

Voices: Calling is not a job

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In my experience, the word “calling” has had a particular definition in Baptist life. Being “called” means God has communicated to you somehow that you will earn your living in ministry, most likely in a church.



Meredith Stone

We tend to think calling equals a ministry-related job.

But the more I talk to university and seminary students, the more I reflect upon my own journey and those of my peers, and the more I read about calling, I’m starting to think we’re missing the bigger picture.

Only one category?

Why in the world would God reserve the divine call for only one category of occupations? Is the church the only place about which God cares enough to whisper, summon and nudge humans into action?

I think we’ve created far too small of a box for understanding God’s call.

Texas Baptist Voices

The Puritans describe two kinds of calling—general calling and particular calling. General calling is the call every Christ-follower receives to be a disciple and to share Christ with others. Particular calling, on the other hand, is God’s leading of each person to a particular way in which she or he can contribute to what God is doing in the world.

A particular calling is a passion God has led that person toward, something to which they feel irresistibly drawn, a common thread pulled through their life, a theme that guides their choices and decisions.

Gladness and hunger

Frederick Buechner famously wrote, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

Buechner’s insight exemplifies this understanding of calling. God calls every person to live out the fullest expression of their unique selves in a way that lines up with the needs of this world which God seeks to meet.

God’s call invites each of us to become God’s partner in the work of redemption in this world.

Other authors use different terms for a particular calling, such as missional calling, vocation or a holy discontent. But the same concept is at work. Our particular calling is a God-implanted passion through which we participate in the kingdom of God.

Examples of a particular calling might be hospitality, teaching people about the Bible, racial justice, child literacy, ending hunger, bringing others joy, helping people find wholeness in this life, making the world a fair and safe place, etc.

Life-guiding themes

Notice these examples of particular callings are not jobs. They are life-guiding themes we can express in our occupations, but which we also can fulfill in our relationships, our “spare” time, our volunteerism, etc.

Being able to choose our occupations is a first-world concern. Throughout history and across the world, most people do not have the opportunity to align their occupation with their inclinations. Still, God has been calling and partnering with people throughout time, no matter how they tried to sustain a livelihood.

But since aligning our calling with our occupation is an option for us, we certainly can try to maximize our contribution to God’s work in the world. For example, the person whose particular calling is to help people find wholeness in this life could express calling through work as a counselor, a chaplain, a doctor, a nurse, a fitness instructor, a pastor, a sanitation worker, etc.

However, when finances or life circumstances dictate we cannot line up our callings and our jobs, we still can express our callings outside our jobs, and we can try to be employed in ways that have a positive impact on the world.

Benefit others

Proverbs 11:10a reads, “When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices.” As followers of Christ, any prosperity that comes from our work should not be self-serving, but work which benefits others.

God gives each of us a calling, a unique way to be a part of God’s purposes. God can lead us to discover that calling, and God can guide us in finding ways to express that calling—both through work and all that makes up who we are.

So, instead of saying, “I feel called to ministry,” perhaps ministry-directed people could say, “I feel as though God is leading me to express my life’s calling and passion through an occupation in ministry.”

It may seem like an issue of semantics, but it makes a big difference. As Baptists, we traditionally have believed in the priesthood of all believers. We should not let the way we use “calling” violate that theological principle.

May we grow in our blessing and celebration of the many different ways people are called and participate in God’s purposes for redemption and reconciliation in this world.

To read more on this topic see: Doug Koskela’s [Calling & Clarity](#); Ben Campbell Johnson’s [Hearing God’s Call](#); Parker Palmer’s [Let Your Life Speak](#); Bill Hybels’ [Holy Discontent](#); and Amy Sherman’s [Kingdom Calling](#).

Meredith Stone is director of ministry guidance and instructor of Christian ministry and Scripture at Hardin-Simmons University’s Logsdon School of Theology. She is a member of the Baptist Standard board of directors.