

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

Study #2

For you are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. —Ephesians 2:10, NIV

Definitions and Historical Development

To the “man on the street,” the word “calling” conveys some blend of the two senses given in typical dictionaries: on the one hand, “a profession or occupation;” on the other hand, “a spiritual summons or impulse to accomplish something.” This blend is often expressed as “being involved in something bigger than oneself.” Also, many frequently equate calling with “career” or “job,” but these words do not fully capture the depth and breadth of calling. To clarify these and other common misconceptions, this section begins by defining key terms that will be used throughout the remainder of this study, thereby illustrating what calling is and is not. The section then summarizes the development and distortion of the concept of calling from biblical and classical times up to the present day, including discussions of the medieval and Reformation eras.

Definitions

Numerous terms are often used interchangeably with “calling” in contemporary society, but only one is truly equivalent. Dr. R. Paul Stevens, professor of applied theology at Regent College in Vancouver, BC, explains that the word *vocation* is based on the Latin *vocatio*, meaning “calling.” “They are the same thing,” he says, “though this is not obvious to the people who use these words.”¹ As such, the words *calling* and *vocation* will be used synonymously in this study. Dr. Gene Veith, author of *God at Work* and founder of the Cranach Institute, an organization devoted to the study of calling, notes that in today’s society, “vocation” has become synonymous with “job,” as in “vocational training.”² Dr. Douglas Schuurman, professor of religion at St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN explains that calling is much more than work: “God not only calls people into a given form of paid work; family relations, friendships, extracurricular commitments—indeed, all significant social relations are places into which God calls us to serve God and neighbor.”³ Dr. Shirley Roels, co-author of *Business Through the Eyes of Faith* and an academic dean at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, MI explains further that “*Vocation* implies a relationship with the one who calls us. Biblically, that caller is the triune God.”⁴ Dr.

¹ R. Paul Stevens, “Calling,” in *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity*, ed. Robert Banks, and Stevens, R. Paul (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1997), 97.

² Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 16. Veith’s treatment of this topic is based primarily on Luther’s theology; in his preface, he describes the book as a summary for lay people of what he learned from Luther and Swedish theologian Gustav Wingren’s *Luther on Vocation*.

³ Douglas J. Schuurman, *Vocation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), xi. Schuurman’s treatment of this topic is much more academic than Veith’s; he also compares Luther’s teachings to Calvin’s, and comments on the diversity among contemporary Christian theologians on the topic.

⁴ Shirley J. Roels, “The Christian Calling to Business Life,” *Theology Today* 60, no. 3 (2003), 358.

Os Guinness, internationally renowned speaker and Senior Fellow of the Trinity Forum, emphatically states, “there can be no calling without a Caller.”⁵ In his classic *The Call*, Guinness defines the overarching concept of calling as “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.”⁶

There are key differences between “calling” as defined above and other related terms. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines “occupation” as “an activity that serves as one’s regular source of livelihood.”⁷ Stevens explains how calling differs from “career” and “job:” “A career is an occupation for which people train and in which people expect to earn their living for most of their working years. A calling is the summons of God to live our whole lives for his glory; a career is part of that but not the whole. A job is work that is simple toil out of necessity.”⁸ As an example, he notes Joseph had a career as a shepherd, a job as Potiphar’s slave, and a calling to be used by God to save the nations of Israel and Egypt. Current researchers define “profession” as “a relatively ‘high status’ occupation whose members apply abstract knowledge in a particular field of endeavor.”⁹ As such, professions are identified by their expertise and the “jurisdiction” in which they apply that expertise.¹⁰

Calling in the Bible

Os Guinness describes what he calls “four essential strands” of calling in the Bible. First, he explains, calling has a straightforward meaning and a relational setting in the Old Testament as when “you ‘call’ someone on the phone, you catch someone’s ear for a season.”¹¹ Second, “to call” in the Old Testament means “to name, and to name means to call into being;” as such, “calling is not only a matter of being and doing what we are but also of becoming what we are not yet but are called by God to be.”¹² Schuurman explains how these two strands are related: “in the Bible, one’s name frequently sums up the divinely given purpose or identity to which God calls that person.”¹³ Third, calling in the New Testament is virtually synonymous with salvation: “God’s calling people to Himself as followers of Christ.”¹⁴ Guinness notes that *ecclesia*, the Greek word for church, means “called-out ones.”¹⁵ Fourth, calling

⁵ Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2003), ix. Guinness’s classic book on calling is written as an in-depth devotional (complete with study guide), and also serves as an excellent reference manual on the subject.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷ Pamela B. DeVinne, et al, ed., *American Heritage Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 860.

⁸ Stevens, "Calling," 104.

⁹ James Burk, "Expertise, Jurisdiction, and Legitimacy of the Military Profession," in *The Future of the Army Profession*, ed. Lloyd J. Matthews (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 21.

¹⁰ Don M. and Watkins Snider, Gayle L., "Introduction," in *The Future of the Army Profession*, ed. Lloyd J. Matthews (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 7.

¹¹ Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*, 29.

¹² *Ibid.*, 29-30.

¹³ Schuurman, *Vocation*, 18.

¹⁴ Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*, 30.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

in the New Testament means to live under the lordship of Christ: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.”¹⁶

The last two strands of the biblical meaning of calling, Guinness explains, are the basis for what theologians later referred to as the “primary” (or “general”) calling and “secondary” (or “specific”) callings. “First and foremost,” he says, “we are called to Someone (God);” then, we are called to “something (such as motherhood, politics, or teaching) or to somewhere (such as the inner city or Outer Mongolia).”¹⁷ That is, one’s primary calling is to *be* God’s own; their secondary callings (note plural) include everything they *do* in response to their primary calling. The remainder of this study will focus on secondary callings, though by no means intending to minimize the importance of the primary calling. Schuurman explains that the Bible refers to God’s general calling much more frequently than His specific callings.¹⁸ Nonetheless, the Bible contains many examples of God calling individuals to specific tasks. For example, God personally called someone to craft sacred items for the Hebrew tabernacle: “I have called by name Bezalel ... and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs.”¹⁹ The ninth chapter Acts describes Saul’s primary calling and his secondary calling to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Schuurman describes many other instances where God calls individuals to serve His people in specific ways.²⁰ He then exegetes several passages to demonstrate that the Bible also validates secondary callings outside the context of Israel or the Church, concluding that “all defining spheres of social life are ... ‘callings’ assigned by the providence of God.”²¹

Calling in the Classical and Medieval Eras

While the biblical perspective emphasizes “being” (God’s own) as the basis for “doing” (everything for God’s glory), the Greek mindset lies in stark contrast. Nonetheless, calling was not completely ignored in the classical era. Gilbert Meilaender, Professor of Christian Ethics at Valparaiso University in Valparaiso, IN, contends that since the word “vocation” is derived from Latin, the concept has “other important roots in Western culture.”²² In his article “Divine Summons,” for example, he argues that Vergil’s *Aeneid* is “among other things, a poem about vocation.” Aeneas, destined to found Rome, is “the man / whom heaven calls.”²³

But viewing one’s life work as a response to a divine summons was the exception, not the norm, in Vergil’s day and age. Adriano Tilgher notes that “to the Greeks, work was a curse and nothing else.”²⁴ Dr. Lee Hardy, professor of philosophy at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, MI explains: work was simply a requirement for survival, part of the “endless cycle of activity forced upon us by embodied

¹⁶ Colossians 3:23, NIV.

¹⁷ Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*, 31.

¹⁸ Schuurman, *Vocation*, 17.

¹⁹ Exodus 31: 2-4, RSV.

²⁰ Schuurman, *Vocation*, 31.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 33-37.

²² Gilbert Meilaender, "Divine Summons," *Christian Century* 117, no. 30 (2000), 1110.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Quoted in Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 7.

existence.”²⁵ The Greeks carried this idea a step further, thereby initiating a duality that still informs contemporary thinking: a life of leisure philosophizing was seen as the highest good for man, the “rational animal,” while practical, physical activities were seen as “impediments” to thinking.²⁶

Greek dualism continued to wield its influence by dividing the world into vocational “haves” and “have nots.” In A.D. 312, Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, argued that there were two ways of life: the “perfect” and the “permitted.” The former was spiritual and contemplative and “reserved for priests, monks, and nuns;” the latter was secular and “open to such tasks as soldiering, governing, farming, trading, and raising families.”²⁷ Later theologians including Augustine and Thomas Aquinas also relegated the “active life (*viva activa*)” to second place behind the “contemplative life (*viva contemplativa*).”²⁸ Having a calling during the Middle Ages, Veith explains, meant being a priest, monk, or nun; “the ordinary occupations of life—being a peasant farmer or kitchen maid, making tools or clothing, being a soldier or even king—were acknowledged as necessary but worldly.... Even marriage and parenthood ... were seen as encumbrances to the religious life.”²⁹

The Impact of the Reformation on the Concept of Calling

The Reformers, led primarily by Martin Luther and John Calvin in 16th century Europe, debunked the monastic “the best and the rest” view of vocation and broadened the concept from the Catholic emphasis on spiritual activities. The Reformation arose because such men were convinced that the Church had slipped from its scriptural foundations. Luther vigorously opposed the prevailing ecclesiastical misunderstanding that “in order to serve God fully, a person should leave his or her previous way of life and become a member of the priesthood.”³⁰ Reformers did not lessen the importance of clerics, but taught that the vocations of “lay people” also had their own holy “responsibilities, authority, and blessings,” says Veith.³¹ Their teaching, Schuurman explains, “rejected the church/world dichotomy prevalent in their day; indeed, they saw an inherent dignity in everyday activities.”³² Veith elaborates on the Reformers’ extension of the ecclesiastical concept of calling: “Luther goes so far as to say that vocation is a mask of God. That is, God hides Himself in the workplace, the family, the Church, and the seemingly secular society. To speak of God being hidden is a way of describing His presence, as when a child hiding in the room is there, just not seen.”³³ From this perspective, then, God provides healing *through* those in the medical field, teaching through pastors and educators, protection *through* the military and police forces, pleasure *through* musicians and artists, and so on.³⁴

²⁵ Ibid., 7.

²⁶ Ibid., 11-16.

²⁷ Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*, 32.

²⁸ Ibid., 33.

²⁹ Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, 18.

³⁰ Stevens, “Calling,” 98.

³¹ Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, 18.

³² Schuurman, *Vocation*, 6.

³³ Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, 24. Luther’s concept of an active, “hidden” God should not to be confused with the deistic concept of a “hands off” God.

³⁴ Ibid., 25.

Calling in Modern Times

In the centuries since the Reformation, the concept of calling gradually faded as the secularist worldview gained prominence. In fact, Stevens characterizes the present day as a “post-vocational society.”³⁵ Roels laments, “Sadly, Luther’s and Calvin’s vision ... lost primacy in the centuries that followed.”³⁶ Their teaching on “divinely derived vocation,” Roels explains, was eclipsed by the concept of “career.” The word “career,” she elaborates, gradually transformed in meaning from its Latin origin of a “course for chariots” to the French for “giving the horse ... an open field in which [it] could run freely” to, analogously, “self-chosen occupations for which people trained and progressed on their own initiative.”³⁷ One reason for the marginalization of vocation is that the modern worldview escorted the Caller off the stage of everyday life. Veith states, “One of the consequences of ‘modernity,’ that secularizing frame of mind that has been dominant in the culture from the Enlightenment to the last century, has been to drain any trace of God—even any trace of meaning—from the objective world.”³⁸ “Certainly,” he admits, “the Enlightenment explained how rain clouds form, but it is still God who makes it rain. He works through means—the natural processes—that He created.”³⁹ In this period, God’s work “in the so-called secular world” through the means of vocation was largely forgotten; people “went about their worldly occupations but did not see them as being related to ... their faith.”⁴⁰ Another reason for the loss of a sense of vocation, Schuurman adds, is the “market mentality:” the habit of perceiving everything in terms of economic advance and personal well-being has likewise displaced the religious centers of valuation and perception.”⁴¹

The concept of calling has largely faded over the last several centuries, but imperfect remnants remain. Guinness describes the “Catholic distortion” and the “Protestant distortion;” Stevens discusses “the secular misunderstanding,” a close relative of the latter. “Whereas the Catholic distortion is a spiritual form of dualism, elevating the spiritual at the expense of the secular, the Protestant distortion is a secular form of dualism, elevating the secular at the expense of the spiritual.”⁴² As such, those who tend to feel clerics are “called” while they themselves are not have fallen prey to the Catholic distortion; those who idolize their work have fallen prey to the Protestant distortion. The secularist misunderstanding, Stevens explains, reduces a calling to “the occupation one chooses.”⁴³ In light of society’s orientation toward the pursuit of self-fulfilling careers, he says “the recovery of biblical vocation is desperately needed.”⁴⁴

³⁵ Stevens, “Calling,” 98.

³⁶ Roels, “The Christian Calling to Business Life,” 363.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 363-364.

³⁸ Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, 26.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 28-30.

⁴¹ Schuurman, *Vocation*, 9-10.

⁴² Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*, 38.

⁴³ Stevens, “Calling,” 97.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

Summary

After defining key terms that will be used in this study, components of the biblical concept of calling were then described, and examples of “call stories” from the Bible were given. Aeneas’ “call” was then contrasted against the dualistic Greek view of work. The monastic notion of vocational “haves and have nots” was then developed, followed by a description of the Reformers’ attempts to liberate the laity. This study concluded by describing the effect of secularization and two religious “distortions” on calling. The next study builds on this foundation and describes how one “discovers” their calling.

Scripture: Ephesians 2:10

Discussion:

- Explain how you felt “called” to the military as your profession.
- How are you “called” to serve God and neighbor in the military?
- Share your response to “the Caller.”
- Define the general calling that all Christians receive.
- What are some specifics to which you might be called?
- Discuss the “perfect versus permitted way of life.”
- If God is “hiding” in your profession, what ways might He be working *through* you?

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