



A STUDY ON
CALLING

*New Thoughts for
an Old Idea*

GETTING STARTED

What am I supposed to do with my life? It's a common question these days. And it's a uniquely modern question.

In his book *The Courage to Be*, theologian Paul Tillich argued that people of all ages have dealt with anxiety — the sense of being haunted by death or guilt, for example — but what we are most afraid of is *emptiness*. We struggle to shake the feeling that our days are purposeless and we are beset by the “anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern, a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings.”

“A meaning which gives meaning to all meanings” — each of us is hardwired to try to find a central purpose through which our lives become meaningful. That's what vocation is all about. Unfortunately, the original, biblical meaning of calling has been lost in our cultural context, where we've been conditioned to identify “calling” with “occupation.” In other words, we tend to think of “vocation” as nothing more than a fancy way of saying “job.”

As we'll explore together, the Bible offers a much richer and more profound understanding of vocation than we might have realized, according to which each person is called to be genuinely human, to enter into relationship with Jesus Christ, and to steward their individual gifts in service of God and neighbor.

In this study, you will:

- Examine the various ways in which the Bible defines vocation and calling;
- Explore the relationship between our primary calling to Christian identity and our secondary calling to serve our neighbors through our whole-life vocation;
- Apply practical principles for cultivating personal stewardship in your vocation.

REFLECT

• In your experience, what do most people mean when they refer to a person's vocation? How would you define vocation?

• At this stage in your life, what is your “meaning which gives meaning to all meanings”?

“Everybody has a vocation to some form of life-work. However, behind that call (and deeper than any call), everybody has a vocation to be a person — to be fully and deeply human in Christ Jesus.”

Brennan Manning,
The Wisdom of Tenderness

EXAMINE

WHAT IS VOCATION?

The word “vocation” derives from the Latin *vox* (“voice”), which suggests that someone or something is summoning us to some kind of purpose. This is also captured in the way that we use the word “calling,” since calling, of course, implies a Caller.

We get our language of calling from the Christian Scriptures, where page after page God is calling people into relationship with himself. “Calling” is used in a few different ways in the Bible. But in every case, biblical calling refers to God’s *address* to a person or to a people with the expectation of *response*.

UNIVERSAL CALLING

In the first place, calling can refer, most broadly, to the responsibility that every human being has as a bearer of the *imago Dei* or to God’s universal call to salvation, issued to all people in every time and place. Take a few minutes to reflect on these biblical passages, paying special attention to the ways in which God has summoned humanity to action, even if the word “calling” is not used:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Genesis 1:27-28, ESV)

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. (Genesis 2:15, ESV)

“Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.” (Isaiah 45:22, ESV)

REFLECT

• According to these passages, to what task(s) has God called every human being?

PARTICULAR CALLING

More narrowly, calling can also refer to instances in which God singles out individuals for a unique task or purpose in God's plan of redemption. While unmistakable commands from God to take on a particular type of work are rare in the Bible, they do occur, for example, in the callings of Abram, Moses, and Paul. Consider the following passages:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3)

Then the Lord said [to Moses], "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey... Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt." (Exodus 3:7-8, 10)

But the Lord said to [Ananias], "Go, for [Paul] is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." (Acts 9:15-16)

REFLECT:

- What are the unique tasks to which God called Abram, Moses, and Paul, respectively?
- Christians are sometimes surprised to learn that very few characters in Scripture received a direct call from God in the way that Abram, Moses, and Paul did; often, God's people have had to discern God's leading in less direct ways. How does this fact challenge your understanding of calling, if at all? How might this fact change the way you think about common understandings of calling?

CALLING TO IDENTITY

So, God summons all people to work and cultivate the world as his image bearers and he occasionally sets apart individuals to accomplish unique purposes in the drama of redemption. However, when the Bible uses the language of calling, most of the time it is referring to the vocation of God's people to inhabit a certain kind of *identity* — to be a particular kind of people.

Most fundamentally, and before any other responsibility, the believer has the vocation of living out a lifestyle befitting those sanctified (“set apart”) for God’s purposes and presence by being united to Jesus Christ, no matter what their particular occupation may be. Have a look at some of the ways calling language is used in the New Testament:

I [Paul] therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-2, ESV)

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Romans 8:28-30, ESV)

Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct... (1 Peter 1:13-15, ESV)

In our individualistic culture, it’s easy to forget that our primary calling is to be carried out in community. In fact, the Greek word for church, *ekklesia*, is related to the verb “to call” — to be the church is to be a community of “called ones.”

REFLECT

- ☛ How would you define your identity in one sentence?
- ☛ How would it change your sense of self and calling to realize that, as the writers of the New Testament argue, your foremost identity is as one who belongs to Jesus Christ together with all those of the people of God?
- ☛ Think about all the various spheres of responsibility in your life (your career, your family, your friendships, your church, etc.). What would it look like, in concrete terms, to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” in each of these dimensions of your life?

“The calling is the call of Jesus Christ to belong wholly to him; it is the laying claim to me by Christ at the place at which this call has found me; it embraces work with things and relations with persons; it demands a ‘limited field of accomplishments,’ yet never as a value in itself, but in responsibility toward Jesus Christ.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*

EXPLORE

So far, we've established that the language of calling has several layers of meaning in the Bible. We've seen that, primarily, to be "called" is to be summoned to a specific identity as God's people and to a manner of life that is consistent with that identity. We are called first and foremost to Jesus Christ, and then everything we do should flow out of that relationship. In this sense, our calling includes our occupations, but it also transcends them.

Historically, Christian thinkers have proposed several different models to try to organize these various dimensions of calling in the Bible. For example, the Puritans of the 16th century spoke of *general calling* and *particular calling*. That is, every believer is called to be united with Christ in a general sense, but also to a specific kind of work to be done out of love of and in service to our neighbors. As Puritan theologian William Perkins put it, "A vocation is a certain kind of life, ordained and imposed on man by God, for the common good."

Putting it slightly differently in his book *The Call*, Os Guinness has distinguished between *primary calling* and *secondary calling*. Believers are called to their primary identity *before* we are called to any one specific professional context. Our secondary calling relates more narrowly to the specific and concrete responsibilities of our lives, such as parenthood or professional occupations.

Christian vocation, then, is a calling to a *whole life*, where we pursue our secondary callings — as a mother or father, accountant, mechanic, pastor, or whatever it is — as an expression of our primary calling. We serve the common good and love our neighbors through everything we do because we have been called above all to Jesus Christ.

REFLECT

- How does your primary calling inform and shape your secondary calling? What does it look like for you to be "called according to God's purpose" (Romans 8:28) as you go about your daily occupations at home and at work?
- For a Christian, vocation is not simply about finding purpose for our individual lives, but also about finding ways to serve the common good and meet the needs of our neighbors. In what concrete ways can you love your neighbor and serve your community through the things you do as part of your vocation each day?

"We are not called to do something or go somewhere; we are called to Someone. We are not called first to special work but to God. The key to answering the call is to be devoted to no one and to nothing above God himself...Calling is the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion, dynamism, and direction lived out as a response to his summons and service."

Os Guinness, *The Call*

APPLY

“Well, it must have been nice for Moses,” you might be thinking. “I wish God would appear to me in a burning bush and tell me exactly what to do with my life.”

It’s likely that most of us have never had a “burning bush” moment, and many of us never will. So where does this leave us? We’ve looked closely at what the Bible means by calling, but the question still remains: *What am I supposed to do with my life?*

As we do the long and hard work of discerning the particular vocation and personal stewardship to which God has called us, above and beyond our most basic calling to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, it can be helpful to remember that this process is defined by both *clarity* and *mystery*. The storyline of our life is seldom a straight one. A Christian’s primary calling unto Christ never changes, but secondary vocations almost always unfold over a lifetime; they often change during different seasons of life, and we usually have multiple callings at once.

As Tod Bolsinger explains, “The God who calls our names and offers us life and partnership in his own redemptive purposes fits us for the call. That requires us to grow, to be transformed — to become who God intended us to be. *One’s calling in life is not so much found as formed*, or to say it more clearly, our vocation is not truly found until we are fit for it.”

Here are some practical ways to pay attention to the ways that God is making you fit for your vocation:

- 1. Seek wise counsel:** “Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisors they succeed” (Proverbs 15:22, ESV). We often make grand plans for our lives without consulting anyone else, only to be disappointed when they don’t pan out. Find a few trusted voices (especially some that are older than you) who can help identify your gifts and aptitudes but who will also be honest with you about your weaknesses. Often, our callings are confirmed by the words of others.
- 2. Make space to listen:** We may never hear God’s voice audibly, but he’s speaking to us all the time. The problem is that we’re too busy or too distracted to listen. Make time and space each day for silence so that you can hear God’s voice in the gentle whisper (1 Kings 19:12, ESV).
- 3. Practice faithfulness where you are:** “Whatever your hand finds to do,” writes Solomon in Ecclesiastes 9:10, “do it with all your might.” This advice can be especially hard to swallow when you’re in a job you dislike or a difficult season of life. But in an important sense our vocation simply is whatever it is that God has us doing at the moment. God is forming you through each season of life, and the wise person will take lessons from every experience.
- 4. Do the slow work of contentment:** In our upward mobility-obsessed culture, it’s easy to grow impatient, bored, or discontent in our vocations, constantly obsessing over “the next thing.” But we won’t be fully-formed in our vocations unless we practice what Eugene Peterson called “long obedience in the same direction.”

God is forming each of us to live an *unrepeatable life* — each of us has gifts, aptitudes, and experiences to contribute something, however small, in service of God and neighbor that cannot be duplicated by anybody else. Personal stewardship means taking responsibility for the work which cannot be done by anyone else.

REFLECT

☛ It can be a helpful exercise to state our vocations in one sentence. Spend some time in prayerful reflection before filling out the template below. Once you've got a draft, spend some time in conversation with your wise counsel to refine your statement.

I love God and love _____ (*insert groups of people/neighbors/communities in my life*)
by and through _____ (*list your aptitudes, gifts, and passions*).

☛ If you haven't had a "burning bush" moment (and really, even if you have), it'll take the long, slow work of discernment to be formed for your vocation. Take a few minutes to reflect on some practices for cultivating a sense of personal stewardship:

- From whom can you seek wise counsel in discerning your gifts and callings? Try to think of several people you can ask for guidance in discerning your vocation.
- In what concrete ways can you make time and space for silence, reflection, and listening to God?
- How specifically can you engage the work of your hands — whatever it happens to be in this season of your life — faithfully?
- Where are you discontent in your calling? What practices can help to overcome this discontentment?

☛ Rowan Williams reminds us that we're responsible only for becoming *ourselves*, not for becoming somebody else. Think about your unique giftings and experiences. *Who* is God calling you to be? What makes you most fully you?

"I cannot become holy by copying another's path...I have to take my own steps and create a life that has never been lived before. At the day of Judgment, as we are often reminded, the question will not be about why we failed to be someone else. I will not be asked why I wasn't Martin Luther King or Mother Teresa but why I wasn't Rowan Williams."

Rowan Williams, *Where God Happens*



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