

The Concept of “Calling” and its Relevance to the Military Professional Study #3

The Process of “Discovering” One’s Calling

It is the first of all problems for a man to find out what kind of work he is to do in this universe.

—Thomas Carlyle, Scottish philosopher (1795-1881)

“Grownups” frequently ask children, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Someone recently quipped that adults ask this question because they are looking for good ideas! But this question is not unique to adult-child conversations. Writer Cliff Fadiman bemoans, “For most men life is a search for the proper manila envelope in which to get themselves filed.”¹ In military circles, similar sentiments are often expressed, especially by mid-career officers or those nearing retirement: “Some day, I’ll figure out what I want to be when I grow up.” This study begins by contrasting the secular concept of “choosing an occupation” with the biblical concept of calling. The study continues by describing how internal “clues” and external influences can help people discern their secondary calling in the workplace. Finally, the study gives several examples of how callings are confirmed in everyday experience.

Choosing, or Calling?

The secular and biblical worldviews address the quest for purpose in very different ways: as noted earlier, the former encourages people to select a self-fulfilling career; the latter challenges people to discern and embrace their God-given callings. Writer Jo McGowan notes that people typically consider salary, hours, perks, and benefits in choosing a self-fulfilling career; she cautions that these factors are practical, but do not “... guarantee job satisfaction. It is one of those strange ironies of life that the more carefully we look out for our own interests, the less likely it is that our interests will be served.”² Veith notes that “despite what our culture leads us to believe ... we do not choose our vocations. We are called to them. There is a big difference.”³ Veith says he can “choose” to be a pro athlete or an aeronautical engineer—but if he does not have the ability, and no one drafts or hires him, his “choice” makes no difference.⁴ As such, one must consider other influences when attempting to discern a calling.

Internal Clues to Calling

There are many internal “clues” that help reveal one’s callings. Schuurman admits that while the New Testament does not give a “formula” for discerning God’s callings, assessing one’s gifts and abilities is a critical component of the process.⁵ Veith agrees, noting that in part, calling is related to “finding your God-given talents (what you can

¹ Available from www.bornmotivate.com/Vocation.html.

² Jo McGowan, “Job, Career, Vocation: What Works for You?” *U. S. Catholic* 61, no. 9 (1996), 20.

³ Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, 50.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵ Schuurman, *Vocation*, 38. It is beyond the scope of this report to summarize the various means available for such ‘self-assessment.’ The author has found “motivating verbs” tests (closely related to “passion word” exercises) helpful in clarifying his personal callings.

do),” but it is also important to consider “your God-given personality (what fits the person you are).”⁶ Consider two college students who choose to major in nursing. One cannot handle the biology courses; the other sails through the coursework and is hired by a major hospital after passing her nursing board exams, but absolutely hates the work. Since nursing does not match the talents of the first student, and it does not match the personality of the second, nursing is not their calling.

By considering the calling of Saul the Pharisee, Schuurman explains that a Christian’s assessment of their spiritual gifts is important, but “an individual’s natural gifts and existing relations” (e.g., Saul’s intelligence, passion, grasp of the Hebrew Scriptures, standing as a Pharisee, etc.) also inform their callings in society and the Church.⁷ The desires of a person’s heart can also help reveal God’s call. Author and speaker John Eldredge advises people to ask, “What is written in your heart?” and “What makes you come alive?” because “a man’s calling is written on his true heart, and he discovers it when he enters the frontier of his deep desires.”⁸ Veith admits that while vocation is partially a function of one’s makeup, “we cannot know our vocation purely by looking inside ourselves.”⁹ Thus, external factors must also be considered.

External Influences on Calling

Numerous external factors join forces to influence our callings. In response to the popular misconception that God only summons people to specific callings in extraordinary ways, Schuurman cautions, “God rarely speaks directly to a human being from the heavenly throne or a burning bush . . . particular callings are mediated.”¹⁰ That is, says Veith “Since God works through means, He often extends His call through other people, by means of their vocations.”¹¹ Elizabeth Jeffries, professional speaker and author of *The Heart of Leadership*, affirms that “God speaks to us in many ways . . . through other people, through prayer, through writing, through meditation, and through simply hearing the right thing at the right moment.”¹² Jeffries also encourages openness to ideas, noting that reading a Herman Hesse novel paved the way for Robert Greenleaf’s calling to inspire the servant-leadership movement.¹³ Perceiving needs is also part of the process, says Schuurman; when one recognizes a need and “has the abilities for attending to it, that need becomes a spark of God’s calling to him.”¹⁴

Veith discusses other external factors, such as “doors opening and slamming” (i.e., opportunities and circumstances beyond one’s control) and hiring authorities, noting one’s callings are “literally, in the hands of others.”¹⁵ Additionally, Paul Keim, academic

⁶ Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, 52-53.

⁷ Schuurman, *Vocation*, 39.

⁸ John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 206. Scripture is fraught with warnings about the human heart. It is important to note that in this quote, Eldredge is talking about the redeemed heart, animated by the Holy Spirit and filled with desires that honor God.

⁹ Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, 54.

¹⁰ Schuurman, *Vocation*, 37.

¹¹ Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, 55.

¹² Elizabeth Jeffries, "Work as a Calling," in *Insights on Leadership*, ed. Larry C. Spears (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 33.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁴ Schuurman, *Vocation*, 39.

¹⁵ Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, 54-58.

dean at Goshen College in Goshen, IN affirms the importance of mentors in discerning our calling, citing the biblical examples of Eli helping Samuel discern God's call, and Philip similarly helping Nathanael.¹⁶

Evidences of Calling

Just as callings are revealed by internal and external means, callings are also internally and externally confirmed. William Frame, president of Augsburg College in Minneapolis, MN notes that "the most immediately distinguishing aspect of vocation is that of being drawn to an undertaking with a deep sense that 'this is the right work for me!'"¹⁷ Jo McGowan describes the confirmation of her calling to run a school for mentally handicapped children by saying "There is nothing I would rather be doing. I believe that I have discovered the purpose of my existence on earth and I can't imagine a more satisfying situation."¹⁸

Calling is confirmed "from the outside" as well. When Elizabeth Jeffries met an elderly clock repairman after one of her speaking engagements, his calling was evident to her because of his enthusiasm for his work and his "peaceful and centered" demeanor.¹⁹ Sometimes, one can look back and see how God confirmed His call. In describing the sequence of events before and after his calling to found the American Leadership Forum, Joseph Jaworski says "I was experiencing the power of commitment to a higher purpose, discovering what the members of the Scottish Himalayan Expedition discovered—that 'the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too All sorts of things occur to help one that would otherwise never have occurred.'"²⁰

Summary

This study first examined the key difference between the secular and biblical worldviews with respect to work. The former champions career choice; the latter acknowledges a Caller who invites individuals to play their part in His "larger story." Next, we saw how internal "clues" (including special abilities and personality) help one discern their calling. Then we examined external influences on calling, including circumstances and decisions made by people in positions of authority. Finally, we saw examples of how calling is confirmed—in sum, "you'll know it, and others will too!" The next study will explore why the military profession is a calling unlike any other.

Scripture: Romans 12:3-8

Discussion:

Internal: List some of your God-given talents and personality traits.

- What makes you come alive? (Hint: If you had a rich uncle who gave you \$10M with no strings attached, what would you do?)

¹⁶ Paul Keim, "Call Me," *The Christian Century* 120, no. 1 (2003), 16.

¹⁷ William V. Frame, "A President Looks Back 500 Years and Finds His Calling," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 49, no. 2 (2002), B11.

¹⁸ McGowan, "Job, Career, Vocation: What Works for You?", 20.

¹⁹ Jeffries, "Work as a Calling," 29-30.

²⁰ Joseph Jaworski, "Destiny and the Leader," in *Insights on Leadership*, ed. Larry C. Spears (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 262.

The Concept of Calling and its Relevance to the Military Professional - Study #3

- What are your callings in society? in your church?
- If you sense a need in one of your spheres of influence, are you necessarily “called” to meet this need? Why or why not?

External: List some God-given talents and personality traits you see in those around you. How might some of these “markers” reveal God’s calling in their lives?

- Who can help you discover your calling?
- Looking back, what events have happened in your life to verify your calling?

Scott G. Frickenstein, Ph.D., Lt Col, USAF authored these six studies for OCF.
All rights reserved.