

Rethinking the Call of God

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For nearly two decades now, I have been privileged to rummage around in the lives of young adults as they struggled to identify why God had placed them on this earth. I have observed, participated in, and provided counsel to those various quests, first as a campus minister, later as one who trained collegiate workers in the Pacific Northwest, and now as a seminary professor at Golden Gate Baptist Seminary. My vantage point has been, therefore, not primarily from the halls of academia, but alongside those who were seeking faithfully to live out their calling.

Along the way I have noticed a disconnect between the popular understanding of the call of God, and what the Bible really teaches. Allow me to provide a personal illustration. In 1998 I was approached by a pastoral search committee, which was considering whether God might be leading me to be their next pastor. I was also seeking to discern the will of God. During the course of the interview, I relayed my conversion experience, and how I came to realize my vocational calling.¹ Despite this, a layman on the committee grew visibly uncomfortable as he struggled to find the right way to ask a burning question.

¹*Vocational calling*, though redundant, is a term that I will use to describe the awareness of God's call as it relates to one's personal mission or role in the Body of Christ to help fulfill the Great Commission. This phrase recognizes that the term *vocation* has developed a secularized sense related to one's work, while *calling* retains the sense of one's mission in life within the overall call to belong to Jesus Christ.

Finally, he blurted out, “But when did you come to believe that God was calling you into *the ministry* [emphasis mine]?” By that time he knew that I had already completed twelve years in full-time Christian service. His question betrayed a theology that the call of God was neither more nor less than a call to the pastorate. If pressed, he might have conceded that there could, perhaps, also be a separate call to missionary service. Beyond those two categories fell everyone else—the great host of un-called people!

Gordon T. Smith, speaking of his own early religious education, echoes a similar experience: “I remember hearing it suggested when I was a young man that if we really loved the Lord we would be missionaries; and if not missionaries, then pastors; and if not missionaries or pastors, then at least business people (in ‘secular work’) who could support those with the ‘sacred callings.’”²

This popular understanding of calling has roots in Christian history. Early Christianity was essentially a movement mostly devoid of a clergy/lay distinction. All believers shared in the ministry of the church, according to gifting. However, the demands for structure in the merging church along with the emergence of vexing theological controversies in the post-apostolic age, nudged the church toward a professionalized ministry. This was coupled with a popular piety which looked to Old Testament priestly models of leadership and embraced a sacramental view of the Lord’s Supper.³ Eventually, the division between priest and the ‘non-religious’, to use Catholic terminology, became firmly entrenched. While the Protestant Reformation served as a corrective, with its emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, it did not go far enough.⁴

²Gordon T. Smith, *Courage and Calling: Embracing Your God-Given Potential* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 24

³Ibid., 39ff.

⁴Ibid., 45ff.

Today, Baptists and other evangelicals wrestle with a tension between the Church as the people of God, and the Church as being divided between clergy and laity, for a variety of reasons. First, conservative evangelicals, including Southern Baptists, are highly vested in upholding a high view of Scripture. Certainly the role in the church that is most closely associated with the Word is that of the pastor—the one who brings the message week in and week out. However, alongside that key servant are a host of others who teach and live out that same Word in a myriad of different ways. A truly biblical understanding of calling should enhance all aspects of calling without diminishing the call of the pastor.

First Corinthians 14:1 is a verse that some use to justify an exalted view of pastoral calling: “Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophesy.” Many evangelicals would equate the word *prophesy* in this case with preaching. The context of this passage concerns the relative importance of the intelligible spoken word over that of ecstatic utterances, or tongues. In its original context, Paul likely was referring to spontaneous, but intelligible utterances over the carefully prepared sermons as practiced by most pastors today. Gordon Fee states this case well: “By prophesy, of course, as the full evidence of this chapter makes clear, he does not mean a prepared sermon, but the spontaneous word given to God’s people for the edification of the whole. Most contemporary churches would have to be radically reconstructed in terms of their self-understanding, for such to take place.”⁵ Such reconstruction of worship services would, indeed, involve a larger role for those other than the pastor, including those referred to, in today’s terminology, as lay people.

Within American culture (and perhaps throughout the world) there are also parallel developments toward professionalism, paired with a growing spectator mentality. This has

⁵Gorden D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F.F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 660.

impacted the church in negative ways as lay persons have abandoned their own responsibilities as witnesses and ministers, deferring instead to the ‘hired guns.’⁶

A final impetus to note for exalting the pastoral calling over against other callings is to restore the high value of the pastorate in light of its devaluation within the Church and contemporary society. Henry Blackaby and Henry T. Brandt express this sentiment in *The Power of the Call*. “In recent years I have watched many people diminish the sacredness of God’s specific call to be a shepherd to his people. We heard people say, ‘Everyone is called.’ But in the Scriptures, God calls some to shepherd His people. The call and the enabling are special. Do not let anyone explain away your high calling, and make it common to all. It is not common.”⁷ Stevens recognizes this issue as well: “It is widely acknowledged that pastors are facing an identity crisis, a crisis which may be deepened by the pastor-as-equipper emphasis now being promoted by many, including myself. Simply put, if there is no single activity that is the exclusive prerogative of the pastor, including equipping, is there anything left?”⁸

One wonders why, despite these arguments, we must sacrifice the idea of a vocational call for all Christians to give proper regard for the pastorate? They are not mutually exclusive, nor would the various lists of spiritual gifts give credence to the concept of a pastoral calling being special while other callings are not. What may be missing in this argument is a parallel realization that all believers share in both a general and a specific call.

⁶For an excellent discussion of how television has moved the Church toward a spectator focus, see chapter eight entitled ‘Shuffle Off To Bethlehem’ in Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves To Death* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986).

⁷Henry Blackaby and Henry T. Brandt, *The Power of the Call* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997), 28.

⁸R. Paul Stevens, *The Abolition of the Laity* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1999), 51.

A careful examination of the New Testament reveals that the call of God, if seen in its full scope, is much broader and richer than the flawed popular understanding envisions. The first chapter of Romans especially reflects a clear theology that the call of God applies to all people. Nor is there a general call to all who will believe, then a specific call that is only for the select few. Rather, all share fully in the call of God. It is first and foremost a call to belong to Jesus Christ. Everything else, including vocation and lifestyle, are simply implications of that call. Further, all believers, and not just pastors, are expected to fully live out their calling in its vocational and its lifestyle implications.

According to James D. G. Dunn, the introduction to Romans consists of three sections within chapter one. In verses 1-7, Paul introduces himself elaborately and gives a typical greeting to his readers. Verses 8-15 contain Paul's stated hope of visiting the Christians in Rome. Finally, Paul introduces the main theme of his letter in verses 16-17.⁹

Rom. 1:1-7 is an excellent passage to see the multifaceted nature of the term *call*.

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, **called** to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to **call** people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. And you also are among those who are **called** to belong to Jesus Christ. To all in Rome who are loved by God and **called** to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. [words in bold for emphasis]¹⁰

The term *call* or *called* is used four times in verses 1-7. Paul first speaks of being “called to be an apostle” (v.1). This might initially lead a reader to conclude that the popular use of the term *call* as being a lifelong divine assignment to a particular task may be the central meaning of

⁹James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. Bruce M. Metzger (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 3.

¹⁰Unless labeled otherwise, all scriptures cited are from the *New International Version of The Holy Bible*.

the word. One should note, though, that Paul's calling was not to the pastorate, but to apostleship. Nor, according to Stevens and David Faulk, should this be a model for all pastoral callings:

Paul uses "call" to describe his own anointing as an apostle. . . . But he never offers his experience of a personal commission as a model for the general or special call to be experienced by other believers. David Faulk shows that Paul's call is both conversion and commissioning. The conversion 'call' he shares with all other believers through history. The commission call is unrepeatable. It is not a paradigm for the "call" of church leaders today.¹¹

Paul also clarified that his apostolic summons included a grace gifting and assignment to "call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith." The Roman Christians are next reminded that they, too, are "called to belong to Jesus Christ." Finally, in his greeting, Paul refers to the Roman believers as those who are "called to be saints" (v. 7).

The last two occurrences of this term clearly refer to salvation, not to apostleship. Leon Morris clarifies the term's essential meaning.

Christians are people whom God has called. He goes on to speak of being called to belong to Jesus Christ. There is a responsibility attaching to call. Those called belong to Christ. Their lives are his. . . . The call of the rank and file of the Roman church balances that of the great apostle. Great leaders are called, but then so are all God's lowly people. Saints is a term frequently used in the New Testament to denote Christians in general. . . . The term reminds us of the essential character of being Christian. The word basically signifies set apart, separated.¹²

Three Greek words form the primary foundation for the theological use of the term call. "*Kaleo*" means *to call*, "*klesis*" refers to *calling*, and "*ekklesia*" translates as *assembly* or

¹¹Stevens, 153. Embedded quote from D.J. Falk, "A New Testament Theology of Calling with Reference to the 'Call to the Ministry'" (MCS thesis submitted to Regent College, Vancouver, May 1990), 133.

¹²Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 52.

church.¹³ L. Coenen describes *ecclesia*, especially in its usage in Acts, as descriptive of “those who follow the call of God”¹⁴

Kaleo, a verb, is used in three basic senses. First, at its most literal level, one might say, “John called Cindy to tell her about the party.” Additionally, *kaleo* can refer to the naming of something or someone; thus, “John called me Hercules.” The third sense is more relevant to this study. *Kaleo* is regularly used in a more technical sense throughout the epistles, to refer to God’s calling of a person to salvation in Christ, or to the vocational or lifestyle implications of that call.¹⁵ Dunn states its essential meaning thus:

Paul’s readers defined precisely as ‘the called,’ those whose lives had been determined by God’s summons, who had been drawn into God’s ongoing purpose by the power of that call (Rom. 1:6-7; 8:28, 30; 1 Cor. 1:2, 9, 24; 7:15, 17-24; Gal. 1:6; 5:8, 13; etc.—see TDNT 3:488-89, 494). Within that calling, which is one of the distinguishing features of all those belonging to Christ, Paul’s thinks of a calling to a specific task (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1), though in both cases he takes care to assure that the idea of a specific calling cannot be separated from the calling of all (Rom. 1:6-7; 1 Cor. 1:2, cf. Str.-B, 3:1-2).¹⁶

Schmidt further states,

If Jesus does the calling in the Gospels, he does so in fulfillment of a divine function, and the proper response is faith, which carries with it not only discipleship, but also the blessings of salvation. Behind the term, then, stands the whole work of God, through Christ, in judgment and grace. This takes place either directly, with Jesus’ own calling or in the gospel ministry (cf. 2 Thess. 2:14).¹⁷

¹³K. L. Schmidt, III, “kaleo, klesis and ecclesia” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume*, eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, translated and abridged by G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 394-397.

¹⁴L. Coenen, “Church” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House), 305.

¹⁵Kittel, 394-395.

¹⁶Dunn, 8-9.

¹⁷Schmidt, 395.

Believers are called beyond the salvific and vocational implications of their call, as expressed in Scripture, to certain lifestyle implications of that divine summons as well. Christians are called to *repentance* (Matt. 9:13), to *fellowship with his Son* (1 Cor. 1:9), to *peace* (1 Cor. 7:15), in *grace* (Gal. 1:6), to *freedom* (Gal. 5:13), to *his kingdom and glory* (1 Thess. 2:12), in *holiness* (1 Thess. 4:7), to *eternal life* (1 Tim. 6:12), to *light* (1 Pet. 2:9), to *suffering* (1 Pet. 2:20-21) [emphasis mine].¹⁸ Each of these uses of *kaleo* refers to actions or implications which arise in response to or as a result of living out the overarching call to salvation and discipleship.

Klesis, a noun, refers to the summons one has received in Christ. The Corinthian believers are urged to consider their call. (1 Cor. 1:26). The saints at Ephesus are urged to live worthy of their call (Eph. 4:1). Second Peter's readers are urged to confirm their call and election (2 Pet. 1:10).

In light of these passages, I would conclude that the call of God is essentially a call to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. This relationship includes the necessity for a manner of life that reflects the high honor of that relationship. Yet it also includes a missional element—for all believers. This vocational call has also been variously referred to as a secret call or a particular call. H. Richard Niebuhr included this element in his classic formulation:

- The call to be a Christian
- The secret call involving a vocational choice or summons.
- The providential call that makes up the intellectual, psychological and moral qualifications of the individual for ministry.
- The ecclesiastical call which involves the recognition by a particular church of the former three callings, often connected with ordination.

However, for Niebuhr, the latter three callings, including the secret call, are reserved for clergy.¹⁹

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹H. Richard Niebuhr, Daniel Day Williams and James M. Gustafson, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, Reflections on the Aims of Theological Education* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), p. 64.

Stevens distinguishes between four categories of calling:

- An effectual call to become a disciple.
- A providential call, including one's personality, circumstances of upbringing and opportunities.
- A charismatic call, involving one's spiritual gifting.
- A heart call, meaning the desires one has for a particular task.²⁰

While these categories are somewhat helpful, he goes on to question whether a secret—or vocational—call experience is even necessary or normative.²¹ This stance cuts against much Christian tradition and is, I believe, an overreach biblically.

It seems that much of the literature seems to force one to an extreme of either exalting a special call for the few, or denying such a call to all. A better position would be to recognize that one's calling does indeed include a particular mission, though it may be recognized in various ways. Some Christians come to an understanding of their particular vocational callings through intense and profound religious experiences, others through a growing awareness of giftedness and need, still others through the simple process of doing ministry. Regardless of the avenue through which that calling travels, it belongs to all believers. Smith indicates such when he suggests three callings for all believers:

We can understand the call of God in three distinct ways. First, there is a call to be a Christian. . . . All aspects of our lives flow from and find meaning in the fact that we, the church, are a called people. Nothing matters more to us than that we are called. This calling is a gift—an invitation offered to us in the mercy of God to become his people and walk in faith and obedience to his Word. It is, essentially, a call to God's salvation.

Second, for each individual there is a specific call—a defining purpose or mission, a reason for being. Every individual is called of God to respond uniquely through service in the world. We can only understand this second meaning of calling in light of the first: when we fulfill our specific vocation we are living out the full implications of what it means to follow Jesus. Therefore, while we all have a general call to love God and neighbor, each of us follows our Lord differently. He calls us all to follow him, and once we accept that

²⁰Stevens, 80-82.

²¹Ibid., 82ff. Cf. 152-159.

call each of us is honored with a unique call that is an integral part of what it means to follow him. The second experience of call is derived from the first.

Third, there is the calling that we face each day in response to the multiple demands on our lives—our immediate duties and responsibilities: the call to be present to my sons when they are competing athletically, or to help out in my local church, or to respond to some other specific and important need that comes before me. These are my tasks; they are not burdens, but are those things that are placed before me today by God.²²

In light of this understanding, is it still right to speak of a *call* to be a pastor? Certainly, so long as one does not see that calling as the only valid one, or as a higher calling than the essential one, which is “to belong to Jesus Christ.” Within that salvific call is a call to be on mission with God, and for his Kingdom that is specific to each individual. Likewise, Christians should understand that ministry assignments are not always a life sentence. Since the basic calling for a Christian is to belong to Jesus Christ, and since there is a lack of biblical evidence showing all vocational “callings” to be lifelong in duration, one should give deference to one’s owner; that is to Jesus Christ.²³ Jesus alone should determine where, when, and for how long his servants should serve him in a particular task.

A more biblically sound understanding of call serves to correct several problems within churches. First, it invites all Christians to live out their calling in its most complete sense. Laypersons will no longer see themselves as consumers and spectators of a ministry that is to be performed by religious professionals. Instead, each should discover and live out the vocational and lifestyle implications of his or her own calling as a full partner in the Church. Pastors will no longer be exhausted by the physical and emotional burden of being the lone person doing the lion’s share of the ministry in the church. The load will be shared with a whole church full of ministers. Stevens envisions the positive potential:

²²Smith, 9-10.

²³Stephen, for example, was first set apart as a deacon (or one of the seven), became an evangelist and worker of miracles, then climaxed his service as an apologist and martyr (Acts 6:5-7:50).

What would happen if we reinstated the ministry of the whole people of God? . . . Consider what it would mean for pastors, now liberated from the impossible task of being the comprehensive, all-encompassing ministers of the church, to be able to exercise their gifts of leadership to empower people to grow corporately and individually into maturity. Think of a church of two hundred ministers ministering seven days a week in all the contexts which our sovereign God has placed those members. They do not have to be persuaded or inveigled into going into the world; they are already there. Envision the waiting world—closed countries, partially Christian countries, nominally Christian countries, post-Christian countries. We can never reach the world for Christ by sending fully-supported missionaries. We must mobilize the whole people of God.²⁴

Frank Tillapaugh and Richard Heart agree: “Sitting in the pews of churches across America are literally millions of Christ-ones who are God’s gift to a hurting nation. They are mechanics, doctors, tutors, and entrepreneurs, whose hearts break for the homeless, the hungry, the addicted etc. Ninety-eight percent of America’s Christ-ones are not ordained ministers, but their callings to ministry are just as important as the pastor’s calling.”²⁵

As more Christians embrace a vocational calling for all believers, other church practices may also need to be re-examined against the new paradigm. For example, if second staff members are just as called as the senior pastor to their ministries, should their “call” be automatically negated when a new pastor comes to the church? Perhaps the Church has borrowed more from the business world than from the Bible when a new pastor brings in his own team without first considering whether God had changed the call of the current staff persons. This is where the ecclesiastical call may serve as a corrective to the individual call.

Finally, although many scholars have visited the issue of the call of God, including arguments for extending the vocational aspect of calling to laity, more needs to be done to weave this into the fabric of church life. All believers need to fully embrace their calling in Christ. This includes becoming passionately committed to the person of Christ in discipleship and lifestyle. It

²⁴Stevens, 158.

²⁵Frank Tillapaugh and Richard Heart, *Calling* (Monument, CO: Dreamtime Publishing, 1997) 11.

should also include understanding and embracing the ministry function they have within the Body of Christ. They should stand alongside those typically referred to as ‘clergy’ functioning fully as partners in a common ministry.

Since all callings are indeed sacred and valuable, the Church might, for instance consider finding suitable ways of commissioning its members to their particular callings. This can be done without challenging the well-established practice of ordination for pastoral staff. Some would call ordination itself into question, viewing the practice as extrabiblical and/or unnecessary²⁶. However, such a drastic move is not required to restore every-member ministry within churches.

Resources for calling out the called are now burgeoning. Tillapaugh was a leading popularizer of every-member ministry through his books *Unleashing The Church*²⁷ and a follow-up book *Calling*.²⁸ Gordon T. Smith’s more recent book, *Courage and Calling*, cited earlier, focuses especially on ways to help the reader to discern his or her vocational calling. Likewise, Rick Warren’s popular book *The Purpose Driven Life* guides people through *Forty Days of Purpose* where gifts, passion and purpose are clarified.²⁹ Church Resource Ministries through their *Focused Living Retreats*, offer church members a twelve-hour small groups process for understanding their own particular calling. This excellent approach helps participants integrate past experiences with scriptural revelation through a small groups process to develop their own

²⁶Tillapaugh and Heart, 156-158.

²⁷Frank R Tillapaugh, *Unleashing the Church* (Ventura, CA: GL Publications, 1982).

²⁸See footnote 22, above.

²⁹Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 2002).

Personal Calling Statement.³⁰ Sue Mallory, in *The Equipping Church*, identifies ways to implement every member ministry within the church structure.³¹

In conclusion, the gifts and calling of the Spirit belong to all Christians, since all share in a common call. As Erwin McManus states so clearly, “The one call is to lay your life at the feet of Jesus and to do whatever he asks.”³² Church leaders should refocus their energies, then, on the important task of calling out the called among them and equipping them for ministry within the Body of Christ. As Thomas Gillespie states: “It will be realized only if the ‘nonclergy’ are willing to move up, if the clergy are willing to move over, and if all God’s people are willing to move out.”³³

³⁰For more information about Focused Living Retreats and Church Resource Ministries, see <http://home.crmnet.org/>.

³¹Sue Mallory, *The Equipping Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 2001).

³²Erwin Raphael McManus, *An Unstoppable Force: Daring to Become the Church God Had in Mind* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2001), 201.

³³T.W. Gillespie, “The Laity in Biblical Perspective,” *Theology Today* 36, no. 3 (October 1979): 327.