

Calling in the Theology of Work

Theology of Work Project, Inc. Paper read by William Messenger

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<http://tifwe.org/resources/calling-in-the-theology-of-work/>

Introduction

When Christians ask about calling, we usually mean: Is God calling me to a particular job, profession or type of work? This is a significant question because the work we do is important to God. If work is important, it makes sense to ask *what* work God wants us to do.

In the Bible, God does indeed call people—some people, at least—to a particular work and gives various kinds of guidance for all people in their work. So, as a preliminary answer, we can say, yes. God does lead people to particular jobs, professions, and types of work. However, in the Bible, the concept of calling goes deeper than any *one* aspect of life, such as work. God calls people to become united with himself in *every* aspect of life. This can only occur as a response to Christ's call to follow him. The calling to follow Christ lies at the root of every other calling. It is important, however, not to confuse a calling to follow Christ with a calling to become a professional church worker. People in every walk of life are called to follow Christ with equal depth and commitment.

After exploring the call to follow Christ, we will explore the calling to particular work in light of many the biblical passages related to calling. We will show how the cooperative work of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—guide and model our work. We will provide links for further theological exploration of calling. Along the way, we will examine related topics such as how to discern God's guidance in work, the community nature of calling, the calling to church versus non-church work, callings to the creative and redemptive work of God beyond just the workplace, the importance of *how* you work at whatever job you have, and the ultimate freedom that Christians enjoy in their work.

Types of God's Callings

The Call to Belong to Christ and Participate in His Redemptive Work in the World

In the Bible, the word *call* is used most often to refer to belonging to Christ and participating in his redemptive work in the world. This sense of calling is especially prominent in the letters of Paul.

including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. (Rom. 1:6)

All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. (Rom. 8:28)

[God] desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Tim. 2:4)

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Cor. 5:17–20)

The calling to belong to Christ goes deeper than the kinds of workplace callings, which is the main focus of this article. For this reason, it is important to start our exploration of calling with the call to follow Jesus. It is a call to a restored relationship with God, with other people, and with the world around us. It encompasses all of a person's being and doing. It reminds us that the call to a *particular* kind of work is secondary to the call to belong to Christ and to participate in his redemption of the world.

In particular, our work must be an integral part of our participation in Christ himself. His work of creation underlies the act of creativity and production in the universe (John 1:1–3). His work of redemption can occur in every workplace through justice, healing, reconciliation, compassion, kindness, humility, and patience (Col. 3:12). Christ's redemptive work is not limited to evangelism but encompasses everything necessary to make the world what God always intended it to be. This redemptive work occurs in harmony with the work of creation, production, and sustenance that God delegated to humanity in the garden of Eden. The Bible does not indicate that the work of redemption has superseded the work of creation. Both continue, and, in general, Christians are commanded to participate in the work of both creation and redemption.

A Direct, Unmistakable Call to Particular Work

With the understanding that the ultimate image of calling in the Bible is the calling to follow Jesus, we are ready to explore callings to particular kinds of work. If by *calling*, we mean a direct, unmistakable command from God to take up a particular task, job, profession, or type of work, then calling is very rare in the Bible. No more than a hundred or so people were called by God in this sense. God called Noah to build the ark. God called Moses and Aaron to their tasks (Ex. 3:4; 28:1). He called prophets such as Samuel (1 Sam. 3:10), Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4–5), Amos (Amos 7:15), and others. He called Abram and Sarah and a few others to undertake journeys or to relocate (which might be taken as a kind of workplace calling). He placed people in political leadership, including Joseph, Gideon, Saul, David, and David's descendants. God chose Bezalel and Oholiab as chief craftsmen for the tabernacle (Ex. 31:1–6). Jesus called the apostles and some other of his disciples (e.g., Mark 3:14–14), and the Holy Spirit called Barnabas and Saul to be missionaries (Acts 13:2). The word *call* is not always used, but the unmistakable direction of God for a particular person to do a particular job is clear in these cases.

Aside from these, very few people in the Bible received an individual call from God. This strongly suggests that a direct calling from God to particular work is also very rare today. If God is calling you directly and unmistakably to particular work, you do not need guidance from an article such as this, except perhaps for the affirmation that, yes, this type of calling does occur in the Bible in rare instances. Therefore, we will not discuss direct, unmistakable, personal calling further, but will instead focus on whether God guides or leads people to particular types of work through less dramatic means.