

IV. INDIVIDUAL CALLING

God has first called us into a love relationship with Himself. This is an intimate relationship which we will enjoy for eternity. God then calls us to join Him in His purposes - that of the gospel. Every believer is called to share Christ and to help other believers in the growth process. It is not an option.

Our individual calling or life-mission becomes the context where we live out the relational and universal calls of God. Everyone has a different individual calling, yet we all have one. No individual calling is higher or more spiritual. They are all equal in God's eyes.

Romans 1:1

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.

Acts 13:1-4

Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

1 Corinthians 7: 20-24

Let each man remain in that condition in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. Brethren, let each man remain with God in that *condition* in which he was called.

QUESTIONS

1. How is calling used in these verses?

2. How is this different than the universal calling which we just discussed?

Oswald Chambers

Not knowing Where

The Call of God

When God says “Follow Me,” He never says to where; the itinerary must be left entirely to Him. We come in with our “but” and “supposing” and “what will happen if I do?” (see Luke 9:57-62). We have nothing to do with what will happen if we obey; we have to abandon to God’s call in unconditional surrender, leaving behind all our shivering wisdom, and smilingly wash our hands of the consequences. However, this does not mean that a life of faith is a life of fate. Fate is stoical resignation to an unknown force. Faith is commitment to One whose character we know because it has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ. And as we live in contact with our heavenly Father, His order comes to us in the haphazard, and we recognize that every detail of our lives is engineered by Him.

The call of God only becomes clear as we obey, never as we weigh the pros and cons and try to reason it out. The call is God’s idea, not our idea; and only on looking back over the path of obedience do we realize what God’s idea has been all along, for God sanctifies memory. When we hear the call of God it is not for us to dispute with Him and arrange to obey Him if He will expound the meaning of His call to us. As long as we insist on having the call explained, we will never obey. But when we obey, it all becomes clear, so that looking back we can say with a chuckle of confidence, “He doeth all things well.” Before us there is nothing, but overhead there is God, and we have to trust Him.

The Calling of Abraham

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out not knowing where he was going (Hebrews 11:8).

One of the hardest lessons to learn is the one which describes Abraham in the New Testament roll call of faith. “He went out not knowing where he was going” could be said of a faithful soul or a fool – or perhaps both. For as we, like Abraham, obey the call of God, we often become fools in the eyes of the world.

In the beginning faith is always uncertain, because at that point we have only the broad view, uncertain of particulars. We hear the call of God while we listen to a sermon or during a time of prayer, and we say, “Yes, I will give myself to God unreservedly.” Then something happens in our immediate circumstances that does not seem to fit into the vision we have had, and the danger is that we might compromise and say we must have been mistaken in the vision. Our natural tendency is to want to be always on the mountain where the view is clear. When we come down into the Devil-possessed valley we get annoyed or exhausted, thinking we cannot go on with God there. We have perfect faith in God as long as He keeps us on the mount, but not the slightest atom of faith when He takes us into the valley. Yet it is the trial of our faith that lies in these particulars, and it is in passing through that trial that we become spiritually enriched.

Personal acquaintance with God shows itself in separation, symbolized by Abraham's physical separation from his country and his kindred. Jesus Himself emphasized this need for separation (see Luke 14:26). Nowadays, such separation often involves a moral rather than a physical severance as we detach ourselves from the way those nearest and dearest to us think and look at things, if they do not have a personal relationship with God. Those who would argue against obeying the call of God frequently take the shape of country and kindred, and if we listen to them, our ears will soon become dull to God's call. Their sympathy competes with God for the throne of our life, and we dissolve into the most commonplace Christians imaginable because we have no courage to strike out in faith. We have seen and heard but have not gone on. If we accept sympathy from those who have not heard the call of God, it will so blunt our own sense of His call that we become useless to Him. Ultimately, every saint stands alone before God. And when He calls us to step out in faith, we begin the walk of faith alone, seeking no other comrade than the One who has called us for His purpose.

QUESTIONS

1. Why is understanding our calling not just an issue of reason?
2. What is the key to understanding the call of God?
3. How do we blunt the call of God?

EUSEBIUS

Eusebius (c. 260-c 340) was the Bishop of Caesarea and the “father of church history.” A prolific but rather unpolished writer, he is our principal source for the history for the Christian faith from the apostolic age down to his own day. He is a particularly valuable witness because he lived through such historic experiences as the Diocetian persecution (A.D. 303-310), the “conversion” of Constantine (A.D. 312) and the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325), which gives us the Nicene Creed.

The passage illuminates the rise of a two level view of calling: the spiritual life versus the secular life of action. This idea is alive today and gives rise to the view of a “higher calling” of spiritual service.

That the Christian Life is of Two Characters

The one wrote on lifeless tables, the Other wrote the perfect commandments of the new covenant on living minds. And His disciples, accommodating their teaching to the minds of the people, according to the Master’s will, delivered on the one hand to those who were able to receive it, the teaching given by the perfect master to those who rose above human nature. While on the other the side of the teaching which they considered was suitable to men still in the world of passion and needing treatment, they accommodated to the weakness of the majority, and handed over to them to keep sometimes in writing, and sometimes by unwritten ordinances to be observed by them. Two ways of life were thus given by the law of Christ to His Church. The one is above nature, and beyond common human living; it admits not marriage, child-bearing, property nor the possession of wealth, but wholly and permanently separate from the common customary life of mankind, it devotes itself to the service of God alone in its wealth of heavenly love! And they who enter on this course, appear to die to the life of mortals, to bear with them nothing earthly but their body, and in mind and spirit to have passed to heaven. Like some celestial beings they gaze upon human life, performing the duty of a priesthood to Almighty God for the whole race, not the sacrifices of bulls and blood, nor with libations and unguents, nor with smoke and consuming fire and destruction of bodily things, but with right principles of true holiness, and of a soul purified in disposition, and above all with virtuous deeds and words; with such they propitiate the Divinity, and celebrate their priestly rites for themselves and their race. Such then is the perfect form of the Christian life.

And the other, more humble, more human, permits men to join in pure nuptials and to produce children, to undertake government, to give orders to soldiers fighting for right; it allows them to have minds for farming, for trade, and the other more secular interests as well as for religion: and it is for them that times of retreat and instruction, and days for hearing sacred things are set apart. And a kind of secondary grade of piety is attributed to them, giving just such help as such lives require, so that all men, whether Greeks or barbarians, have their part in the coming of salvation, and profit by the teaching of the Gospel.

QUESTIONS

1. What are the two classes of people that Eusebius described?
2. How is this view still perpetuated today?
3. Why is this not biblical?
4. Is a businessman living in the marketplace more secular or more spiritual than a full-time Christian worker?
5. How does God view these two and what is of most importance to Him?

Pat Macmillan

Hiring Excellence

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The seeds of calling as it relates to our profession or work were planted in the New Testament. But the concept pushed into the spotlight during the Reformation when Luther challenged the division between the sacred and the secular, defining “good works” as those chosen by God and “comprehended within the bounds of a particular calling.” Later, Calvin would expand the concept and give it greater definition. He used the term “call” (vocation in French and vocation in Latin) in two senses: the “primary call” is from God to God; the “secondary calling” is to a particular work, occupation, or station in life. The purpose of work, in Calvin’s view, regardless of what kind of work it was, was to glorify God, to be a service to Him through service to men. Calvin exalted the common and refused to give preference to a particular religious vocation, which might be esteemed above others. All work, whether preaching a sermon or digging a ditch, was to be done as a service to God and not for personal gain or pleasure. It was a calling.

The Puritans really gave the concept of calling its momentum, turning the principles of Calvin and Luther into practice. William Perkins, a Puritan preacher and writer in Elizabethan England, refined the concept further by distinguishing between the general call and a particular call. The general call was common to all Christians as Christians (to be holy, to be peacemakers, to be salt and light, etc.) The particular call was to a specific person because of his or her character and gifts.

Let me clarify one important point. I believe that if Perkins were here today, he would distinguish between “work” and a “job”. Work would be defined as vocation or career, a life task or general direction. Within this “vocation,” even numerous “jobs” should form a pattern, a continuity that contributes to our broader vocation – or, as Perkins would say, our “particular” calling.

By calling, Guinness would agree with Perkins. It means much more than something exclusively spiritual, like guidance, but rather that “the expression of our personalities, the exercise of our gifts, all that we are, everywhere we go, and everything that we do is seen as a response to the Lord and is done as part of our calling to Him.” “In scripture,” Guinness notes, “calling is primarily to Someone (God). It is not to somewhere (a place); it is not to something (a task). Where we go and what we do is the secondary part of calling, merely the outworking of our primary calling, which is to God.”

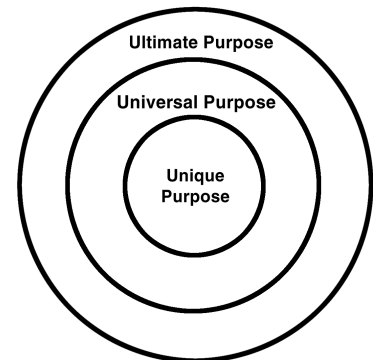
How Do We Find Our Calling?

In many respects a synonymous term for calling might be purpose. What is the purpose of your life? Purpose deals with the question “why?” Why do I exist? Or more accurately, “For whom do I exist?”)

Pat Morley, in his excellent book, *The Man in the Mirror*, notes that there are two aspects to finding significance: “The first answers the fundamental question, “Who am I?” The other answers life’s second big question, “Why do I exist?” We derive meaning and identity from understanding who we are in Christ. It’s a position we occupy. On the other hand, God has a purpose for our lives – a mission, a destiny – which is why we exist. It is the direction in which God wants us to be moving.”

As Christians, our primary purpose is to glorify God (Isaiah 43:7). The first statement in The Westminster Shorter Catechism sums it up in an eloquent, straightforward manner: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” Actually, this really isn’t our purpose, but rather God’s overarching purpose for us. We can find the purposes of God for men on three levels. Picture these levels as three concentric circles. We’ll label the outermost circle God’s ultimate purpose - ultimate in that it encompasses the entire scope of history – past, present, and future (Isaiah 46:10). It’s played out from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21, and every person, Christian and non-Christian alike, will play his or her part on the stage of God’s ultimate purpose.

The middle circle is God’s universal purpose – universal because it applies to all Christians. His Word makes it clear that all followers of Christ are to devote themselves to prayer, to love one another, to study and apply God’s Word to their lives, to share the gospel, to be salt and light, as well as the other spiritual disciplines the Lord admonishes us to pursue. They do this so that they might “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” Universal purpose is equivalent to what the Puritans termed general calling.



In the innermost circle, we find God’s unique purpose for each individual Christian. Unique, in that each of us is hand-crafted by the Creator for some special purpose. In Galatians 1:15, the Apostle Paul notes that the story of the Gentile church didn’t start on the Damascus Road, but rather many years earlier when God set him apart in his mother’s womb to be the apostle to the Gentiles. God told Jeremiah that He knew and consecrated Jeremiah in the womb of his mother to be a prophet to the nations (Jeremiah 1:5). David acknowledges as much in Psalm 139:

Thou didst form my inward parts;
Thou didst weave me in my mother’s womb....
Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance;
And in Thy book they were written,
The days that were ordained for me,
When as yet there was not one of them. (verses 13,16; NASB)

We could write the same message in our journals. One of the most fulfilling challenges for Christians is discovering God's unique purpose for our lives.

Finding our unique purpose is, to a great extent, a pilgrimage - a journey of exploration rather than an immediate "ah ha" experience. It comes in little bits as God, over time, reveals insights into why you (as a unique individual) are here. It comes as we pray asking God to reveal His purpose for us (Matthew 6:7-8), study His Word, and reflect on the influences and forces He has brought to bear in and on our lives. When it comes to a unique purpose, we must take into special account the way God crafted us, that is, the gifts, interests, aptitudes, and temperament He designed into our lives just as He did into the lives of David, Jeremiah, and Paul.

QUESTIONS

1. How does MacMillan's view of calling align with what we have read from Chambers, Eusebius, etc.?
2. MacMillan uses calling and purpose as almost synonymous. What are the three areas of calling and how do they differ?
3. Do you have a written purpose for your life? (At the end of this study, there is a section on how to write a purpose statement).
4. What value is there for having a clearly defined purpose statement?

REVIEW

Individual Calling

- All Christians are to work, yet they work is expressed differently for every individual. called some type of individual work. Most are called to remain in the context of the marketplace and neighborhood to be salt and light among the people God has placed them. In other words, our career is a platform in which we relate to God and to the world.
- There are no lone rangers as we live out our calling in the world.
- Our individual calling will be a unique expression of our spiritual gifts, talents, etc.
- There is no higher calling between doctor, lawyer, and ditchdigger vs. missionary, minister, and priest, only different.
- A few are called to full-time vocational Christian work, all are called to be full-time Christians.
- Passion, spiritual gifts and circumstances play a factor in our individual calling.
- God does not reveal His individual calling if we are not relationally aligned with Him. Yet, God does not play games with us in this area of work if we are aligned with Him.
- Our individual calling fits into God's purposes and His Kingdom.
- Our individual calling becomes the context or arena of influence where our intimacy with God and our living out God purpose's takes place.