

Chapter 2—Calling

Introduction:

Return to the scene in Isaiah 6:1-11. Isaiah beheld the Holy One but did not become dumbfounded. He maintained his senses—even after all the special effects going on would put Steven Spielberg or George Lucas to shame—especially his hearing and his thinking. He demonstrated no sense of losing his mind, rather further transformation of his mind occurred.

The image is as if God looked out over the crowd gathered in the Temple, but perhaps a re-creation of the royal court of Uzziah, though with distinctly heavenly attributes, surveying possible responses to the statement: “Whom will I send? Who will go for us?” Two questions almost out of context mixing “I” and “us”—a coalition, a collaborative effort. To the questions, Isaiah immediately responded with “Here am I, send me.”

The order is (1) worship and (2) expectation, query for response; a calling out and a sending out. The content for Isaiah is that of describing life for the Hebrews if they keep on going the directions they are headed. Prophecy—both in the foretelling and forthtelling modes—is Isaiah’s vocation henceforward.

Other incidences of calling run through the Old and New Testaments. This one juxtaposes the primary elements as compactly and vividly as any, though. Truly, one way to understand that one has worshipped is that things change, expectations upon one become more vivid, and directions for life become plainer.

With the Integrity Wheel in mind—visualize worship, again, as the hub, and the spoke that is set at about 4 o’clock, if the wheel were a clock, is calling. One of the effects of not being the same after worship is that a direction, a passion, a calling forward comes upon one’s realizations.

Without a doubt I have a clearer sense of calling now than I did years ago. I can conjure up struggling with the idea of calling about the time I was in the eighth grade. I didn’t feel as if I had anyone I could

talk to about the matter. I did ask an uncle who was a pastor, “What do you do as a preacher, a pastor?” His reply, which provided no help was, “Well more than what they pay me for?”

A Framework for Calling

Some of the framework I have now for talking about calling began to come together about my second year of teaching in a graduate theological education context. One day, in the curriculum’s basic Christian Ethics course I was talking about money, vocation, calling. A student sitting on the front row held up his hand and asked, “Do you mind talking about your own sense of calling?” My response was, “No, not at all. Don’t you get that here in your other classes?” His reply, “No. No one talks about calling.” I have to admit feeling a level of puzzlement with that reply.

So, I began an improvisational recounting from my eighth grade thinking on. How in the church context in which I was reared there was often related respective preachers’ sense of call to preach (and that was the only ministerial calling ever mentioned). Those calls were often quite dramatic in the retelling. As well, I related how I felt more deeply about pursuing theological education than I did through those years thinking about whether I was called to preach or not when I made that sense of calling public at a summer revival meeting between my junior and senior years in high school. In other words, calling has a process dimension about it; not so much a once and done impression.

Remarkably, as people came by after that summer revival service giving me words of encouragement, one of the deacons (my favorite I have to say) paused to say, “Some of us have seen this coming, but were afraid to say anything so as not to frustrate your thinking about it.” Inside, I thought, “Oh, why didn’t you say something. I really could have used some clarity on these questions I’ve had. How do I know, for sure, for instance?”

I brought my sense of calling up to that time for those students in class—the whole presentation was probably about 35 minutes. By then, I noticed that one of those rare times struck. I had every eye and ear

in the room caught. It was a little unnerving. But, I realized, I had taken up something, giving my authentic story, about something probably everybody in the class identified with. They had their own struggles, even in a graduate theological education context.

From then on, every semester, I worked that session of calling in. And, every time, I had their full attention. In fact, I noticed from then on how many of the office visits with students began with conversation about this or that assignment, but moved to a facet of calling. I probably did some of my best teaching in those office visits or the hall conversations when an impromptu question started and ended with calling. Those students took the matter quite seriously, but so much of the curriculum, the faculty, had assumed they had all the ideas about calling pulled together.

My sense is that every generation has its own struggles with regard to calling. The matter of calling was one of the main ingredients of the Reformation. Who can be a minister? Is “calling” only to the ministry? Can’t people who are not in the ministry project a calling with theological import? Does every calling have the same objective?

Particularly the movement toward thinking about lay people experiencing calling was a push back against what had developed over several centuries that which is called the “clerical paradigm.” The dynamic is still alive and well among us in the 21st Century—empowered by clergy and those not clergy. And, the term is accurate, what is at stake and used and abused is power of an office, a title, a rank.

Back to Isaiah, the question from God “Who will go for us?” was not just for males. By this time, there were already women who had exhibited the characteristics of being called by God. The exercise of finding those characters—for example, Huldah, Miriam, Deborah, the Proverbs 31 woman—in the Old Testament, and then Mary, Anna, Pricilla, Phoebe, probably half of the persons named in Romans 16 and others--was enlightening for particularly males in my classes. The enlightenment is still happening, too slowly, but happening. Who, indeed?

The Church and Calling

There is need for the Church to recover its accountability regarding “calling out the called.” For most Protestants, the called would include all those who have made a profession of faith. And, that profession is defined as fulfilling a call to salvation and service—thus, the ingredient of living into whatever vocation is pursued with Christian character at the core of an individual’s lifestyle.

More specifically, what about the accountability regarding “calling out the called” to vocational ministry?

Though only one piece of the larger measuring of the demographics, the numbers of students involved in theological education is in decline, and has been for several years. Financial need is one factor— theological education can be expensive. But, there are declining numbers of those entering such programs, as well, because congregations and congregational leaders are not cultivating interest in ministerial vocations. This cultivation includes inviting potential students to consider ministry as a vocational choice, and also, even more importantly, a walking alongside these individuals giving them a view of what being a minister can entail. Too, congregations should support the principle from Paul to congregations of the First Century—pastors’ main job was, and now is, that of “equipping the saints.”

The declining numbers is reflective of those who are aware of the distrust in the American culture of those in ministry. The #metoo and #churchmovements have opened the windows to the public of harassment and abuse by ministers. The data and experiences constitute negative marketing for persons to become ministers. Who wants to be connected to a vocation which is mistrusted?

The idea of calling into ministerial vocation has centuries old background. Certainly, not just Isaiah, but others in the Old Testament and New Testament illustrate their sense of following God’s impressions for them. It would be worth spending some time reviewing the biblical characters and how they became spokespersons for God in their cultural contexts. Sometimes little attention is given to these characters and their calling experiences. If any is given, it may come off as rather idealized and, in some ways, more of a put off for contemporary persons.

A study of Church history, perhaps with specific characters in mind, will reveal the manner in which Christians through the centuries have responded to calling. These can serve as examples with which one can compare one's experience.

Calling, Imagination, and Faith

Isaiah 6 evokes all sorts of images in contemporary minds. Images which stretch the imagination. But, that could be the reason for how that passage was put together. How does one perceive calling? Could it be that the key to that question lies within our imaginations, how our imaginations are informed and formed? A suggestion is that we investigate the matters of how one instigates and assesses her/his imagination toward understanding one's calling. Too often, people consider imagination to be connected to fantasy. Those individuals will be surprised, then, when they discover that imagination and faith spring from the same well spring in Scripture.

A helpful resource for identifying calling and its impact in, through, and with our imagination is a set of three principles articulated several years ago in a book by Findley Edge, The Greening of the Church, 1971, pp. 140-42. The overall intent of the book was to give feet to the notion of the perennial need of the Church to be revitalized, re-invigorated, relevant to its culture in meaningful ways. That notion required a continuous flow of minister types into the culture. Edge's guidelines for recognizing calling could be considered somewhat idealistic, but yet are good starting points for one moving deeper and more broadly into considering the reality of realizing a calling into ministry.

Edge's three principles paraphrased: (1) When one discovers her/his calling to a special ministry, that one has a feeling of "Eureka!"; (2) When one discovers her/his calling he/she dreams about it; (3) When one discovers her/his calling that person cannot help but talk about it.

Quite possibly it will not be a clergy person, but a lay person who can be one of the best advisors for one who is seeking clarity about "am I called?" For, Edge's principles can be absorbed by lay people, as well.

Some ideas, questions, thoughts for rumination which might be helpful in what might be a regular, or irregular, conversation could include these that follow. Or, as in my own case, perhaps these can be helpful questions to ponder on your own as you need.

1. When did you first have a sense you had a thought to the effect you could be a minister, or a sense of direction to invest life into a particular social/community/congregational need?
2. Has that thought come and gone with you, over a period of time? If it does not occur for several days, a few weeks, do you wonder if it has gone, not to return? Does the advice from Gamaliel in Acts, “If this is of God. . .” mean anything for you? Or, what of Jeremiah’s reflection on quitting being a prophet, but he could not. In other words, if it is of God, the sense of calling probably won’t go away. Is there a pattern of associations that bring the calling impression/recognition to you?
3. Have you had some individual model/exemplify for you the role of being a minister that caught your imagination? Can you have conversation with that person?
4. Are you familiar with the lists of gifts of the Spirit to the Church found primarily in those epistles generally aligned with Pauline authorship? Do any of those gifts provide a general reference point for how you might express life?
5. Does your imagination take you in the directions of idealistic living out of being a minister, or have you walked alongside ministers who not only preach, but also invest themselves in myriad circumstances that may or may not seem to fit “pastoral care?”
6. How are your personal relationship skills?
7. Can you take an online personality inventory, e.g. The Enneagram Personality Inventory, the Myers-Briggs, or MMPI-2, so as to have a sense of your personality profile?
8. How do you react to someone who suggests that if you can give your life to anything else but ministry, you need to do that?

9. What are your motivational dynamics for thinking of becoming a minister or any of the several possibilities of following a role in life that deals with theological impact in society?
10. Can you make a list of the fulfilling facets of ministry, but also the facets that are quite challenging?
11. If you have reflected on these questions by yourself, can you now, or at any point have conversation with a respected person or group who can reflect on this sense of calling with you?

Conclusion:

Calling emanates from worship. And, examining and re-examining one's calling will press one to worship. A most interesting reciprocity is in place. As well, the interface of worship and calling will inspire greater sensitivity to what happens in a congregational setting. Also, one will be drawn to broader and deeper study of Scripture, which has its own value toward informing one's perspectives about God. A person's sense of cultural context will heighten as sociological, psychological, and emotional dynamics are realized as more and more a part of wholistic worship and applications to life of that worship. What might be considered by too many people as abstract, subjective dynamics take on energy and substance. This same energy from worship informs and forms the next "spoke" on the Integrity Wheel, heroes and heroines.