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What Do You Think: Are You Called?

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As a teenager, I attended a Christian youth conference, and during one of the services the preacher put an emphasis on "calling out the called." What he meant by that was that he felt certain that there were people in the audience who had been called by God. His purpose in that message was to call out Christians to commit themselves to vocational Christian ministry – pastor, education ministry, music ministry, missionary, and the like. And there were a number of people who responded to this speaker, and who committed themselves to that path – myself included. Later, as I interacted with other people who were attending, some I spoke with said they simply didn't feel that they were called by God into ministry.

At that time in my life, I really didn't think anything of that response. My understanding in those days was the same as theirs – God called some people into ministry and others he simply wanted to use to support "the called."

Since that time, however, I have come to understand the idea of calling in an entirely different way. The preacher was certainly not wrong to "call out the called," as there is a great need for Christian leadership in the church. But I now understand that those other folks who said they were not "called" were completely wrong. Oh, they were not wrong, perhaps, in assessing that God was not calling them into vocational Christian ministry, but the very idea of calling is much broader than my previous understanding of the topic.

Three Kinds of Calling

When we look at what the Bible says about a person's calling, we can actually identify three basic types that God has given to people. This is not a reference to the specific life direction that God gives to individuals, but rather three categories that the concept of calling falls into.

1. Calling to be a Christian

The first kind of calling is the call is to salvation – for a person to enter into a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. For instance, in Acts 17:29-30 when Paul was speaking before the Areopagus, he made this statement: *Therefore, being offspring of God, we should not think that the Divine Being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by man's skill and imagination. Although God overlooked the ignorance of earlier times, He now commands all men everywhere to repent.* This particular calling is not given to any particular category of people, but is one that is given to every single human being. God wants every person to enter into a personal relationship with himself.

2. Calling to Christian Service

The second calling we find in Scripture is the calling to Christian service. This one is given to everyone who answers the first calling – that is, to all believers. We find an explanation of this in Ephesians 4:11-13. There is it written: *So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

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In verse 11, Paul gives a list of church leaders – apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/ teacher. Then in verses 12-13, he gives a job description of these leaders. He says their work is "to equip his people for works of service." The idea is that the work of ministry (Christian service) that is to be done out in the world is not mainly the work of the church leaders, but of believers in general.

Sadly, there is a strong sense among many, if not most, in the Christian community that the work of ministry is primarily in the hands of the professional church leadership. That is simply not the case. The work of ministry in the world is primarily the responsibility of everyday Christians. The work of the leaders is that of preparing them to do their work for Christ out in the world.

3. Calling to Vocational Ministry

The third category of calling is the call to Christian leadership. Out of those who have accepted the second calling, God calls certain ones to be leaders. These people become the professional church leadership in the Christian community. For instance, in Acts 13:1-3 we read: *Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.* As we saw in the section above, the primary work of these church leaders is to equip the believers in the church for the ministry God has called them to do. While this calling is not always associated with a full time vocation, it probably is more often than not.

Exploring the Call to Christian Service

Note that the primary focus of this article has to do with the second calling – the call to Christian service. In order to more fully understand it, though, we need to describe some of the characteristics of this kind of service.

1. Full-Time

The first characteristic of the call to Christian service is that it is a full-time undertaking. The meaning here is simply that you are never off the clock when it comes to living out your Christian faith. For the Christian, there is no such thing as "faith" time vs. "secular" time. Many people who self-identify as Christians truly believe that they express their faith by going to and supporting the church, and in doing good deeds. The other parts of their life (work, socializing, entertainment, etc.) are considered, for them, their own business. That is a false dichotomy.

The essence of the Christian faith is not related to something you do. It is something you become. When people become a Christian, they enter into a personal relationship with the very God of the universe. And when that happens, God does something in the life of the individual that literally transforms them from a sinner to a saint. In doing this, he actually gives the individual a new nature – one that hates sin and loves him and his ways. If that kind of transformation has not taken place, it is doubtful that the individual has ever actually become a Christian in the first place.

2. Not Done as a Vocation

A second characteristic of the call to Christian service is that it is not directly associated with one's vocation. There are some exceptions to this, but these exceptions are very specific.

For instance, those who receive a calling from God to enter vocational ministry do exercise their calling in a

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particular vocation (pastor, evangelist, church staff member, etc.). But even in that situation, it is important to understand this calling apart from the vocation. There are people who serve as pastors, evangelists, and other ministry vocations who are not faithful in living out this calling to Christian service. They simply do their work to make sure the church organization and programs continue, but never share a witness for Christ or otherwise build up the body of Christ by discipling other believers. A person called into vocational Christian ministry does their ministry primarily through the church organization, but this kind of calling is a distinct personal service that is a spiritual, as opposed to a material, expression.

Another nuanced situation consists of those who do bi-vocational ministry – they serve as a professional church worker while also working to support themselves in a secular vocation. We actually see an example of this in the Bible as the apostle Paul worked as a Christian missionary while supporting himself as a tent-maker. Here, too, we must be careful to distinguish this calling from the vocational title.

The call to Christian service is not exercised as a vocation. It may be exercised through one's vocation, but is not directly associated with the vocation itself. The large majority of people who have received this call exercise the calling from the platform of some non-church vocation (remember, this is a calling God has extended to every person who has received Christ).

What Is Necessary to Prepare for the Calling to Christian Service?

So in fulfilling the calling to Christian service, exactly what is involved? It is, obviously, impossible for most people to get the kind of theological training most pastors and other vocational ministers get. Most don't have the

opportunity to go to a Bible school or theological seminary. So how, exactly, is this supposed to play out?

1. *Accepting the Call*

The first thing that must happen is that a person must accept the call. God never forces himself on anyone. Entering into a personal relationship with him is done by a personal decision. Likewise, the decision to obediently follow his leading, in every area of life, is also done by the individual based on a personal decision to do so. As such, it is an intentional step. Individuals must recognize that God has called, and be willing to accept it before he can do more through them.

2. *Identifying Your Platform*

Once the decision is made to be obedient in this way, individuals must discern specifically how God wants them to carry out his purpose. While the fact of a calling by God is common to everyone, the means for carrying it out in daily life is specific to the individual. God has a way that he wants you to express your faith in the world. You have your own specific personality, talents, and gifts, as well as your own unique circle of friends and acquaintances. As such, he gives specific direction to every believer concerning things such as vocational choice, choice of a mate, and how to steward your money, time, talents, and other resources. It is within the realm of an individual's personal relationship with God that he gives guidance concerning these things, in order to use persons to accomplish his will in the world.

3. *Training for Ministry*

As was briefly mentioned above, most people do not have the luxury of attending a theological school in order to get in-depth training about how to live out their faith in the world. But God has not left us without recourse. Earlier we looked at Ephesians 4:11-13, and in that section we noted that God has given gifts to the church.

Those gifts are persons whom he has called into church leadership for the specific purpose of equipping the believing members of the church in the matters they need to know to accomplish ministry in the world.

Obviously, some churches are better at doing this than others, but the opportunity is there for all who are willing to take advantage of it. Additionally, the possibilities are not left only to the church. Particularly in our day, resources abound that allow individuals to take initiative in becoming equipped for the ministry God has called them to. All that is left is for individual believers to discern God's leading, then put out the personal effort to become equipped.

You Are Called!

As we consider why the information in this article is important, we can quickly see that there are some very profound implications to all of this. It has implications both for how we think and what we do.

As far as how we think, this gets right down to the very core of our motivations for living the way we do. If we truly believe we have been called by God for service, then that must be the most important thing that guides our lives. The purpose for what we do is not to serve self and act in self interest, but to build up the body of Christ. Our focus in life is not to make more money, climb the corporate ladder, enjoy great adventures, or become more famous, though any of these things are certainly possible as we live life. But if any of these things do happen, they should not be an end in themselves. Rather, they should happen in the course of fulfilling the calling God has placed on our lives.

Of course, building up the body of Christ certainly involves helping and serving those who are believers, but it also extends well beyond that. God also desires that we reach out to those who don't know him, and serve them in their need in order to point them toward faith in Christ.

There are also implications as it relates to the various actions we take in life. These implications reach well beyond any particular activities we may engage.

For instance, we might work day in and day out to put food on our table, help our company succeed, and accomplish things for society. There is nothing wrong with any of these things, but they are not our primary calling from God. They are only a means, or platform, for doing the real focus of our lives – the work of ministry. We should do them well to be a good witness for Christ, but all the while we must keep in focus the greater calling.

Another part of life we often engage is entertainment. Whether it involves playing a sport, watching TV, movies, or plays, going on vacation, or any other activity, these are also expressions of our calling. For instance, going to places and participating in activities that involve immoral activity will hurt your witness and reflect badly on your calling. Refreshing yourself with entertainment can be a very good thing, but it, too, should be used as a means of fulfilling God's calling on your life.

One other area of life that expresses this thought is retirement. We may retire from our secular profession, but we never retire from our calling. Our calling is an expression of our very lives, and we are to live out that

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calling until the end. We may do it from a different platform, but we never step away from our calling to build up the body of Christ.

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you have been called into full-time Christian ministry. As a faithful believer in Christ, it is critical to explore the implications of how that should look in your life day after day.