

CALLING AND CAREER

A Public Faith Curriculum
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Purpose

This article is designed to help the learner work in a biblical fashion, according to kingdom principals and to pursue a career in light of God's call.

Introduction

Chapter 1: A Biblical View of Work

Chapter 2: The Architecture of Calling

Chapter 3: Thoughts on Choosing a Career

Chapter 4: Designed with Purpose

Introduction

The human longing for meaning and significance lies in a distant memory of what life was meant to be. We were created for a deep relationship with God and to be employed in meaningful work on his behalf. Often, however, we languish in an unnatural state of drudgery, viewing our work as completely disconnected from what we imagine to be our specific and unique purpose.

God calls us and reconnects us to himself and his purposes. As he calls, our work is imbued with meaning. In his book *The Call*, Os Guinness describes the magnitude of God's call in the life of one who responds, "...God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to his summons and service."¹

Whether we are looking for a deeper sense of purpose in our work or simply trying to determine what kind of work we should be doing, the topic of calling often comes to the fore. This article attempts to connect the topics of *calling* and *career* in a practical way for those who are investing their lives in the work place.

Chapter 1 - A Biblical View of Work

To adequately connect God's call to our careers we need to understand the purpose and meaning of work from a biblical perspective.

The world was created for *shalom*, a universal flourishing that was to be the context in which humankind was to live and work. *Shalom*, a Hebrew word, often translated as peace, is really much more. It is an **inter**dependence of the created order where God, humanity and creation are woven together, each in a right relationship to the other. As a result of this interdependence, or right relationship, everything flourishes and there is universal justice, prosperity and rejoicing.

The first human job description, *to subdue and rule*, was given in Genesis 1:28. As the Wycliffe Bible Commentary puts it, we are "to be God's responsible representative and steward on the earth, to work out [the] Creator's will and fulfill the divine purpose."² The human race was meant to go from the garden and make all of the earth suitable for human flourishing, which is shalom. This was the incredible sequel to being created in God's image.

It is important to note that work came before the fall and is part of the created order. Therefore work is *very good*. Genesis 1:30, just two verses after God gives the mandate to subdue and rule, says, "And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good."

In Genesis 2:15, we see gardening used as a paradigm for all work, casting work as a shalom-building activity. "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it." Gardening, as with all work, is the process of taking raw materials and rearranging them for the benefit and flourishing of the human race. Our work is designed to provide people with what they need to flourish. Human flourishing, or shalom, was meant to come through the institution of work.

Sin destroys shalom and distorts the work that was intended to create shalom. As a result not all work is pleasant or even satisfying. In Genesis 3:17 we see how the original gardening paradigm for work is altered because of sin, "...Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you will eat bread..."

Sin not only distorts work but it destroys the context in which we work. As a result there is a great deal that goes on in the name of work that does not promote or restore human flourishing. But our basic job description of shalom building has not been rescinded. Humankind is still intended to making the world fit for human flourishing, however now there are elements in the world that destroy shalom and so we need to be restoring shalom not just creating it. This is true for all professions not just professions in the church or para-church.

Chapter 1 - A Biblical View of Work

Summary Points

- The world was created for shalom
- The first human job description to subdue and rule is shalom creating
- Because of sin there are elements in the world that destroy shalom and so we need to be restoring shalom not just creating it.

Chapter 2 - The Nature of Calling

Calling is directional. Jesus said, "Come follow me!" It isn't essential to know the destination in order to respond. God initiates and we obey. He first and foremost calls us to himself, but as we respond he further beckons us to take part in his redemptive purposes. As such our lives develop a pattern of call and response, as we hear him say, come *keep following* me.

As a result of this rhythm of call and response there has traditionally been a distinction between *primary* and *secondary* calling. First God calls us to himself and then he puts us to work. Although this distinction is helpful, if we simplify calling in this way we end up blending *calling* and *purpose* into one amorphous entity.

Calling and *purpose* are integral but not the same. God's overarching purpose for all of humankind differs from his specific and personal intentions for each individual. As calling becomes specific and personal the distinction between *calling* and *purpose* is important because our response to God needs to be understood in two parts - *vocation* (what we do) and *destiny* (God's penultimate purposes for each individual).

It might be helpful to define *calling* and *purpose* at this point. Our calling is God's beckoning us to himself. We are primarily called to him not to a task. It is on his initiative and aimed at his image bearers. But for what purpose? As image bearers we all share one overarching purpose. The Westminster Confession explains that our ultimate purpose is, "to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." So our primary calling is to God for the ultimate purpose of glorifying him and enjoying him.

Along with our ultimate purpose and primary calling, we each have specific purposes reflected in our personal callings. Responding to God's call unlocks our potential to live in harmony with him and to become all that we were created to be. It also makes it possible for us to cooperate with God in accomplishing his purposes.

“It is because of this, that calling creates an ethic of aspiration, not just obligation, as it always,” according to Os Guinness, “challenges us directly to rise to our full stature as human beings.”³

Both our purpose and calling are rooted and fulfilled in God alone. Understanding what is primary and ultimate safeguards us from living solely in pursuit of self-gratification or self-actualization. When our ultimate purpose is to live for his glory we are able to choose our penultimate pursuits more wisely; our work will always be subject to his glory rather than our own desires for money, security or recognition.

Defining Terms - The Building Blocks of Response

Primary Calling - *To him, for him, by him*

Os Guinness explains that, "Our primary calling as followers of Christ is by him, to him, and for him. First and foremost we are called to someone (God) not to something (motherhood or politics) or to somewhere (such as the inner city or China).⁴ He goes on to explain that, "The key to answering the Call is to be devoted to no one and to nothing above God himself".⁵

How we know or discern: Our primary call is revealed in scripture and is the same for all living things.

Ultimate Purpose - *To glorify God and enjoy him forever*

Embracing our ultimate purpose in life both ennobles us and safe guards us. Knowing our ultimate purpose is to glorify God keeps us from being self-indulgent in our response to God's call, seeking personal significance in neglect of God's glory. Knowing that we are to enjoy him keeps us from seeking self-gratification at the expense of all else.

How we know or discern: Revealed in scripture and is the same for all living things.

The First Human Job Description - *To make the world suitable for human flourishing*

All work is intended to create or restore shalom.

How we know or discern: Revealed in scripture and is the same for all living things. See Genesis 1:28; 2:15.

Secondary Calling - Vocation and Destiny

Our secondary calling is the practical out working of our primary calling and ultimate purpose. In response to God's call we first devote ourselves totally to him and then, as a result of our devotion we attempt to answer the question “What am I to do in the world in which I live.” The answer to this will always promote human flourishing in some way and is best understood in two parts, *vocation* and *destiny* (a funny word but think of it as God's specific purposes). *Vocation* answers the question, "what should I do?" while *destiny* answers, "what will I accomplish?" When secondary calling is made up of both *vocation* and *destiny* then our secondary calling transcends our careers; there is a greater purpose in our lives that remains the same even as we change professions.

Vocation- our work, profession, hobbies (our realm in submission to God)

Vocation is the realm of one's career. It is the work we do. Work is the sequel to being created in God's image and was meant to be personally fulfilling and promote human flourishing. Because of this all vocations are important and equally valuable. Work can't be divided into that which is sacred and that which is secular because work is part of the created order. Of course we live in a fallen world and not all professions promote human flourishing. This, however doesn't make those professions less important, just more in need of reforming.

How we know or discern: Vocation involves human choice and is primarily discerned through ones abilities and interests. But since personal fulfillment is not the end objective of our careers (shalom is) there is also a degree of mystery as we move in faith and God leads.

Destiny - God's specific purposes for us and our life. It is how he is using our life for his greater good toward his end of making his abode with humanity. (God's realm in us) We don't seek, manage or control our destiny. We live faithfully and God reveals what we need to know. We may discern part of his purposes for our life and these purposes transcend our careers.

How we know or discern: Mystically discerned if discerned at all. Often only revealed in retrospect or not fully revealed.

It is important to note that God's specific purposes for each of us may or may not be discernable - there are some things we may never fully know. We may choose a vocation for specific purposes but God may have additional things he is accomplishing beyond what we know or understand. Much of our destiny is outside of our control and this keeps us from a self-justifying search for personal significance.

Chapter 2 - The Nature of Calling

Summary Points:

- Our primary calling is to God for the ultimate purpose of glorifying him and enjoying him.
- Secondary calling involves vocation and destiny.
- All work is intended to create or restore shalom.
- Work can't be divided into that which is sacred and that which is secular because work is part of the created order.

Chapter 3 - Thoughts on Choosing a Career

Once we establish the purpose of work and the nature of calling we are ready think about our careers. Just as calling is directional - come and follow me - so are careers. Instead of thinking of a career as an object think of it as a direction or path.

Our career path is part of the storyline of our lives. It is not just our specific occupation at a specific time but is our accumulation of experience and knowledge, education and employment that forms a path for our vocation or calling. It is in part through our career, not in spite of it, that we are to accomplish the tasks and

purposes that God gives us. Our careers become a means of accomplishing God's shalom in the world.

Another way to think of your career is as a resource to be managed in pursuit of your calling. It is a resource that can grow in value. You gain influence through your career as you gain experience or education. You may gain social capital as you make various accomplishments through your career. As your career grows in social capital you have the ability to use it to a greater and greater degree for God's purposes in the world.

Our secondary calling determines how we invest our lives. It answers the question, "What should I do?" Our career is the chief realm in which we work out this aspect of our calling, however civic groups, hobbies, family and other life elements can also form paths for accomplishing what God has called us too. Our calling encompasses our employment but it transcends it, being concerned with more than just our employment.

Consider the realms of commerce, art, media, academia, advertising, architecture, design, transportation, technology, government and law. All of these disciplines are part of the created order and are intended to create and promote human flourishing. The story of each of these disciplines is deeply rooted in the creation and can best be understood in the context of the four-part gospel story of *creation, fall, redemption* and *restoration* (the *ought, is, can, will* framework).

Take law for example. The gospel helps us make sense of this profession by answering core questions such as: How does the legal system reflect justice, punishment or mercy? How should it? What changes are needed if the legal system is to promote shalom? Consider art as a second example. What does the gospel have to say about art? How do the arts reflect creativity and beauty? How should they? How can they begin to? In what ways does art promote shalom? In what ways does it destroy shalom? Each profession can best be understood through the lens of the gospel.

As we connect our faith and work we can build reference points for the gospel helping those with whom we work to understand the gospel's relevance to life in the real world. No transmission of information alone, no matter how complete, can help people understand God in this very real and practical way.

How to Choose a Career.

In today's society, work can be a means of success or acclaim. More often it is a means to money or to the lifestyle we hope money can buy. But if work was meant to be a shalom-building activity then we have more to consider than just our personal success or fulfillment.

When choosing a career we need to look at it from two different perspectives. Whenever possible, we want to choose work that *fits* us personally and also work that *benefits* the wider world. We want to contribute to the common good while doing what we were designed to do.

- Work that *fits* us personally

Our work will be most satisfying when it reflects our primary calling and moves us ahead in accomplishing God's purposes. Since God calls us for a purpose it is reasonable to expect that he has designed us and gifted us for that purpose. He has given us abilities and interests fitting for the work we are to do. We will be most satisfied in our employment when we do work that we enjoy and work we do well.

Consider Os Guinness' thoughts about choosing a career, "When we choose a career path for external reasons such as salary, prestige or parental pressure we are setting ourselves up for frustration later in life if the work does not equally suit us for internal reasons, namely our giftedness and calling. "Success" may then flatter us on the outside as "significance" eludes us from the inside."⁶

- Work that *benefits* the wider world

Throughout scripture godliness and good works are linked for the believer who is instructed to be ready and active in working for the common good. Though choosing a career according to our gifts and abilities is important, self-fulfillment is not the ultimate objective.

Shalom is the bottom line. When choosing a career consider whether work will build human community, or detract from it? Will it help people to flourish or prevent people from flourishing? Use Shalom as a straight edge for choosing your work even if the work is not as professionally or personally fulfilling.

Chapter 3 - Thoughts on Choosing a Career

Summary Points:

- Careers are both directional and a resource
- When possible choose a career that fits you personally
- Choose a career that benefits the wider world

Chapter 4 - Designed with Purpose

The human eye, it's incredible. It is a highly complex organ designed to relate a vast array of visual information to the brain. Each moment, the human eye makes multiple, instantaneous adjustments so that we can clearly see and perceive the world around us. It adjusts according to the brightness or dimness of a situation; it focuses instantly with good resolution and definition in all kinds of lighting and it can distinguish an almost limitless number of colors and hues.

The retina is amazing. It has six layers of light sensitive cells made up of photoreceptors that convert light into chemical energy and then into electrical energy. Each eye has 137 million of these receptors. Most digital cameras only have a million. These layers process six different levels of sensory information before sending the data to the brain for final processing. The eye even compresses the data before sending it on, a kind of visual Win-zip. The information is sent to different parts of the brain and the two fields of vision, one from each eye, are seamlessly reunited so that we never even experience the split.

Who would deny that the eye is incredible? But imagine trying to hear with your eyes. Optical design is useless for the hearing. We can't hear color, and light and

darkness don't correspond to volume and pitch. As highly complex as the eye is - it can't hear.

Like the human eye, we are designed with a purpose. Each of us is one-of-a-kind because we were each designed with a specific and unique purpose in mind. This has incredible ramifications on how we live our lives and how we listen for God's call, because God has designed us for what he calls us to do. Our design gives us a clue into his purpose; just as light sensors indicate that the eye is for seeing not hearing.

1 Corinthians 12:4-7 and 14-21

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. **If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?** But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

How can we tell what we were designed to do? This passage gives us one important clue. We need to consider our *natural abilities* and our *interests*. These traits are a part of our internal design and will help us begin to discern our secondary calling. Design, however, is not the only factor by which we discern God's call; we will also look at two external factors - *resources* and *opportunities*. Considered together, these four things - abilities, interests, resources and opportunities, with much prayer and good counsel can increase your understanding of who you are and God's call for your life.

Discerning And Responding To The Call Of God

Before we can begin to discern a secondary calling we must faithfully respond to the primary calling. This is something that God cannot do for us. He has called, we must respond. Dallas Willard describes spiritual life in this way, "Once the individual has through divine initiative become alive to God and his Kingdom, the extent of integration of his total being into that Kingdom order significantly depends upon the individual's initiative."⁷

We must respond to God's call in order to become integrated into his Kingdom order. Willard goes on to say, "We soon learn...that there is much more in us than what we can consciously command. We find how hard it is to discern and to harmonize the *whole* self with the will and personality of God. Yet even as we reach for more grace to this end, we also learn by experience that the harmonization of our total self with God will not be done *for* us. *We* must act."⁸

This “act”-ing begins with prayer, worship and listening to God’s voice. These actions must be sustained throughout life and require practice and discipline. The effort and skill required for this do not arrive all at once in a moment of devotion but must come with discipline over time.

Understanding the Process. In undertaking a discussion about calling it is important to clarify the essence of God’s call; how is it issued and therefore how we hear it. Let’s look at some popular approaches.

The Mission Statement Approach: It is popular to put a mission statement together and mistake this for calling. The objective of a mission statement is to have a concise and motivational statement by which we can make decisions. While a mission statement can be very helpful it is not the same as calling. More accurately, a mission statement is our impression of what we should do, possibly as a result of hearing God’s call, but possibly not. Remember, calling is directional. Mission statements tend to be destinational.

The Rational Approach: This method assesses strengths and weakness, interest and opportunities and determines a path of action. As far as it goes it is very good but we can’t stop with a rational assessment because we cannot know God solely by our reason. He is rational and he is mystical.

The Mystical Approach: An alternate approach to hearing God is draws *only* on the mystical, as if any attempt on the part of the believer to use reason in hearing God’s call actually violates God in some way. But God has given us our minds and using them is essential if we are to fulfill the Great Commandment.

A Mixed Approach: The directional aspect of calling means that discerning God’s call can be more like a treasure hunt than following a road map. At times we may fulfill an aspect of our secondary calling through the completion of a specific act or in the context of a single event. More often our callings will be expressed in a series of events or a process with long-term even life-long involvement more like themes. As a result both our reason and mystery are involved in hearing God’s call. We use our reason but we wait on God to speak to us personally. He often does this through our reason, but not always. With time and searching and the work of the Holy Spirit, God’s secondary calling becomes more clear.

It is important to distinguish between our secondary calling and God’s leading for a specific situation. Although we often seek guidance in how to specifically work out our calling, calling overarches guidance; God usually guides us to do that which best fulfills our calling, but we must be careful because we don’t have the total picture of what he is doing. Though we make decisions in light of our calling, we always respond in obedience to God’s guidance even if it seems contradictory to his calling.

We must be dependent on God in the process of discerning his call and be both ready and resolved to answer the call. Guinness describes readiness for the follower of Christ as, “obedience honed to the highest level of responsiveness. We should be poised to respond to his slightest word or sign. God expects his followers to follow.”⁹

When listening for God's call we can't expect instant answers, sometimes this is how God works but he also works over time. It may take years to fully know what God is calling you to. Remember calling has to do with investing your life not making specific decisions. It is something that will determine your direction in life as you bring everything you are to God.

In today's culture it is popular to package mission and vision statements in one or two sentences. Calling isn't so easily handled. In our quest to know what God is calling us to do, we often move from vague insight to more clarity over time but even that isn't always the case. God's call comes through intense searching and quiet listening. Even so life is dynamic and our view of our call can shift and change.

Understanding Self. Earlier we learned that God calls us for a purpose and we can reasonably expect that he has designed, gifted and equipped us for that purpose. It then serves to reason that by looking at our design and gifting we may begin to sense God's purpose.

The Call (Os Guinness) gives insight into the relationship between giftedness and calling, "Giftedness does not stand alone in helping us discern our callings. It lines up in response to God's call alongside other factors, such as family heritage, our own life opportunities, God's guidance, and our unquestioning readiness to do what he shows. But to focus on giftedness as a central way to discern calling reverses the way most people think." Guinness reminds us that, "We don't own our gifts, we are stewards of them,"¹⁰ which helps prevent selfishness and self-indulgence in how we put them to use.

We will be looking at internal design and external circumstances, specifically at abilities, interests, resources and opportunities to help identify possible life themes and potential areas of calling.

The following process will require a block of time during which you can read, think and reflect. Begin by taking *The Vocational Inventory*. Take time to assimilate your insights. The purpose of this exercise is not so you will know definitively what it is that God is calling you to do. But this process will get you started, hopefully providing you with a good understanding of your design and how your circumstances come into play in light of calling. This process can help you come to a tentative idea of how God is calling you to invest your life.

Chapter 4 - Designed with Purpose

Summary Points:

- Before you can ever begin to discern a secondary calling you must faithfully respond to the primary calling.
- discovering our calling can be more like a treasure hunt than following a road map.
- We must consider our abilities, interests, resources and opportunities in the process of identifying possible life themes and potential areas of calling.

Calling and Career

- ¹ *The Call*, Chapter 4, page 29
- ² *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, Electronic Database. Copyright (c) 1962 by Moody Press
- ³ *The Call*, Chapter 10, page 85
- ⁴ *The Call*, Chapter 4, page 30
- ⁵ *The Spirit Of The Disciplines*
- ⁶ *The Call*, Chapter 17, page 151
- ⁷ *The Spirit Of The Disciplines*, Chapter 5, page 68
- ⁸ *The Spirit Of The Disciplines*, Chapter 5, page 68
- ⁹ *The Call*, Chapter 25, page 235
- ¹⁰ *The Call*, Chapter 6, page 46