

## THE CALL OF GOD

It is no secret that if we do not know what we are doing, we waste huge amounts of life and time. Nevertheless, many people live as if this were a secret. If we have no goal or purpose for our lives, we walk and choose and live in aimlessness – a synonym for SIN. Before it became theological, the word “sin” meant “to miss the mark.” If we are aimless, we always miss the mark. If we are aimless, we are separated – alienated – from God, and from every true purpose or goal. In my tradition, the Statement of Faith says point-blank: “God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.” If then we mix aimlessness with the strange notion that “My life is my own – I can do anything I please,” we have a true definition for disaster. We see it destroying individual lives all over the landscape. And it will destroy our nation and our way of life unless a significant number in each new generation realizes it is Satan’s Creed – a freedom designed to enslave us. True freedom is only the right to choose what and whom we will serve. True freedom leads to genuine commitment.

My suspicion is that most of you know and agree with such precepts. Sometimes we get careless, though that is not news. But since we are talking about the basic commitments of the Christian Life, it is a blessed and happy thing to remember that we have switched from bondage to Satan ... to bondage under Jesus Christ. Well, sometimes we clean up the wording a little. Actually we are *slaves* to Christ – which is our only hope and our only true freedom – but we prefer to say “servants.” And in some ways, that *is* more accurate, since it is a chosen slavery. We put ourselves under Christ’s authority on purpose. In fact, He will accept our service and our lives on no other terms. There are no secret police in Christ’s Kingdom. There are only willing citizens in Christ’s Kingdom. We like our new Master better than Satan, better than ourselves, better than anything or anyone else who has ever tried to run our lives. The first person to get really unhappy when I start to stray out of the Kingdom ... is me!

That said, if I were to try to pick the most neglected subject in modern American Christendom, it would not be politics or ecology or anybody’s rights. It would not be abortion, affirmative action, world hunger, or racism. Huge problems dog our steps as a species and as a civilization. We have not solved them, and both the quality of life and

the probability of life are endangered. I suspect that all of us know this. Which is not to say we are all responding correctly. Nevertheless, the church of my experience is not silent on these matters. If we have not always been effective, at least we have been noisy. And indeed, there have been many serious, sustained, and even sacrificial demonstrations of concern from the church and its people.

There is, however, another subject that comes up in the church somewhere between rarely and never. That subject is VOCATION. The conclusions we draw from silence are always suspect, but it is as if the church does not think of vocation as an important part of the Christian Life. "God is about weekends and holidays. The Holy Spirit cares about you, your relationships, your prayer life and your beliefs, but not about your WORK." Such a statement is truly blasphemy, and far more damaging than most of the things we call blasphemy. "Good works" is even a dirty phrase for some Christians. But there is a difference between doing good works to try to impress God – to earn our ticket into the Promised Land – and doing the work God has called us to.

We are in the midst of a series of sermons about the basic commitments of the Christian Path or Way. I will not review the introductory comments and warnings, though they are as important as ever. Some of you will notice, more and more, the interplay between the commitments, and also how they might enhance each other. The commitments of the Christian Life are not about something we *have* to do to get "saved." They are about what we *want* to do to move our lives into the passion and excitement and joy of the Christian drama – the Christian WAY. Your own personal awareness and participation in the Kingdom are directly related to how many of these commitments you have made and how well you have made them. The commitments do not mean God loves us more, but they do dramatically affect the ways in which we respond to God's love, and how much and how easily God can reach us. In other words, the more of these commitments we make and keep, the more excited and enthusiastic we become about the Christian Way itself. None of us make and keep them all, or even make and keep any one of them perfectly. That does not mean we should hate them or resent them or get all negative or guilty about them. They are there as beacons – they help us make progress on the Way. Every time we are ready, we can add a commitment or take one we already have to a new dimension. And every time we do that, the joy, the excitement, and the interior satisfaction increase.

The first, and most important, of all the commitments is the commitment to pray every day. The second commitment is to read and study the Bible every day. The third commitment is the commitment to find our true vocation and move into it.

- This involves discovering who we are and what our best gifts and talents are.
- It involves the constant training and honing of our gifts.
- It involves the continuing search for better ways, better approaches – any and every way we can find – to enhance, design, and increase our ability to fulfill our vocation.
- It is the constant dedication – the turning over – of our efforts and our labors to God.
- Whatever other dimensions are involved, our work is done for God. As Paul said: *“Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.”* (Colossians 3:23-24)

The key element, of course, is this: A true vocation is an assignment from God. We do not make it up. It is given to us. We are called into it. As we discover our vocation – our assignment from God – we are also given authority to accomplish it. I do not mean in any final or perfect way; where do you think we are?! But much will happen as we find and move into our true work. Jesus said, “My yoke is easy – it is *chrestos*.” Do not be fooled by English words that no longer carry their true meanings. Jesus was a carpenter; He doubtless made many yokes for oxen in His time. If a yoke fits right, an ox can haul an enormous load. A good team loves to haul, but if the yoke gouges or rubs their shoulders raw ... well, lots of people are in jobs that do that to them. Jesus said, “My yoke is *chrestos*.” Not “easy,” as we use the word today – meaning, no effort. That kind of “easy” means it is not worth anything. Is that what you expect from Jesus? No effort, no struggle, no problems, no significance, no importance – nothing matters? Is that how *His* life was? No, when Jesus gives you a task, you will carry it with ease – with grace – because it is tailor-made just for you. *Chrestos* means “it fits right.” A true vocation matches your true identity – your purpose here. And we love doing what we have been designed to do (most of the time, for the most part).

A true vocation is a life-long assignment. It usually goes through many phases and expresses itself in different structures. But the major theme is recognizable throughout. We never retire from a true vocation. If you are seventy-eight or eighty-six or one hundred and three, do not cut out on this commitment. It is never time to quit on what we were called to accomplish. Christians never, ever stop working. It's too much fun. And God has been so involved in it that the **task for God** and the **relationship with God** become all mixed in together.

One lady in a past church had a terrible time whenever the subject of this third commitment came up. Instantly there would come into her mind an image of herself in stocky brown shoes, off in some remote village in Africa. This was not a rational fear; it was some nightmare left over from childhood. In any case, she could not pray about it because she was sure that if she did, she would end up as a missionary in Africa. I thought it would pass in time. Many people in her support group said the right words, but she could not shake this fear. And so her prayer life was frozen.

One evening in the group, somebody realized how much she was suffering with this thing – for nearly two years it had been. They said, “Linda, I truly don't think you would make a very good teacher or preacher anywhere in Africa. I want you to go around the group and ask each one of us if we think that's your gift.” When Linda had asked each person and each person had seriously denied this perception of her gifts, her friend continued: “Linda, I don't know the mind of God, but if nobody here would send you to Africa, I suspect God isn't foolish enough to do that either. But one thing we all do know: if that's where God wants to send you, you would end up being absolutely delighted that you went.”

That broke the spell. Two years later, Linda was in Africa. I'm kidding! It *did* break the spell, however, and Linda was able to pray again. God sent her back to a job at the bank where she worked, and she started being much happier there, improving relationships and getting better positions as she went. But the real assignment was sewing. She was an expert seamstress and had nearly forgotten how much she loved it. Now she discovered that she was under orders to turn her home into a sewing shop and to switch, as quickly as she could, from banking to sewing.

**There is nothing in this world that God is not interested in.** Get God out of the box! You cannot pray if you have boundaries and pre-conceived notions over and around everything before you begin. God wants you doing what you can do best, and usually that turns out to be what you love the most. Stop worshipping the cosmic imbecile. I have friends who do well in Africa, but Linda was never designed or intended to be one of them. Lots of people think that being a missionary to Africa is a great thing but that designing and making clothes have nothing to do with the Kingdom. The way some people go at it, neither one has anything to do with the Kingdom. But God has lots of children who wear clothes. **There is nothing in this world that God is not interested in.** There is no gift or talent anywhere that God cannot use, if we dedicate it to him.

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A couple of stray remarks and then we will get serious: If we could somehow take an honest survey of church members across the land and ask them, “What is it that your church actually wants you to DO?” – what would we find? In general. Here is my hunch:

- Attend worship services faithfully.
- Give more money to the church.  
(However much you give, more would be nice.)
- Be willing to serve on a board or committee,  
or maybe teach Sunday School.
- When possible, respond to special needs we bring before you.  
(We want our church to have the reputation of being loving  
and generous.)
- Live an exemplary life in the community.  
(Have good personal morals.)
- Be nice to each other. At least be friendly and welcoming  
to newcomers.

Did I forget anything? Obviously, every church has some faithful members who go far beyond these. But the question is, “What does my church actually want me to DO?” What does the average church member think the church expects? We are trying to pick up on the vision most churches set before their people. What sort of life are we really being called to live?

Where the vision and the expectation are anywhere close to the list above, the church is dying. Most people will not invest very much time or life in such an uninspired cause. And in most churches with this agenda, those who do come are always squabbling. Nothing exciting is happening, so at least a good argument makes it seem more important.

The common denominator is that in many places, the church is trying to accomplish its purposes with its people's spare time. This is so incredibly stupid and inexcusable that you may think I am trying to be humorous, but I am dead serious. Most of the people I know think of the church's mission in terms of the extras and the leftovers. The church, as everybody knows, is its people. And the only way it will ever be effective in its mission is when the mission is carried in the vocations of its people. The true LIFE of the church is not where its people spend two or three hours a week; it is where they spend between a third and half of their entire lives. God is supposed to be in control of our work, not just our spare time. Give Satan only three hours a weekend and see how long *he* stays in business!

What if all the people in Christendom – across the world – truly believed that God also owned their lives and their efforts from nine to five? That would be a revolution to turn the world upside down. And I am *not* talking about interfering with work by trying to convert everybody on the job. I am talking about each of us doing our work as if deep in our hearts and minds we had made the commitment to do whatever work we do for our Lord, and not for success or money or other people.

It is never easy. Have you ever heard a preacher who preached to win the approval of the people? Who preached to be successful or popular, or to be well thought of? They are everywhere – a blight on the land. You would think all of us preachers would have only one purpose: to preach what will please Jesus – to preach what the Holy Spirit is asking us to say. I am merely trying to point out that no matter what your work is, the commitment to do it for Jesus is rare. It is also huge, difficult, scary, exciting, and full of joy.

Most churches act like they do not trust their people to really live for God except when the leaders of the church are watching. So the church is forever trying to haul its members to some special meeting or program where the church can watch them being faithful: march for this; dance for that; sign this statement; give to seventy-eleven causes (but never enough to do any of them any real good); honk if you love Jesus; walk

five miles on a Sunday afternoon and turn twenty dollars over to some good cause that has nothing to do with Jesus. We have to end the posturing and the play-acting. If you love Jesus, turn your will and your life over to Him – all of it – and commit the rest of your time and life to following His guidance to the best of your ability ... in all things.

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Back to the third commitment – let's get oriented. From the dictionary: *Vocation* – from Latin *vocatio* – a calling, a summoning; from *vocare*, to call. You see, our language remembers, even if we have long since forgotten. *Voice*, *vocal cord*, and *vocation* come from the same root. A VOCATION IS A CALLING FROM GOD – a summons to accomplish. You are not an accident. You are here for a reason. You have a special identity, and with that comes a special cluster of gifts and abilities that nobody else quite matches. I know that some of you do not really believe this. I am not here to argue with what you do or do not believe. I am here to tell you that you do have an assignment from God. God is calling you. That is not the question. The question is: Are you listening? And are you willing to answer?

When we start praying – when we become willing to let God all the way into our lives – the danger of our being called to the purpose for which we were designed greatly increases. Of course, we really want this on the soul level. But there are two little wrinkles:

First, it is always disruptive to our present lives. Even if we have stumbled into work close to our real *vocatio*, which is often the case, nevertheless when the calling makes the assignment clear and we know it is for Jesus, there are always changes of focus and direction that seem quite disruptive. And naturally, if the *vocatio* beckons us toward a whole different field, that becomes a major upheaval in our life, even if we end up loving it.

The second wrinkle is that a real *vocatio* always scares us half to death. It scares us because it always feels like a compliment higher than we deserve, and higher than we can live up to. Even though we want it very much – which is always the case, since a true *vocatio* always matches our true identity – we are quite sure it will be impossible (we don't have enough money, enough authority, a high enough IQ, enough training, or whatever). We know we will never be able to be or do what is being asked of us. The problem is, God assumes we will do this task together,

and we always start out thinking we will have to do it alone. So it scares us. “*I am a man of unclean lips and dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips*” was Isaiah’s first response. “*I am slow of speech and tongue, send my brother Aaron*” was Moses’ first reaction. “*Depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord*” was Peter’s first reply.

These are not the exceptions – these are the classic responses to the call (the *vocatio*) of God. We constantly assume that God doesn’t understand the situation or know who we really are. “Who, me?” “Sorry, wrong number.” “You must mean my older sister.” “I’ve never even been sure You really exist, and now You want me to do *what?*” “Give me a sign so I can be sure this is really You ... How about another sign ...” (That last one is called the Gideon Complex, for those of you who read your Bibles. And Jesus did not have a lot of patience with it.)

There are thousands of people out there who have heard God’s call but turned away from it because it seemed too scary or too impossible. In many cases, they did not have the background to know what was happening, or they did not turn off the radio or television or drugs long enough to be able to track it. One of the saddest things in all of life is when people are mismatched to their work. Not only do they miss the connection between identity and task – one of the highest joys in life – but all the rest of us miss what they were sent here to accomplish. Every person who does not find and fulfill their *vocatio* is cheating all the rest of us out of the plans and purposes of God. Well, God has backup plans and systems, but that does not take away the sadness or minimize the waste. Many people are very concerned about waste these days, but what our world wastes the most is its people.

Some of you may be thinking: If finding our *vocatio* is such a huge and important piece of the Christian Life – if it is so important that we are going to name it as the third commitment of the Christian Life – how come it is not mentioned more often? How come it is not emphasized everywhere in Scripture? Why is it not one of the major, blaring themes? I’m glad you brought that up.

Have you ever heard the term “conversion”? All the biblical stories of conversion are stories of people receiving their *vocatio* – their calling. Only in recent times have we transformed conversion into trivia. Today, many people talk about conversion as if it were some kind of emotional high – a touchy-feely, goose-bumpy thrill from God. Sometimes God does give us a strong hint of presence and support; sometimes the Holy Spirit

does touch us in a way that says, “I like your intentions and honor your struggles – and should you be wondering, I REALLY AM HERE!” When that happens, claim it and keep it and never let me or anybody else talk you out of it. But that is not conversion. That’s encouragement.

We have a significant number of church members who are bored or half-hearted about the Faith, but I do not think it is always their fault. Many of them have simply never been told much about the New Life. They have been told about conversion but not about what comes after that. Conversion is for openers. Conversion does not complete the Christian Life, it begins it. If a person “gets converted” and then just sits around waiting for Heaven, they did not get converted, and they know nothing of the Christian Path or what the church is all about. Some of us came to Jesus weary, frightened, and discouraged and tried to jump up into His lap to rest, only to discover that Jesus doesn’t sit around a lot. Part of the healing is to find ourselves enthralled and involved in a very different LIFE.

Some people still ask, “Are you saved?” Meaning, “Have you encountered the Living Christ in such a way that you know for sure that you are loved and cherished, and that God will never desert or forsake you?” That is a really wonderful question, if asked in the right setting and in an appropriate way – which some of us think is very seldom. But even that is not conversion, though discovering the love of God very frequently *leads* to conversion. The question that goes with conversion is not “Are you saved?” The question that goes with conversion is “ARE YOU USED?” Have you turned your life over enough so that God can use you? Are you a citizen of the Kingdom enough that you work for it? Do you know who you are, and have you found your vocatio? Is God your true Boss? *That* is what conversion is about.

This is essential perspective, so it is essential for those of us who do not already know it to realize that this is the hard-core biblical perspective, even if much of our world has forgotten. So track it with me.

Abraham is the Father of Faith and the beginning of Judaism. He starts praying and gets his marching orders: Leave Ur, go to the land I will show you (Israel), and there find a new people – a new nation that shall be my chosen, my holy people. Not a religious high – though it is also that, as it often is, but that is not the primary point or purpose. It is an assignment, a vocatio. Naturally, when God breaks through to us, it is pretty startling – a memorable moment. But the assignment – the vocatio – is *the reason* for the breakthrough. If we forget the assignment and focus

on the feelings that surround its coming, it comes to nothing. Abraham's conversion changes the face of earth history forever. It is not because it makes him feel good; it is because he accepts his assignment. And using Abraham, God is able to back and support and carry on that assignment.

All biblical stories of conversion are the receiving of assignments. All biblical accounts of conversion are about vocation – *vocatio*. If you hear a story about a conversion experience and it contains no assignment – no calling to accomplish – it is a fraud, a dud. I do not mean that you should challenge the person to a duel. Maybe the calling – the assignment – will follow close on the heels of the awakening. Maybe the person has received their *vocatio* but is still too shy or too humble to claim it yet. I just want you to know that if there is no calling – no *vocatio* – there is no conversion.

Moses has an amazing experience on the mountain: A burning bush – a classic conversion encounter. And the assignment to go back to Egypt, free the people, and take them to the Holy Mountain to receive the Covenant. This is not something he concludes later or evolves into as a result of the amazing experience. The assignment *is* the conversion. The *assignment* is what changes his life.

You want to talk about Jacob, Joseph, Samuel, David, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah? How about Amos or Hosea or Gideon? The conversion is *always* a calling, *always* an assignment. They are not being entertained, they are being used. They are called to their work, to their *vocatio*.

Peter's conversion? I will make you a fisher of men. Paul's conversion? I will send you as an apostle to the Gentiles. Jesus' conversion? Oh yes. His conversion started with His baptism, which sent Him immediately into the wilderness for forty days. And He would not come out of that wilderness until He had His assignment clear.

There are no exceptions. Well, there is always an exception, but I cannot find one for this. Conversion means you receive your *vocatio*. It means you hear the call of God to accomplish what you were designed and sent here to accomplish. Over the years I have been in many conversations about prayer and spiritual experiences, and there are always some people who say that they have never had any dramatic religious conversion. They did not see any bright lights or hear any loud bells or whistles. They grew into it all gradually. (Actually, I appreciate the honesty, because if we don't stay honest, we get nowhere.) But my question to

them is: Have you found your vocatio? If you know your vocatio, you have been converted – I don't care how quietly, gradually, or humbly. And if you do not know your vocatio, you have not been converted – I don't care how many bands of angels danced or sang or did cartwheels all over Heaven.

The third commitment of the Christian Life is the commitment to find and follow your vocatio. It is important to note that the zeal of the commitment begins with the search. That is, all the energy and devotion that will later go into the work goes into the search for that work until you find it. The blessing of the commitment begins as soon as we make it. A few of you may be troubled by a logical inconsistency: If God does the calling, why are we searching? The experience through the ages is that God often does not call *until* we are searching. I suspect it is for the protection of free will, but the reason does not matter. God usually waits until, on some level, consciously or unconsciously, we want it and are willing. Much of the Christian Life feels stuck somewhere between boring and irrelevant until we make this third commitment.

One of the fastest theological overviews of what is going on here on earth is found in the Garden of Eden story. Because of the serpent (the tempter, Satan) connecting with human pride – our tendency to “go it alone,” to forget our Creator, to do things our own way – we both inherit and earn all the curses of alienation: aloneness, estrangement, being out of tune and out of relationship with God. The one-word summation of this condition is “sin.” The curses are not a trumped-up punishment. The curses are descriptions – the inevitable consequences of alienation. The curses are all definitions of apartness, of being out of tune, of being alienated from God: humans estranged from God; brother against brother; men lording it over women; humans at odds with nature. This is *not* the way God wants it! Some people keep forgetting that the curses are not God's will or desire. Jesus Christ came to reverse the curses: to reconcile us to God, to put brother back in love with brother, to fill up the ever-widening chasm between men and women, and more.

One of the curses is the curse of toil. Out from under the weight of alienation, we love our work. We love to accomplish. It is one of life's highest joys. Only under the curse is work reduced to toil – meaningless labor, the squandering of energy with little return and no satisfaction. If Jesus cannot give us meaningful labor, He is not the Christ. But we have to be willing to listen and obey. Jesus never coerces. The Kingdom

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Movement that Jesus brought to this earth is a volunteer revolution. If you don't want to, it doesn't count. We have to *choose* the Kingdom or it leaves us pretty much alone (pun intended). But the truth is, you have a special identity and you have a special vocatio. The third commitment of the Christian Life is the commitment to find it, and to live it out.

I know many of you have known and followed your vocatio for years. But if you have not, this commitment, if you make it, is dynamite. And I said it before and I must also end with it: It does not matter if you are young or old or in-between – God has work for you.