

God's Calling Plan

So what exactly is a call to ministry?

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There is an old joke—so old, in fact, that it may be unknown to a newer generation and, therefore, recyclable.

A young farmer, standing in his field, observes a peculiar cloud formation. The clouds form the letters G, P, and C, and he thinks them a call from God: *Go preach Christ!*

The farmer rushes to the deacons of his church and insists that he has been called to preach. Respectful of his ardor, they invite him to fill the pulpit.

That Sunday, the sermon is long, tedious, virtually incoherent. When it finally ends, the leaders sit in stunned silence. Finally, a wizened deacon mutters to the would-be preacher, "Seems to me the clouds were saying 'Go plant corn.'"

If it really happened that way, it wouldn't be the first time there's been confusion about what it means to be called into ministry.

The concept of a *call* is one of the most profound of all biblical ideas. The Bible is riddled with stories about calls to men and women who, when summoned to service, went out and marked their generation in a particular way. Such calls had several commonalities.

First, in one way or another, they all originated out of the Godhead. God the Father *called* Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, and Amos (to name a few). Jesus *called* twelve men "to be with him," and then sent them out to disciple the nations. The Holy Spirit *called* Saul and Barnabas and others to apostolic opportunity. No one in the Bible anointed himself or herself.

Second, biblical calls were quite unpredictable. Gideon, for example, responded to his call, "How can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." Why David? Why Jeremiah? Why Simon Peter? And, of all people, why Saul of Tarsus who recollects, "I was a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man?"

When St. Francis was asked why God called him, he said, "God picks the weakest, the smallest, the meanest of men on the face of the earth, and he uses them."

Third, biblical calls usually focus on mind-boggling, seemingly impossible objectives. Build a boat, Noah; lead a nation out of Egypt, Moses; face down a wicked king, Elijah; preach to the Gentiles, Paul. But the call was so compelling that it gave courage to the one called.

Finally, each biblical call was unique. No call seems like any other. The circumstances, the nature, the expectations of the call: all customized. When God wanted a word said or a people led, he mandated a person to make it happen in an unprecedented way.

Calls were not classified ads so that anyone could volunteer. Persons, sometimes strange persons, were selected while others, seemingly more worthy and capable, were not. There was only one Esther, one John the Baptizer. There was only *one* Moses in spite of what Miriam and Aaron dared to think the day they asked, "Hasn't he also spoken through us?"

These not-so-novel observations are worth repeating. For they form a foundation for authoritative ministry in the twenty-first century.

If we have lost our faith in the idea that such calls continue today, then perhaps we have lost touch with the supernatural element that ministry desperately needs. The key questions are simple: *Does God still call men and women as He once did? And do we know how to recognize and implement a call if it should come?*

How God called me

I have lived my life under the discipline of a call. Looking back, the call seems to have emerged in a family conspiracy in which my mother and grandmother prayed fervently that God would raise up a preacher in their family. That apparently was me. How (or why) God merged his choice with the prayers of two women is a mystery to me. But their prayer is part of the story.

In my second year of life, two military aircraft collided over our home and showered fuel and flaming debris over our neighborhood. I was in our backyard in the one place that escaped the falling wreckage. My life's being spared was a mystery, perhaps a miracle. Three years later in a similar situation, I was rescued in a near-drowning incident. Thus the family story: my life had been preserved by God for a purpose only He knew.

"Be very careful," my mother would say. "You dare never say no to God. Should you choose to do anything else but what God calls you to do, you'll be a sad person all of your life." A bit over the top? Perhaps. But, again, that's part of the story.

Throughout childhood and into my teen years, I was romanced by the idea of pastoral life. When other boys dreamed of driving fire trucks and playing professional baseball, I dreamed of preaching the Bible and leading people toward Jesus. A one-time babysitter tells me that, at the age of four, I loved playing "worship service" in which she was the congregant and I was the pastor.

As a teen, I gained a love for words, for public speaking, for leadership. Men and women in ministry told me they saw potential in me for pastoral work. My heart soared when I listened to people challenge us in the direction of Kingdom activity. I could see myself in a pulpit or doing missionary work. Nothing else was quite so interesting.

In college, however, I succumbed to an impulse to join the Air Force and fly jets. I went to the recruiting center for the required physical examination.

"You're color-confused," a doctor said as he examined my eyes. "You can't distinguish certain colors well enough to qualify as a pilot."

As I left the recruiting center, I thought I heard a bit of laughter from Heaven, as if God were saying, "Did you really think you could get away from your call that easily?" My mini-rebellion quashed, I submitted to what seemed to be inevitable—I was destined to serve God.

When I met my wife, Gail, we fell in love quickly and easily because both of us had a similar sense of a desire to serve Jesus in "a full-time way." Soon the call to ministry became more specific, and I realized with the help of others that my "instincts" (gifts?) were those of a pastor—not an administrator or evangelist or missionary.

And now 42 years of adult life have passed, and there has almost never been a time when I have not enjoyed life from a pastoral perspective: being there for people in their tough moments, encouraging them to be strong in the Lord, challenging them to personal growth in Christlikeness, helping them discern *their* calling and giftedness. Even though I no longer have day-to-day responsibility for a congregation, I still function as a pastor.

You could call this a call-story. Every *called* person has one. A call story is a history of "whispered words and events" that capture the soul and make you aware that God is speaking.

For some of us the call-story is dramatic. In one forceful moment, you gain a sense of conviction that God has spoken and directed. You are never again the same after this.

For others, like myself, the call is like a continual dripping: it just beats on you until you capitulate. "Okay. Okay!"

Once you are called, financial security, location, notoriety, applause, and power become increasingly less important. Obedience becomes the primary issue. Let others feel free to build fortunes and empires; the call binds you to surrender yourself to the will of God. I fear this sounds overly pious, but it's been the perspective of called people for centuries.

Does God call everyone?

In my earliest years, it seemed like most call-stories began when someone was aged 13 or 14. Christian camps, vacation Bible schools, missionary rallies were key places where young people were challenged to hear God's call and commit their lives to Christian service.

Perhaps it's just me, but I hear fewer call stories today. I hear less about calls and more about careers, less about God's will for your life and more about recognizing an opportunity. On seminary campuses, I meet fewer students who say, "I'm here because God has called me into ministry," and more who say, "I'm just testing the waters by taking a few courses."

In the 1960s church renewal movement, it became fashionable to say, "All Christians are called." It had a nice ring to it. I, like others, was drawn to the idea and found it believable and motivational. The implication of this teaching, however, is that if all are called, then the notion of a supernatural call—a transaction in which God sovereignly selects some to be evangelists, pastors and teachers (Eph. 4)—was nothing special. Becoming a pastor, then, is no different than deciding to become an airline pilot—anything can be your "calling," and you decide what it is.

That idea led to something very unfortunate. We began to lose an important aspect of Christian leadership. We lost the power that comes when we recognize that God sets apart certain men and women and ordains them to spiritual leadership.

Over time, new words came to dominate our vocabulary. Words like *vision*, *being led*, *gifted*, and *passion*. Less heard is: "God clearly called me."

Perhaps it was convenient to diminish the sense of call because it meant that *all* of us are equal in God's designation, and thus we don't have to follow any other leader when we don't want to. Maybe we fell for the same logic as those leaders in Israel who said to Moses: "You've gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why do you set yourselves up above the Lord's assembly?" The words have a religious ring to them and seem awfully reasonable. Yet, the last time I read the story, those who said such things got themselves swallowed by an earthquake. Go figure!

So are church leaders specially called? Or are we now in some egalitarian place where everyone is called and, therefore, no one is specially called to lead the rest?

I would suggest we be very careful when we fool with this question. Our culture has made it easy to move in the direction of "everyone is called." This move, however, could generate consequences we may soon regret. In this seemingly innocent shift, the Christian movement risks losing the spiritual example of men and women who have exchanged the life of normal human privilege for one that is sacrificial. We also risk walking away from the biblical precedent that God has always selected out certain people, given them unusual authority, and anticipated that they might "suffer for his sake."

A calling is not simply putting together a career in ministry.

Voice recognition

Several things authenticate a call. By that I mean things that convince us that G-P-C really does mean "go preach Christ" and not "go plant corn." A special call generally is the result of three or four things.

1. Heaven does speak! The ways of speaking? Many and varied. But there is a moment of certainty that God has put His hand upon you and nudged you toward a particular people, theme, or function. Amy Carmichael is called to India. Luther is called to preach justification. Graham is called to evangelism.

Mary Slessor, who spent her life in Africa, heard Heaven speak through the death of her hero, David Livingstone. Before he died, he had written, "I direct your attention to Africa. I know that in a few years I shall be cut off in that country which is now open... . Do not let it be shut again. Carry out the work I have begun. I leave it with you."

James Buchan, Slessor's biographer, writes, "Mary read the reports about her hero's death and a ridiculous idea began to come into her mind and to keep returning there as often as she threw it out: she was to follow Livingstone to Africa ... for over a year she tried to forget the idea. But she was not allowed to forget."

2. Confirmation. The genuineness of a call is *usually* (not always but *usually*) confirmed by others who discern the unique work of the Holy Spirit in a particular person.

The action of the prophets and teachers at Antioch who heard the Holy Spirit's call to Saul and Barnabas is a great example. So is the affirming mentorship that Aquilla and Priscilla gave to Apollos.

One of the most delightful call-stories comes from the life of George W. Truett—among America's greatest preachers.

Young Truett was studying law and, occasionally, preaching for a congregation when the pulpit needed filling. One night in a church business meeting, an older man arose and, in part, said, "This church has a duty to perform, and we have waited late and long to get about it. I move, therefore, that this church call a presbytery to ordain George W. Truett to the full work of the gospel ministry." This motion was made and seconded without consulting Truett.

Truett was thunderstruck. He rose to his feet and said, "You have me appalled; you simply have me appalled."

But one person after another stood up and said, "Brother George, we have a deep conviction that you ought to be preaching." He begged them to hold off for six months. They said, "We won't wait six hours. We are called to do this thing now ... we dare not wait ... we must follow our convictions."

Truett recalled, "There I was, against a whole church, against a church profoundly moved. There was not a dry eye in the house—one of the supreme solemn hours in the church's life. I was thrown into the stream, and just had to swim."

I would dare to say—realizing there have been extraordinary exceptions—that a call to ministry is not a call until a portion of the Body of Christ has said it is a call.

3. Giftedness. There are some romantic (and probably true) stories of calls where a person had no apparent capacity for the task of ministry at all. But those are rare. With a call comes giftedness—that mysterious empowerment of capacity and spirit that God visits upon the "call-ee." When such people are in alignment with their call, something powerful happens, and we, the observers, are all left in amazement.

"Go towards the poor," St. Francis heard God say, in his heart, through his friends, from inescapable confrontations with lepers. The Pope tried to make him an administrator, a builder of buildings, a functionary in the hierarchy. But Francis refused, because his instinct was tuned to the poor. And all who had known him as the frivolous son of a middle class cloth dealer marveled at the transformation. Intuitively, he knew just what to do when he engaged the poor.

4. The results. Again there are exceptions, but the hard questions are these. Are people impacted by the person supposedly called? Are they drawn to Jesus? Do they grow in Christlikeness? Are they motivated to greater commitment and vision? These are some of the questions likely to be relevant when a call is assessed.

St. Patrick had a dream. In the dream, Irish people were saying, "We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us." For Patrick it was a call, and he was obedient. He combed the Irish countryside bearing witness to chiefs and kings. An entire nation began its journey to Christian conversion.

To borrow words from Thomas Cahill, the long-term result of Patrick's call was national transformation, and the Irish monks in turn "*saved civilization*."

When Eric Liddell, in *Chariots of Fire*, said to his sister, "When I run, I feel God's pleasure," he put his finger on a hard-to-explain dimension of *call*. When one lives obediently in the center of a call, one feels God's pleasure; one knows joy.

Let us be frank: Men and women have obeyed God's call and become martyrs. Others have undertaken unspeakably difficult and discouraging tasks and barely survived. Some have lived obscure lives in far off corners of the world and have finished the course never feeling that they accomplished anything of measurable value.

There have been others, of course, whose lives have sparkled with spectacular results—who in their preaching, their writing, their organization-building, their ability to envision and empower people have left their mark on church history. What did they all have in common? They *felt* God's pleasure; they had joy. Not a very scientific concept; but a very real experience.

What kept these people going through the difficulties? Only the indelible memory of a moment when they became very sure that Heaven had spoken and they were under divine appointment. They could not run; they could not back away; they could not quit.

Most could never tell you *why* they heard the call. They are the first to admit that they are the chief of sinners (Paul's words), that they are insufficient for the task (also Paul's), and that they have occasionally desired, like Jonah, to run. But the call has prevailed. They understand Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

These are the called people who have, as James put it, a greater responsibility.

And I—through the mysterious kindness of God—have been one of them.