

Clarifying our Calling

By Glenn Smith

There are two extreme views regarding the subject of calling. Those who come out of a more “rational” theological tradition (e.g. fundamental, Bible church, etc.) see calling as mostly a rational process of identifying your gifts and simply operating within those gifts. Aubrey Malphurs calls this God’s “divine design” for you.¹ This part of the Body of Christ tends to shy away from anything that is “mystical” or subjective. They see the discovery of ones calling as an objective, rational process that can be understood by knowing ones strengths and gifts. It’s that simple.

On the other extreme we have those who come out of a more “mystical” theological tradition (e.g. holiness churches, Pentecostal, etc.) They see calling as a highly subjective, mystical (i.e. spiritual) reality. On the most extreme side these brothers and sisters would see the discovery of ones calling as purely a supernatural experience, void of anything rational.

Then there are those who come out of a reformed theological tradition who would place great importance on the Body of Christ (the church or ecclesiastical Body) in identifying or confirming one’s calling. These brothers and sisters see their calling as coming from God, but through the church. Who’s correct? I take the position that there is some truth in each of these perspectives, and I do not believe that they are mutually exclusive. We will examine this concept in scripture, but first, where does the word come from?

In the English language, “calling” is related to the word “vocation” which comes from the Latin “voca,” meaning voice. The idea was one of an inner voice “calling” one to a particular work or “vocation.” It suggests that our “work” should not be just something we do, but that it should be connected to who we are! Tillapaugh² and Guinness³ suggest that every human being is looking for a calling, but most only find a job! Tillapaugh states *“Most of us are looking for a calling, not a job. Most of us have jobs that are too small for our spirit!”*

Unfortunately, most people in the Western world do not connect calling and vocation. (See Guinness on “The Catholic Distortion” and “The Protestant Distortion” in chapters 4-5.) For many, their work is just something they have to do to survive or to provide for their family. There is no sense of purpose, passion, or “calling.” Guinness stated, *“The problem with Western society is that we have too much to live with and too little to live for!”* Thus, one of the greatest needs of middle and upper class Western society is the need for significance or purpose!

¹ Aubrey Malphurs, *Maximizing Your Effectiveness* (Baker Books, 1995.)

² Frank Tillapaugh and Richard Hurst, *Calling* (Dreamtime Publishing, 1997.)

³ Os Guinness, *The Call* (Word, 1998.)

Calling is not restricted to clergy! In fact, the entire clergy-laity concept is not really a biblical concept (Guinness calls this the Catholic distortion.) The truth is that ALL people have a calling! It is a reflection of human dignity, being created in the image of God! People in the pew need to understand calling just as much as a pastor or church planter! Every member of the core team planting a church should have a clear sense of calling to this work! In this sense, even non-Christians are created with a “calling!” (This is what we develop under DIMENSIONS OF CALLING in our training course for church planters.)

In modern Christendom, we have done something that is not good. We have segregated those “elite” believers who are appointed to preach, or become missionaries, or work vocationally in ministry. We refer to them as the “called.” This undermines the real biblical concept of calling! For those of us who grew up in evangelical churches in the mid-20th century, we heard about these elite who “surrendered to the call.” Think about how you’ve heard this term used in your past (especially if you grew up in the church!) We think of the called as “the few, the proud, the marines” of Christianity! As a result, the average believer sees his or her role as simply to obey the “called” and give money so the “called” can do the things they’re “called” to do!

It is my argument that every human being is created for a divine purpose or calling! This calling is shaped by our design, but it is fulfilled when we enter into relationship with the Designer! Once we become a Christian, two new dimensions come into place: our calling is shaped by our giftedness (spiritually) and is fulfilled in kingdom service! Every member of the Body of Christ should discover his or her calling! (See BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CALLING in our training course for church planters and study those scriptures carefully.) We believe that our primary calling is into relationship and communion with God, and our secondary calling(s) is to live out our primary calling in a specific direction, for which He has uniquely created us! This becomes the sphere in which we live on mission for Him!

Our working definition of calling is this: *“a summons from God; a strong inner pull toward a particular course of action and/or place of service.”*

One final thought: Before we can know who we are, we must be willing to acknowledge who we are not! The journalist Ambrose Bierce understood this half of calling when he wrote, “When I was in my twenties, I concluded one day that I was not a poet. It was the bitterest moment of my life.” C. S. Lewis stated, “The more we get what we now call ‘ourselves’ out of the way and let Him take us over, the more truly ourselves we become.”