



Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Laborers

CALLING ALL SENIORS! • Kelly Madden

People have a God-given desire for significance. Students graduating to the real world, especially, want to live lives of purpose and impact and meaning. Only the biblical concept of calling can provide these.

“Calling” is used in several ways in the Bible. We can group these into two categories for the Christian: primary calling and secondary calling.

Our primary, or general, calling is our relationship to God. We are called to Christ, above all. Your first calling is to know Him and love him and find deep joy and satisfaction in Him. To be called to Christ means that we are:

- Called out of darkness into light (1 Peter 2:9)
- Called to repentance (Acts 2:38-39)
- Called by the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:14)
- Called into fellowship with Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:9)
- Called into the body of Christ (Colossians 3:15)
- Called into his kingdom (1 Thessalonians 2:12)
- Called to eternal life (1 Timothy 6:12; Hebrews 9:15)
- Called to be saints (1 Corinthians 1:2)
- Called to glory (Romans 8:30)

This is the heart of our calling. We are called to Christ. Without this primary understanding, “calling” makes no sense. The word “vocation” has the same basic background and meaning in European languages, and it has moved even farther from its origins. But you cannot have a calling without a Caller. So when people use the word “calling” to describe some part of their lives without acknowledging God, they are trying to find meaning and mystery without any basis other than their own feelings.

It’s not about us. It’s about Him. People seeking significance for their lives put an impossible burden on themselves when they try to build their identity from their own choices and intuitions. We just do not have the resources to give our lives purpose. Thank God, He has a plan! Those who turn from their arrogant independence—to Him—can relax. They can concentrate on responding to his voice rather than trying to create their own sense of meaning for the universe.



Our secondary calling, or specific calling, relates to our particular place in the world. You cannot have a calling without a Caller, and you cannot be called without a specific calling. We are humans, not angels, or concepts. We have bodies, families, histories, national and ethnic backgrounds. We are born in a place and time, live in a place and time, and will die somewhere on a specific date. We will be resurrected in bodies. This situation is the context of His calling to us. God calls us to Himself in a set of circumstances. These circumstances, and how He wants us to work with them, are our secondary calling.

The Corinthian Christians had a misconception of the Christian life seen throughout church history. They wanted to identify the ideal Christian life with some special status. In their case, the issues were apparently marriage, circumcision, and slavery. They thought some circumstances—being single, circumcised, or free—put you on a higher spiritual plane. Paul says “No.” But in his answer, he spells out a greater principle: “Each one should remain in the situation [literally, “calling”] which he was in when God called him.” (1 Corinthians 7:20)

In this passage, the two senses of calling are used together. God “called” us to Himself in a particular situation or “calling” and we should not abandon it. Paul is not saying that our social position or caste is a permanent state. Your secondary calling will change and evolve as you walk with the Lord and He moves in your life and in the world around you. This is especially true in the modern world. The Bible also denounces social oppression. This same passage encourages us to improve our condition if we can. Slaves, for example, should gain their freedom, if possible (v. 21). There is no ground here for “keeping someone in his place.”

Rather, Paul means that our abilities, spiritual gifts, experiences, personal history, desires, family background, and social surroundings are all part of our calling. In other words, an essential aspect of your calling in life is where God has put you. The circumstances of your life are no accident. God’s sovereignty and providence have uniquely positioned you to play a redemptive role in the world.

From this we can draw some other conclusions concerning our calling.

Your calling or assignment in life is much more than your work, and much, much more than paid employment. Your job is one aspect of your calling, an important aspect, but only one aspect. Your job is not the sum total of your calling, contrary to the claims of our culture. And if you are between jobs, or a stay-at-home mom, or disabled, you still have a calling.

In reality, we all have multiple callings: as a family member, a professional, a member in a local community of believers, a citizen, and so forth.

Returning to First Corinthians 7, Paul is saying something equally important: You do not usually have to leave your circumstances to fulfill God’s calling. As long as they do not violate God’s laws, the normal Christian life can be lived in any set of circumstances. You do not have to be a pastor or a missionary or an evangelist to fulfill your calling. “Full-time” Christian service—as if there were part-time Christians—is not an ideal. The Bible says nothing about a “higher” calling, or superior calling, for ministers. It is another calling and a vitally needed calling, but not a better calling.

Christ has called some people as ministers of His Word: apostles, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. The calling of these people is a calling out of the normal circumstances of their lives. It is an exceptional calling, an unusual calling. To many people Christ said, “Go home and tell what God has done for you.” To a few he said, “Leave your nets and follow me.”

The calling of the ministry of the Word is not the normal Christian life. It is a life of service to the other members of the body, to enable them to live the normal Christian life where they are. The notion of “professional Christian ministry” is not a concept we see in the New Testament. People were called by God to be evangelists, teachers, apostles, pastors, and so forth. And they usually gained their livelihood from Christians supporting them in this calling. But the ministry was part of their calling—whatever the source of their income.



Because the harvest is great and God wants us to pray for workers, the staff of Campus Crusade should challenge every disciple of Christ under our influence, to consider joining us, offering themselves to God for vocational service. But the Scriptures, church history, and common sense tell us that most believers are not called to serve Christ as evangelists, missionaries, and so forth. All Christians should ask whether God has a particular call on our lives to administer His Word to others. But the full-time ministry of the Word is not the norm, in fact, or in design.

The church has often viewed paid ministers as “the real Christians” and minimized the spiritual importance of the laity. This is a profound error in thought. It produces equally serious errors in practice. The greatest practical problem may be that that it tends to absolve average Christians of their own sense of calling and responsibility: “We hire preachers and missionaries to do that spiritual stuff.” This attitude is irresponsible. But many ministers subtly encourage it.

The right attitude toward calling does not waive the responsibilities of the layperson or of the minister of the Word, but heightens the necessity of each, and their interdependence. Lay people need those devoted to the ministry of the Word in order to know better what God expects of them. Ministers need lay people to live out the Word in the world.

Our primary calling is only an idea, unless it has concrete application to our lives. In other words, the primary calling has to be lived out in the secondary calling. But our secondary calling must find its true purpose in our primary calling. It’s all about Him. Both are needed: He is Lord of all, and every last detail of our lives can bring Him glory.

We can sum up with this definition of calling from Os Guinness:

“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.”

For further reading:

Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (W Publishing Group, 1998)

Paul Helm, *The Callings: The Gospel in the World* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987.)

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