. The fruit, over years, in a life examined honestly, is the only verification that was ever real.

Belonging before expectation. Invitation before instruction. Grace before growth. Formation is the metric. Fruit is the evidence. Character is the credential.

This paper distills a full 62-page research dossier — including a verbatim quote register, a complete firm and platform directory, and a documented verification and uncertainty log — available in its complete form. Scripture quoted from the NIV84.

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