

The Biblical Doctrine of Calling and Vocation

I. Definition of the Doctrine of Calling

"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*, p. 29

II. Distinctions and Descriptions of Calling

A. Distinctions

1. Primary calling: to salvation in God through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

1. Called to faith in Christ (Rom. 8: 28-30; 1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Thess. 2: 10- 12)
2. Called to the kingdom of God (1 Thess. 2: 10-12)
3. Called to eternal life (1 Tim. 6: 12; Heb. 9: 15)
4. Called to holy living (1 Cor. 1: 2; 1 Pet. 1: 15)

2. Secondary callings: to specific stations and tasks in life through which we serve God, the human family, and the Church of Jesus Christ by means of particular interests and gifts that God has bestowed upon His people in order to meet significant needs and to accomplish His special purposes in the world

1. Callings in which believers receive their primary calling (1 Cor. 7: 20-24)
2. The attitudes and actions of those called in all work and service (Eph. 6: 5-9; Col. 3: 22-4: 1)

B. Descriptions

1. Martin Luther, *Works*, vol. 5, p. 102

What you do in your house is worth as much as if you did it up in heaven for our Lord God. For what we do in our calling here on earth in accordance with His word and command He counts as if it were done in Heaven for Him

Therefore we should accustom ourselves to think of our position and work as sacred and well-pleasing to God, not on account of the position and the work, but on account of the word and faith from which the obedience and the work flow. No Christian should despise his position and life if he is living in accordance with the word of God, but should say, "I believe in Jesus Christ, and do as the ten commandments teach, and pray that our dear Lord God may help me thus to do." That is a right and holy life, and cannot be made holier even if one fast himself to death.

. . . It looks like a great thing when a monk renounces everything and goes into a cloister, carries on a life of asceticism, fasts, watches, prays, etc. . . . On the other hand, it looks like a small thing when a maid cooks and cleans and does other housework. But because God's command is there, even such a small work must be praised as a service to God far surpassing the holiness and asceticism of all monks and nuns. For here there is no command of God. But there God's command is fulfilled, that one should honour father and mother and help in the care of the home.

2. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III. X. 6.

The last thing to be observed is, that the Lord enjoins every one of us, in all the actions of life, to have respect to our own calling. He knows the boiling restlessness of the human mind, the fickleness with which it is borne hither and thither, its eagerness to hold opposites at one time in its grasp, its ambition.

Therefore, lest all things should be thrown into confusion by our folly and rashness, he has assigned distinct duties to each in the different modes of life. And that no one may presume to overstep his proper limits, he has distinguished the different modes of life by the name of callings. Every man's mode of life, therefore, is a kind of station assigned him by the Lord, that he may not be always driven about at random. So necessary is this distinction, that all our actions are thereby estimated in his sight, and often in a very different way from that in which human reason or philosophy would estimate them . . . in everything the call of the Lord is the foundation and beginning of right action. He who does not act with reference to it will never, in the discharge of duty, keep the right path. He will sometimes be able, perhaps, to give the semblance of something laudable, but whatever it may be in the sight of man, it will be rejected before the throne of God; and besides, there will be no harmony in the different parts of his life.

Hence, he only who directs his life to this end will have it properly framed; because, free from the impulse of rashness, he will not attempt more than his calling justifies, knowing that it is unlawful to overleap the prescribed bounds. He who is obscure will not decline to cultivate a private life, that he may not desert the post at which God has placed him. Again, in all our cares, toils, annoyances, and other burdens, it will be no small alleviation to know that all these are under the superintendence of God. The magistrate will more willingly perform his office, and the father of a family confine himself to his proper sphere. Every one in his particular mode of life will, without repining, suffer its inconveniences, cares, uneasiness, and anxiety, persuaded that God has laid on the burden. This, too, will afford admirable consolation, that in following your proper calling, no work will be so mean and sordid as not to have a splendor and value in the eye of God.

3. William Perkins, *A Treatise of the Vocations or Callings of Men*.

A vocation or calling is a certain kind of life, ordained and imposed on man by God, for the common good. . . . Every person of every degree, state, sex, or condition without exception must have some personal and particular calling to walk in. The main end of our lives . . . is to serve

God in the serving of men in the works of our callings. . . . the true end of our lives is to do service to God in serving of man.

III. Distortions of Calling

A. Catholic distortion of calling: spiritual *dualism* in elevating “spiritual” over “secular” callings (e.g., “full time Christian service”); it is affirming the primary calling at the expense of the secondary calling.

Eusebius, *Demonstration of the Gospel*

1. “Perfect life”—sacred vocations dedicated to *contemplation* (*vita contemplativa*) and reserved for priests, monks, nuns, etc.

2. “Permitted life”—secular vocations dedicated to *action* (*vita activa*) and entailing such tasks as governing, farming, trading, soldiering, homemaking, etc.

“If all that a believer does grows out of faith and is done for the glory of God, then all dualistic distinctions are demolished. There is no higher/lower, sacred/secular, perfect/permitted, contemplative/active or first class/second class. Calling is the premise of Christian existence itself. Calling means that everyone, everywhere, and in everything fulfills his or her (secondary) callings in response to God’s (primary) calling. For Luther, the peasant and the merchant—for us, the business person, the teacher, the factory worker, and the television anchor—can do God’s work (or fail to do it) just as much as the minister or missionary.”

—Os Guinness, *The Call*,

34.

“To know
That which before us lies in daily life
Is the prime wisdom.”
—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

B. Protestant distortion of calling: *secular dualism* in elevating “secular” over “spiritual” callings (the so-called “Protestant work ethic”), and severing daily tasks from a distinctively Christian emphasis; it is replacing the primary calling with the secondary calling.

1. Calling without a Caller

2. Making an idol of work

“Beware of anything that competes with loyalty to Jesus Christ. The greatest competitor of devotion to Jesus is service for Him. . . . The one aim of the call of God is the satisfaction of God, not a call to do something for Him. . . . The men and women our Lord sends out on His enterprises are the ordinary human stuff, plus dominating devotion to Himself wrought by the Holy Spirit. Be absolutely His.”

—Oswald Chambers, quoted in Guinness, *The Call*, 42-43.

“Do we enjoy our work, love our work, virtually worship our work so that our devotion to Jesus is off-center? Do we put our emphasis on service, usefulness, or being productive in working for God—at his expense? Do we strive to prove our own significance? To make a difference in the world? To carve our names in

marble on the monuments of time? ¶ The call of God blocks the path of all such deeply human tendencies. We are not primarily called to do something or go somewhere; we are called to Someone. We are not called 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.”

—Os Guinness, *The Call*, 42-43.

IV. Differences Between Vocation/Calling and Occupation

A. Vocation/calling — the call to God and to His service in various spheres of life based on giftedness, desires, affirmations and human need

1. Vocations/callings often stable and permanent over a lifetime
2. Matter of personal discovery (with God's help, of course) based on giftedness, interests, and human need

“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.” — Frederick Buechner

B. Occupation — opportunities for service presented to believers that enable them to fulfill their vocations/callings

1. Occupations often change (personal example: campus ministry, university professorate, writing)
2. Matter of God's specific leadership, guidance, and provision

V. Implications of the Doctrine of Calling

A. For students

1. Students must be taught to look upon their studies as a sacred calling from God, generating excellence, devotion, and faithfulness in their work.
2. Students must be taught to choose a course of study, including a major and minor, on the basis of a perceived calling from God.
3. The Career Development Services office ought to help students choose jobs on the basis of calling rather than on the basis of pure economics.

B. For administrators, faculty, and staff

Believers called by God to the professorate ought to view their work as a sacred trust, generating the following attitudes and actions:

- Excellence
- Creativity
- Faithfulness
- Spirituality
- Service
- Contentment
- Loyalty
- Humility

VI. Poetic and Musical Meditations on Vocation and Calling

The Elixir

—George Herbert.

Teach me, My God and King,
In all things Thee to see;
And what I do in anything,
To do it as for Thee.

A man that looks on glass,
On it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,
And then the heaven espy.

**All may of Thee partake;
Nothing can be so mean,
Which with this tincture: 'For Thy sake,'
Will not grow bright and clean.**

**A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine;
Who sweeps a room, as for Thy laws,
Makes that and the action fine.**

This is the famous stone (next page)
That turneth all to gold:
For that which God doth touch and own,
Cannot for less be told.

Mark and Sammy

—Billy Crockett and Milton Brasher-Cunningham

Chorus: Mark and Sammy and Sammy and Mark
Knocking 'em out of the old ball park
Mark and Sammy and Sammy and Mark
I need another one from you.

New year's day was warm this year
How beautiful did our future then appear
How quickly it turns, how fragile our soul
And here's the look, the pitch, the swing
And now it's gone, gone, gone. Chorus.

Someone had a childhood dream,
They'll tell you 'bout
How it slips away unseen
The long I live the less that I know
But I love the sound in that stadium
When you are bound for home. Chorus.

**What makes the great ones anyway
You find your one thing and get up and do it again today
I swear they aren't giving that stuff away.**

**So I find my guitar
And I walk to the light
And I vow to try again
To be the man I'm made to be tonight**

Mark and Sammy and Sammy and Mark
Knocking 'em out of the old ball park
Mark and Sammy and Sammy and Mark
I'm playing this one for you.