

THE CALLING OF GOD

*Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your **calling** and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, (2 Peter 1:10)*

διὸ μᾶλλον, ἀδελφοί, σπουδάσατε βεβαίαν ὑμῶν τὴν κλήσιν καὶ ἐκλογὴν ποιεῖσθαι· ταῦτα γὰρ ποιοῦντες οὐ μὴ πταίσητέ ποτε.

quapropter fratres magis satagite ut per bona opera certam vestram **vocationem** et electionem faciatis haec enim facientes non peccabitis aliquando

I. What is Calling?

The Greek word κλήσιν (*klesin*), which means *calling, call, invitation* is predominantly used in a religious sense in the NT meaning “the divine invitations.” It is one’s temporal status and position in life *a social role, vocation, situation, station*. The Hebrew word for “call” in the Old Testament is קָרָא (*qara’*) which has the nuance of call, call out, recite, read, cry out, commission, appoint. The Latin translation of the word “call” is **vocationem**, which is etymologically related to the English word “vocation.” Therefore a proper synonym for the word “calling” is “vocation.” Based on the usage in ancient literature, the Oxford English Dictionary defines “vocation” in four ways:

First, vocation is the action on the part of God of calling a person to exercise some special function, especially of a spiritual nature, or to fill a certain position; divine influence or guidance towards a definite (especially religious) career. Second, vocation is the action on the part of God (or Christ) of calling persons or mankind to a state of salvation or union with Himself; the fact or condition of being so called. Third, vocation is one’s ordinary occupation, business, or profession. Fourth, vocation is the action, on the part of an ecclesiastical body, of calling a person to the ministry or to a particular office or charge in the Church.

Therefore, calling is both an event and a process in which God takes the initiatives to invite a person for relationship to discover the real meaning and the eternal purpose of life. In calling, God chooses and enables a person to hear the invitation, but he does it without dictating the free will of a person. Calling constitutes compassionate invitation, promise of ultimate meaning and the freedom of choice.

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David. (Isaiah 55:1-3)

The free will response to the invitation is an important element of calling. There is no compulsion or force, which would be contrary to His divine love. Calling includes the

knowledge of the blessings or consequences of a life with or without submission, thus helping the subject to respond intelligently. Through calling God gives opportunity to humankind to exercise their free will for a good cause, to exert their personal human effort, and to express their inner feelings and emotions toward God in words and deeds. Therefore, human decision, out of the free will, is an absolute necessity in the calling of God. Calling remains only an invitation until one submits in response, out of one's free will, without any pressure of any kind, to the fulfillment of the meaning and purpose that God intends for one's life.

II. Why Does God Call?

A. First, the answer lies in his identity. Who is HE after all?

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exodus 3:14)

"This is what the LORD says-- Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God. (Isaiah 44:6)

"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? (Job 38:4-5)

He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life (Revelation 21:6)

God is the supreme authority because he is the creator, sustainer and provider of the universe. But above all he is the Sovereign Lord.

*And the LORD said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have **mercy** on whom I will have **mercy**, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. (Exodus 33:19)*

Since He has created us He owns us and therefore He has authority over us. He has the absolute right to call anybody, anywhere, anytime, for any job.

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." (Jeremiah 1:5)

B. Second, it is God's design to work through a community. He created men and women in his own image to accomplish His purposes through them in the world.

*Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them **rule** over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." (Genesis 1:26)*

His purpose is to build a community of the people of God that will manifest the character, love and harmony of the trinity. His calling is to enjoy the unity of origin, resources, purpose and destiny.

C. Third, God did not intend to create us only for a limited time but for eternity.

Now if we are children, then we are heirs-- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (Romans 8:17)

There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. (Revelation 22:5)

D. Fourth, God wants us to enjoy the privilege of participating in his divine nature.

*Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the **divine** nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. (2 Peter 1:4)*

When the people of God participate in the divine nature of God, the world is able to see God in action and the hope of the hopeless is restored. God's divine nature of beauty, excellence, character of gentleness, compassion and love, begins to manifest itself in the community of the people of God.

E. Fifth, God's ultimate goal is to train and develop His people into the likeness of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. As we work with God we conform more and more to his likeness. We move together in the same direction and share similar objectives. In doing so, we undergo transformation. Someone has said, "the kind of work you do and the kind of person you work with is the kind of person you become." God's ultimate goal is the restoration of the Garden of Eden, where men and women will worship Him in spirit and truth for eternity.

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. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. (Romans 8:28-30)

III. How Does God Call?

In the scripture, we read that God called his people through supernatural events. Supernatural events such as Moses before the burning bush, Abraham before the three angels, Samuel hearing the mysterious voice, and Saul being struck by lightning on the road to Damascus, often dominate the minds of Christians as the means of hearing God's call. I struggled through such expectation for nearly three years. Considering the life and biographies of the missionaries of the twentieth century whom God used mightily, we observe that in most cases God called them through His scripture, through the preaching of the Word, through circumstances, through the church, through fellow believers, through needs, through the crushing burden, and finally, through the inner voice of the Holy Spirit. God can perform miracles, but God can also call us through our understanding and our sensitive conscience.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. (Hebrews 1:1-2)

God can call a person by the blinding light as he did to Saul on the road to Damascus even today but our God is also able to persuade a person without performing a miracle. The only need is a sensitive and obedient heart.

IV. Misleading Notions.

There are two misleading notions, which we need to sort out before we proceed further. First, calling is often misunderstood as having a sense of leading by God to serve him as full-time Christian worker. We must recall to ourselves on the biblical teachings that our creator God is served not only inside the churches and on the mission fields, but also in the hospitals, schools, corporate companies, and market places. God's kingdom and authority is effective beyond Christendom. We often hear a minister or a missionary sharing his/her testimony that God called him/her to join a church as a pastor or go to Africa, but we rarely hear such a testimony from a Christian businessman or a teacher. I want us to remind ourselves that Peter did not write his second epistle to full-time workers, but to all Christians.

The second misleading notion is about the place of the laity in the church. The place of the laity is often considered as less sacred and less important than the ministers, and therefore the calling related to the ministers is seen more seriously than that of the laity.

Owen Cooper in his article, "The Need" very boldly writes, "The greatest heresy among the Southern Baptists is that we have divided the people of God into two groups: First: pastors, teachers, missionaries, and other "ordained" to fulfill their call in Christian work; while the second group, denominated as "lay persons," are considered as without a

call, without a ministry, largely exempt from the Great Commission, and relegated to a second class position among the people of God.”ⁱ

Let us first consider who are the laity?

The word laity is etymologically related to the Greek word *λαός* (*laos*) which means *crowd, populace, people* and is often used for Israel as God’s chosen *people*. It is also used for Jews as contrasted with Gentiles (Acts 4.10) and for the Christian community, meaning as the people of God.

But today the word has a different nuance because of its usage. In the Oxford English dictionary, the word “layman” and “laity” are defined as:

1. A man who is not a cleric; one of the laity.
2. The body of the people not in orders as opposed to the clergy; laymen collectively
3. Unprofessional people, as opposed to those who follow some learned profession, to artists, etc.

These definitions have influenced our minds causing us to look at our church and divide the crowd into two distinct categories – ministers and non-ministers, professionals and amateurs, skilled and unskilled. I do not intend to reduce the importance of the ministers in the church but I am only trying to restore the importance of non-ministers in the kingdom of God; importance that will raise the level of seriousness in doing the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The great commission and the final words of Jesus (Matt 28:19, Acts 1:8) were not addressed to group of clergy, but to common people. Jesus did not recruit his disciples from the clerical and professional groups, but from the *laos*. It was a group of *laos* in Acts 11:19 that went to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch and other gentile areas and spread the gospel. Dr. Lewis Drummond writes, “It is reasonably conclusive that in the early church there was little if any distinction between full-time, ordained ministers and the laity, at least in the sense of responsibility to spread the good news and minister in the name of Christ. Every Christian was in some sense a God-called minister. This principle rests in the fact that God’s Holy Spirit imparts to all believers certain spiritual gifts to enable them to serve Christ effectively.”ⁱⁱ

*But you are a chosen people, a royal **priesthood**, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)*

Therefore, calling received by the laity in the church is equally important as calling received by the clergy. Both callings deserve similar respect and serious considerations in the ministry of God. We must purge ourselves from these misleading notions of categorizing laity and clergy as two classes in hierarchy in the ministry of God.

V. What is the Nature of Calling?

The word “Calling” is often used in parallel with choosing, electing and setting apart for a relationship. Calling is not using. God in his sovereign will is able to use anybody. God has used even the devil for his own cause, but that is not a calling. The most important distinction of calling is RELATIONSHIP. Calling begins with relationship.

The Bible describes God’s call to a person at four different levels. They are:

1. Call to a saving Relationship.
2. Call to a sanctifying life of Discipleship.
3. Call to be on mission with God.
4. Call to a specific Task.

Let us discuss the call to Relationship. This call is foundational to all other callings. Henry Blackaby is right on target when he says, “Salvation is primarily being called by God to be in a saving relationship with Him.”ⁱⁱⁱ We certainly know that today if we are in saving relationship with God, it is not because we chose him first but because He called us, he chose us, and because he took initiative and helped us to respond to him. This is what Paul was trying to communicate when he wrote to the Church at Rome.

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. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. (Romans 8:28-30)

I want us to understand that at some point of time in our life God helped us to understand His first call to his saving relationship, and we, without any pressure, with free will, responded to Him and entered into the saving relationship with Him.

The Church is born as a result of this call. Therefore the Greek root word for church *ekklesia*, which means “called out ones,” implies that calling is not optional for those who are in the church.

Without this calling we can neither become Church nor understand the second level of call – the call to the sanctifying life of a disciple. The Church often confronts major problems because of the members who are not sure of this call. However, the church can have problem also if they fail to understand the call to the sanctifying life of discipleship and the call to be on mission with God.

Imagine the case of a person who after three years of his marital life tells his wife, “Honey, I think God called me to love you and marry you only; I did not know that I was also called to be your husband every day and then the father of a notorious child.” What do you think about the mess that such a person would make of his family?

Call to a saving relationship embodies in itself the call to a sanctifying life of discipleship and the call to be on mission with God. Os Guinness is explicit when he says,

“Calling entails the cost of discipleship. The deepest challenge is to renounce self and identify with Jesus in his suffering and rejection.”^{iv} To make it simple and blunt one can say, “Call to relationship is a call to accountability.”

The call to a sanctifying life of discipleship is the daily call, while the call to be on mission with God is the call to the ultimate meaning and purpose of the relationship that one enters with God. The former requires daily response while the latter gives the sense of direction in that daily response. But God in his sovereign desire has the prerogative to choose and call any person for any specific task. Sometimes he assigns just one task and sometimes more than one during the lifetime of a person.

Let us examine the scripture for what has been said thus far.

1. First, the following references vividly describe the Call to Relationship:

On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2:17)

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

Jesus replied: "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' "But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.' "Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.' "Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'" (Luke 14:16-20).

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5)

2. Second, the following scripture references describe how the first call entails the second, the call to a sanctifying life of discipleship.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 7:21)

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (Matthew 16:24)

*Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his **cross daily** and follow me. (Luke 9:23)*

"Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. (Matthew 14:29)

*"If anyone comes to me and does not **hate** his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters-- yes, even his own life-- he cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26)*

"No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. (Luke 16:13)

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed-- not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence-- continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, (Philippians 2:12)

3. Third, let us discuss how the first call also entails the third call, the call to be on mission with God.

But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." (Joshua 24:15)

"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." (Matthew 4:19)

And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. (2 Corinthians 5:15)

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

The second and the third calls are inherent in the first call. The effective response to the second and third call is strong affirmation to the genuineness of the response given to the first call.

5. Fourth, God gives the fourth level of call in order to magnify or specify the third level of call.

This call helps a person to stay focused on a specific task that God has given to him/her. Os Guinness comments, "Calling directly counters the great modern pressure toward pluralization because the call of Jesus provides the priorities and perspectives that are essential for a focused life in the over loaded age."^v

The nature of the fourth call differs with time and person but it carries similar importance. The importance of the task is not on the apparent nature of the task but on the giver of the task. All tasks demand the same level of faith and obedience. For example: Moses, Nehemiah, Ezekiel, and Paul - they all had different tasks but each was equally important.

VI. Calling is Packaged with Both Privilege and Accountability.

1. God's Callings are Packaged with Privileges.

God's callings are packaged with privileges. The privilege of entering into relationship, the privilege of his favor and protection, the privilege of providence, and the privilege of being commissioned for a special task. Nehemiah responded to call and God provided him position, passage, protection, providence, people and perks. This may not be the generic nature of the privileges, but scripture certainly assures some kind of privileges, which may vary from one person to another according to what God deems fit for the task.

*Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land-- against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but **will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you,**" declares the LORD. (Jeremiah 1:18-19)*

Scripture describes several instances where God not only called but also equipped the person for the calling. Through calling, first of all, God tests our obedience and then he tests our daily faith in His faithfulness and commitment to help us fulfill the task. If God assigns a task we must be assured that his eyes are always on us watching and waiting to help us succeed in the task.

Therefore, one can depend on God's rich resources, and respond to God confidently. Dependence on our own ability and resources will always lead us to feel inadequate and insufficient to do his task. This is one of the most common tricks that Satan has always played to take away God's people from God's task. God looks for availability and not ability; God provides the ability or capability.

2. God's Callings are Packaged with Accountability.

It is obvious that divine privileges entail divine accountability. Jesus said, "*But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone **who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.***" (Luke 12:48)

The following parable of Jesus is explicit in emphasizing the accountability in calling.

He said: "A man of noble birth went to a distant country to have himself appointed king and then to return. So he called ten of his servants and gave them ten minas. 'Put this money to work,' he said, 'until I come back.' "But his subjects hated him and sent a delegation after him to say, 'We don't want this man to be our king.' "He was made king, however, and returned home. Then he sent for the servants to whom he had given the money, in order to find out what they had gained with it. "The first one came

and said, 'Sir, your mina has earned ten more.' "Well done, my good servant!" his master replied. 'Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities.' "The second came and said, 'Sir, your mina has earned five more.' "His master answered, 'You take charge of five cities.' "Then another servant came and said, 'Sir, here is your mina; I have kept it laid away in a piece of cloth. I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man. You take out what you did not put in and reap what you did not sow.' "His master replied, 'I will judge you by your own words, you wicked servant! You knew, did you, that I am a hard man, taking out what I did not put in, and reaping what I did not sow? (Luke 19:12-22).

The last servant did not expect the king to return reappointed. He thought that neither he will be accountable to any body for his disobedience nor he will ever be judged for his disobedience. The parable has historic reference to the family of Herod whose children had to go to Rome for reappointment. While they were gone many despised the family, opposed their reappointment, and revolted against their rule, however they were reappointed. When they returned they executed all those who had rebelled against them. The morale of the parable is that like the rebellious people who did not escape the judgment of the earthly king, God's people will also have to face the judgment. We all will have to give an account of what we did with the call He gave to us.

God's call to us is always serious in nature. His call demands seriousness and sincerity. He certainly dislikes our light heartedness, tokenism and casual attitude. He is a person and has emotions. We are sinful and vulnerable to worldly temptations. With our weakness either we might deprive ourselves of the blessing that is kept for us or might even grieve or insult Him. This is why scripture exhorts us to have awe, reverence and fear for God.

*Therefore, my dear friends, as **you have always obeyed-- not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence-- continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,** (Philippians 2:12)*

An intelligent mind will always find a good rationale for obedience rather than disobedience to the calling. The cost of disobedience is more costly than the cost of obedience.

VII. Conclusion:

Calling begins with relationship.

All those who are in relationship with God are called to the life of a discipleship.

All those who are called to the life of a disciple, are also called to be on mission with God. There is no spectatorship in Christendom. There is no hierarchy in terms of priesthood. All are called to work towards the coming of God's kingdom.

All those who are on mission with God should gladly accept the calling to a specific task from God, for in God's calling we enjoy the privileges that he bestows and become accountable for our obedience.

It is wise to obey His call and serve the Almighty God.

- ⁱ *Laos All the People of God* ed. Fisher Humphreys and Thomas A Kinchen (Louisiana: Book Crafter, Inc.), 6.
- ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 16.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Henry Blackaby, *What is means to be Called and Accountable* (Birmingham: WMU, 1990), 5.
- ^{iv} Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding And Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville: Word Publishing), 215.
- ^v *Ibid.*, 174.