

## Understanding and Accepting My Call

*Psalm 139:13-16 For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb. 14 I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well. 15 My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. 16 Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, The days fashioned for me, When as yet there were none of them.*

At their very beginning, both Judaism and the Christian faith begin with a call to break and a call to be different, whatever the cost. The first recorded call in the Bible begins with some of the most decisive words in all history. It was uttered to Abram, later Abraham, the command "Go from your country, your people and your father's household" (Gen. 12:1).

Genesis 12:1 Now Jehovah said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee: 2 and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing: 3 and I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse: and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

That command to leave was neither accidental nor temporary. The call of God required of Abraham a radical departure, and it always requires of us a break from anything and everything that invites us to conform to surrounding society, and therefore clashes with the goals and requirements that God has in mind for each of us and for humanity.

God's call to Abraham was anything but negative. Abraham was not called to asceticism, to a drastic renunciation of the world in the manner of Hindu and Buddhist holy men, or even to be a world-denying Christian monk. The call was positive, but before Abraham heard the positive word, he heard the negative. To reach the blessings, Abraham had to make the break. To enter the promised land, he had to leave Haran.

To gain the three-fold benefits, children, land, and an influence on all humanity, he was called to part company decisively with three things: country, culture, and kin.

The equivalent for us would be the social forces of one's homeland, hometown, and immediate family.

God's call to Abraham was to a major reversal of the course of human history after the exile from Eden, and that required a decisive and radical break from the way things were.

Through this call to break, and the radical reversal it represented, Abraham was to set out on a journey that broke with the three primary forces that shaped who people were, and who we are today, all out of faithfulness to God's call and its quite different vision of life.

At a time when exile from home was often viewed as a judgment worse than death, Abraham followed God's call and lived his life as what Augustine later called a "resident alien" in the world.

The way you find out what God wants you to do with your life is to discover how He shaped you. Architects have a phrase that goes like this: form follows function

"No one expects to attain to the height of learning, or arts, or power, or wealth, or military glory, without vigorous resolution, and strenuous diligence, and steady perseverance. Yet we expect to be Christians without labour, study, or inquiry. This is the more preposterous, because Christianity is a revelation from God, and not the invention of man, discovering to us new relations, with their correspondent duties; containing also doctrines, motives, and precepts peculiar to itself; we cannot reasonably expect to become proficient in it by the accidental intercourses of life, as one might learn insensibly the maxims of worldly policy, or a scheme of mere morals." William Wilberforce Member of Parliament, who was the leader in abolishing the slave trade.

### **The "Catholic distortion" and the "Protestant distortion."**

The Catholic distortion. The truth of calling means that for followers of Christ, "everyone, everywhere, and in everything" lives the whole of life as a response to God's call. Yet this holistic character of calling has often been distorted to become a form of dualism that elevates the spiritual at the expense of the secular. This distortion may be called the "Catholic distortion" because it rose in the Catholic era and is the majority position in the Catholic tradition.

Protestants, however, cannot afford to be smug. For one thing, countless Protestants have succumbed to the Catholic distortion.

the fallacy of the contemporary Protestant term full-time Christian service, as if those not working for churches or Christian organizations are only part-time in the service of Christ. This is a form of dualism in a secular direction that not only elevates the secular at the expense of the spiritual but also cuts it off from the spiritual altogether.

Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea argues that Christ gave "two ways of life" to his church. One is the "perfect life"; the other is "permitted." The perfect life is spiritual, dedicated to contemplation, and reserved for priests, monks, and nuns; the permitted life is secular, dedicated to action, and open to such tasks as soldiering, governing, farming, trading, and raising families.

The Catholic distortion created a double standard in faith that in turn produced an important irony. Monasticism began with a reforming mission—it sought to remind an increasingly

secularized church that it was still possible to follow the radical way of life required by the gospel. But it finished with a relaxing effect—the double standard reserved the radical way for the specialists (the aristocrats of the soul) and let everyone else off the hook

there were exceptions to this distortion even in the Middle Ages. But for most people in Christendom in medieval times, the term calling was reserved for priests, monks, and nuns. Everyone else just had “work.”

Into that long-established, rigidly hierarchical, and spiritually aristocratic world, Martin Luther’s *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* exploded like a thunderclap in 1520.

Luther wrote: “The works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, but that all works are measured before God by faith alone. . . . Indeed, the menial housework of a manservant or maidservant is often more acceptable to God than all the fastings and other works of a monk or priest, because the monk or priest lacks faith.”

Others broaden the testing to discover both spiritual and natural gifts, but they divorce the discovery of giftedness from the worship and listening that is essential to calling—thus deepening the Protestant distortion further. The result is a heightened awareness of giftedness, but the emphasis on giftedness leads toward selfishness rather than stewardship.

### **But who are we? And what is our destiny?**

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.

In the Puritan era became a full-grown distortion. Slowly such words as *work*, *trade*, *employment*, and *occupation* came to be used interchangeably with *calling* and *vocation*. As this happened, the guidelines for callings shifted; instead of being directed by the commands of God, they were seen as directed by duties and roles in society. Eventually the day came when faith and calling were separated completely. The original demand that each Christian should have a calling was boiled down to the demand that each citizen should have a job.

Under the pressure of the modern world, the Protestant distortion is more extreme. It severs the secular from the spiritual altogether and reduces vocation to an alternative word for work.

Work was not only entirely good, but it also was virtually made holy in a crescendo of enthusiasm that was later termed “the Protestant ethic.” “The man who builds a factory builds a temple,” President Coolidge declared. “The man who works there worships there.” “Work,” Henry Ford proclaimed, “is the salvation of the human race, morally, physically, socially.”

### **How is all of this Today**

**We need as followers of Jesus to make sure of our primary calling, that is, answering the personal call that Jesus gives us to follow Him and become his disciple.**

**Then, as followers committed to Jesus, we need to work out our secondary calling, that is, that work which we are gifted and enabled to do, whether it big ministry, or our secular work. Both of those come out of our faith commitment to Christ.**

**S.H.A.P.E.** is an acronym Rick Warren developed years ago to explain the five elements that help determine what a person's ministry should be. He believed that every believer is uniquely shaped for a particular ministry.

**I believe this same concept can help each of us understand our secondary calling.**

**SPIRITUAL GIFTS:** The Bible clearly teaches that God gives every believer certain spiritual gifts to be used in ministry (1 Cor. 12, Rom. 8, Eph. 4).

**HEART:** The Bible uses the term "heart" to represent the center of your motivation, desires, interests, and inclinations. Your heart determines why you say the things you do (Matt. 12:34), why you feel the way you do (Ps. 34:7), and why you act the way you do (Pr. 4:23).

Another word for heart is "passion." There are certain subjects that you feel passionate about and others that you couldn't care less about. Some things turn you on while other things turn you off. That is an expression of your heart.

**ABILITIES:** These are the natural talents that you were born with. Exodus 31:3 gives an example of how God gives people "skill, ability, and knowledge in all kinds of crafts..." in order to accomplish his purposes.

**PERSONALITY:** Your personality will affect how and where you use your spiritual gifts and abilities. For example, two people may have the same gift of evangelism, but if one is introverted and the other is extroverted, that gift will be expressed in different ways.

**EXPERIENCES:** God never wastes an experience. Romans 8:28 reminds us, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Different experiences that can help you understand our calling in service.

- (1) Educational experiences: What were your favorite subjects in school?
- (2) Vocational experiences: What jobs have you enjoyed and achieved results while doing?
- (3) Spiritual experiences: What have been the meaningful or decisive times with God in your life?
- (4) Ministry experiences: How have you served God in the past?

(5) Painful experiences: What are the problems, hurts, and trials that you've learned from?

Your shape was sovereignly determined by God for his purpose, so you shouldn't resent it or reject it. "What right have you, a human being, to cross-examine God? The pot has no right to say to the potter: 'Why did you make me this shape?' Surely a potter can do what he likes with the clay!" Rom. 9:20-21 (JB) Instead of trying to reshape ourselves to be like someone else, we should celebrate the shape God has given to each of us.

### **Will I accept my God given shape?**

Admit that God knew best when he made me this way.

Jeremiah 1:Then said I: "Ah, Lord God! Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a youth."

<sup>7</sup> But the Lord said to me: "Do not say, 'I am a youth,' For you shall go to all to whom I

Exodus 3:11 And Moses said unto God, Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?

In C. S. Lewis's homespun picture, those who still conjure meaning out of calling when they do not believe there is a Caller are as silly as "the woman in the first war who said that if there were a bread shortage it would not bother her house because they always ate toast." If there is no Caller, there are no callings, only work.

### **Jesus is the caller, will we answer?**