

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

Study #1

Introduction

I have been fascinated with the topic of “calling” for more than two decades, and have often been found “interviewing” people regarding how they came to be involved in their line of work. In recent years, through mentoring relationships and personal study, I have learned that “calling” involves much more than one’s occupation. I have also learned that since God is the Caller, and “His thoughts are not our thoughts, nor His ways our ways,” there will always be an element of mystery in calling—and hence the need for faith in contemplating the “way ahead.”

In a similar vein, there are entire books on this topic, and institutes devoted to its study, so I do not remotely pretend to supply “all the answers” here. Nonetheless, I believe this study will help military professionals reflect on the reasons for their service. I am convinced that a better understanding of the concept of calling will have profound implications in the life of the military professional.

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Purpose

Americans are vigorously seeking to understand their purpose in life—that is, to answer the question, “What on earth am I here for?” Theologians are using the concept of calling (also known as vocation) to provide answers to this question. Senior military leaders have recently used the word “calling” in various venues to describe the profession of arms. The purpose of this study is to describe the concept of calling and its relevance to the military professional of the 21st century, preparing to “fight the next war”—especially to the vast majority of American officers who identify themselves as Christians.

To achieve this purpose, this 6-part study is organized as follows.

1. Introduce the subject of “calling.”
2. Distinguish between various terms substituted for “calling” and trace the biblical and historical foundations of the concept of calling, highlighting the impact of the Protestant Reformation.
3. Discuss the process of discovering one’s calling.
4. Verify that the military profession is indeed a calling—in fact, a calling unlike any other.
5. Examine how viewing one’s military service from the standpoint of calling can have profound effects—both personal and professional—especially for commanders and supervisors.
6. Conclude that calling is much more than “being involved in something bigger than yourself”—it is an all-encompassing perspective that can have profound, enriching effects on all facets of a military professional’s life.

Introduction

Before I made you in your mother's womb, I chose you. Before you were born, I set you apart for a special work. —Jeremiah 1:5, NCV

At a recent ceremony in which an Air Force colonel was promoted to the rank of brigadier general, the presiding four-star general remarked, “this is not about more pay—it’s a calling—the chance to be involved in something bigger than oneself.” The flag officer guest speaker at a service’s birthday ball stated, “Of all the various professions, the military is most similar to the clergy, because it’s a calling—it’s not just a job.” The wife of the late astronaut Colonel Rick Husband entitled his biography, *High Calling*.¹ But what exactly is a “calling?” More importantly, why should the concept of calling matter to the military professional of today?

Military professionals and civilians share the human need for a sense of purpose—indeed, of calling—to understand that what they do with their life truly matters. The recent *New York Times* #1 best-seller status of Rick Warren’s *Purpose-Driven Life* and the ensuing sweep of “40 Days of Purpose” campaigns across America testify to this need. Warren’s fall 2004 appearance at a massive Pentagon gathering, a camouflage version of *Purpose-Driven Life*, and “40 Days of Purpose” events at military chapels indicate that military professionals mirror society in this regard. Christian theologians are attempting to meet the groundswell of interest in “purpose” by dusting off the doctrine of calling (also known as vocation).

Numerous books and articles have been written on this subject in the past decade—many of which are referenced in this study—attempting to remove the veil of confusion that has surrounded and continues to surround this topic. Many military professionals and civilians alike, for example, feel that their “line of work” is “second rate”—that only members of the clergy are “called.” Perhaps even more common is the “workaholic” that typifies those who attempt to satisfy their deepest longings by relentlessly pursuing the next “rung on the ladder.” In addition to these misconceptions of vocation, military professionals grapple with how periodic re-assignment—sometimes to billets outside their area of expertise—fits into some “bigger picture.” This struggle intensifies when they face retirement or involuntary separation.

Scripture: Jeremiah 1:5

Discussion:

- What things have you always believed about “calling?”
- Which Bible characters do you believe were called?
- Find several in the Bible and discuss the circumstances of their callings.

¹ Evelyn Husband and Donna VanLiere, *High Calling: The Courageous Life and Faith of Space Shuttle Columbia Commander Rick Husband* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003).

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