

Table of Contents

1. Is He Calling Me?	9
2. Reading the Call Narratives	19
3. Abraham and Sarah: The First Lesson For the Called	31
4. Moses: Tell God I'm Not Available	41
5. Joshua: Call Forwarding	53
6. Jacob: Let's Make a Deal	65
7. Isaiah: Here Am I, Send Me!	75
8. Saul: Stopped Cold	85
9. Jonah: Just Say No	95
10. Mary and Zechariah: Great Expectations	105
11. Samuel: Who's There?	115
12. Our Christian Calling	125
13. When God Calls	137

Is He Calling Me?

People called by God—their stories stand at the intersection of every major crisis or turning point in Scripture. A flood is coming to destroy the world; God calls Noah. God embarks on a plan to undo the growing problem of sin, so He commissions Abraham and Sarah. When their descendants find themselves enslaved to a cruel oppressor, God summons Moses. When they face military attack, God calls upon Joshua, then Deborah, Gideon, and Samson, just to name a few. And then there are the prophets, many of whom retell spectacular stories of calling: Samuel and the unfamiliar voice deep in the night, Isaiah and his vision of the Lord enthroned in the temple, Jeremiah protesting that he is too young for this, and Ezekiel—with whatever it was that he saw and ate!

God's call is no minor theme tucked away in a few obscure biblical texts. Rather, from Abraham and Sarah in Ur of the Chaldees to Peter on the shores of Galilee, from Moses on the side of Sinai to Saul on the road to Damascus, and from Isaiah's vision in Jerusalem to John's vision on Patmos, stories of God's call upon the lives of His people leap from the text. Further, most of these stories stand as pivot points for longer and even more famous stories. Everything changes for human history when God calls Abraham and Sarah and the story of Israel begins. The fate of Israel hangs in the balance as God speaks to Moses from the burning bush. And Paul's call on the road to Damascus alters the course of Christianity.

These are not unfamiliar stories and yet, the idea of “calling” that constitutes the essence of these narratives is unfamiliar to many. We know these stories well, but we struggle to know what we are to do with them beyond a resource for reconstructing the longer story. What does God’s call to people like Gideon, Barak, or Ezekiel have to do with us? God may have called them, but what relevance does that have for my life? Some may point out the lessons these call narratives teach us about God: God’s sovereignty, God’s responsiveness to human needs, and God’s way of using people to accomplish tasks on earth. But what about the idea of “calling” itself? How does God call people in these texts? What prepares or qualifies an individual to receive God’s call? Eventually we come around to the central question for how these texts relate to our lives: Does God still call people today? We struggle with how to answer and for good reason find ourselves torn in two directions.

My father-in-law, Harvey (Red), grew up in Gulfport, Mississippi in a Christian tradition, but outside the Stone-Campbell movement. After graduation from high school he joined the Air Force and eventually landed in Midland, Texas among the churches of Christ. One consequence of raising a family in Midland with his own extended family back in Gulfport was the annual pilgrimage home to visit grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins—a lengthy trip that usually led to spending the weekend, including a Sunday morning in Gulfport. One particular Sunday, as was the custom, Red and his family got up and went to the local church of Christ while the rest of the family went to his old home church. This year, however, a dilemma faced him upon his arrival at church; he was the only male present.

There was only one viable solution to the crisis. Harvey proceeded to teach the Bible class and conduct the worship assembly. He led all the prayers, read Scriptures, served the communion, took up the collection, attempted to lead the singing (by his own acknowl-

edgement, not his gift), made the announcements, and to the great delight of his daughters, he preached the sermon.

The after-church reunion back at the home place found two excited young girls proudly announcing “Daddy preached! Daddy preached!” A revelation that caught the attention of Harvey’s brother,

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a lay-ordained pastor at the family’s church who immediately asked him THE question: “Why Harvey, I didn’t know! When did you receive your call to preach?” To which Red replied, “When I got to the building and they asked me.” Not to be put off, Harvey’s brother began to recount his own story of calling. It was a Saturday night and he was

drawing up his bath water, leaning over the tub to put the stopper in the drain when God called him to preach. To which, Harvey interrupted, “Sounds to me like you just pulled a muscle!”

Such a jesting, questioning, skeptical attitude toward divine calling is fairly common among members of the churches of Christ. We would never deny God’s ability or freedom to do anything; we are just not so sure about contemporary claims of personal calling and those who make them, a reluctance that stems from our roots. One chromosome in our spiritual DNA as children of the Stone-Campbell heritage is a deep suspicion of “a personal call.” In fact, the trajectory set by our spiritual ancestors was in sharp reaction to two common practices of “calling” in the early 1800’s. First, Calvinistic teachings of the time emphasized the limited scope of God’s atonement; not everyone was called to salvation, only the elect. Worse, a person did not know if he was a member of the elect unless he had experienced a personal and visible “call” from God. As a result, the earliest use of mourner’s benches (the precursor to coming forward in response to an invitation

song) came into practice for people convinced and convicted by the preaching, but who had not yet received or experienced a “call.” They came forward, waited, and hoped for a call that would confirm their status as one of God’s elect for salvation.

Campbell and Stone (later) fought against this Calvinistic concept of calling, arguing instead from texts such as II Thessalonians that God calls all people to salvation through the proclamation of the gospel. Here, Paul writes to the church that God “called you through our proclamation of the good news” (2:13-14). One does not need to await the experience of a call; God has already issued it in the preaching about Christ. And this call, Peter claims, is “for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him” (Acts 2:39). So instead of waiting for a call from God, Campbell argued that a convicted believer should act in such a way as to receive the call God has already extended.

A second practice to which Stone and Campbell responded was the special calling of clergy to an ordained status in the church. In their day, many denominations required a candidate for ordination to recount his experience of God’s call to the office of a pastor. If a candidate had no such experience, the church would not ordain him. Campbell countered that the early church did not recognize such an ordained, “called” clergy. All Christians are a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (I Peter 2:9). The New Testament knows nothing of a clergy-laity division with a special class of called priests officiating over non-called “lay” members. Consequently, two distinctive doctrines emerged in early preaching among churches of Christ: 1) God calls all people to salvation through the gospel, and 2) God calls all those saved to ministry in the church.

Our spiritual ancestry, then, has led us to be suspicious of any claim to a special call from God. Certainly, God has called many servants throughout the course of history. We would never deny God’s right or ability to do so then or now. God can call whomever God

wishes when God pleases. But we are, after all, talking about spiritual giants, called people such as Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Paul. It stands against our spiritual DNA and seems a bit presumptuous, even arrogant, to claim a “called” place among such heroes of the faith. So we hesitate when we hear such a claim—and would never make such an assertion for ourselves.

This strand of DNA remains strong among many, but not all. For others, the two centuries since Stone and Campbell have weakened this genetic trait; attitudes about divine calling have changed and continue to do so. Whether such change is appropriate will be addressed in the course of this study. For now the point is a simple observation: many members of the churches of Christ no longer share our traditional skepticism or rejection of personal calling. To be sure, we still reject the Calvinistic idea of calling and the special call of an ordained clergy. But some are more receptive to those who make claims about God’s call on their lives to special service and are acutely concerned about discerning God’s call upon our own lives.

One evidence of this renewed concern is the popularity of Annie Herring’s song “There’s a Stirring”:

Verse One: There’s a stirring deep within me,
 Could it be my time has come?
 When I see my gracious Savior,
 Face to face when all is done.
 Is that his voice I am hearing,
 “Come away, my precious one.”
 Is He calling me? Is He calling me?

Chorus: I will rise up,
 I’ll rise up.
 And bow down,
 And lay my crown
 At His wounded feet.

This song is majestic, especially when sung with an audience of two thousand or more passionate young people. My students love this song and I like it too, but I must say that it is morbid. Literally, “There’s a Stirring” is a song about death (or perhaps some concept of a rapture). The opening lines pose the question, “could it be my time has come?” my time to face my Savior when “all is done.” The stirring to which this song refers is an inner uncertainty about whether my time to die has come, and thus the writer poses the question: “Is he calling me?” This reading of the song is confirmed by the second verse, not sung in any congregational arrangements that I have heard.

Verse Two: Could it be the gates of heaven,
 Swinging open just for me?
 Could it be my Lord is coming,
 Coming now to set me free?
 Is that His voice I am hearing,
 “Come away, my precious one.”
 Is He calling me? Is He calling me?

My training as a historical-critical exegete or interpreter makes this “deathly” meaning of the song clear to me; I could not sing it without this understanding. But I am equally convinced that some of my students are not thinking about death when they sing this song. Instead, they exercise something of a reader-response method in singing. Unbound from any original intent of the author, they seize upon key lyrics and fill these with their own meanings. Here, they seize upon the question “Is he calling me?” and ask not whether they are about to die, but whether God is calling them to special service. They want to know if God is calling, to what God is calling, and how they can recognize this call.

My suspicions of this understanding of the song were recently confirmed when a former student sent me a Portuguese version of

If my robe is white when he calls me,
I'll be somewhere list'ning for my name.

Again, the original meaning of the song is about death or the second coming of Christ; with a pure heart and white robe we await the call of God to a life beyond. And yet, I would estimate only half of the assembly sang the song with such an understanding. The other half was anxious to keep their hearts and robes pure so that they could hear the Savior's call upon their lives here and now.

So we find ourselves in somewhat of a bind. On the one side, our genetic predisposition leads us to be skeptical about calling while on the other side a resurgence of interest is leading to a greater openness to the idea. This study responds to and exists in the midst of this tension. Obviously in this short work we will not resolve all the tensions or questions about calling, but I do hope we can resolve a few and in the process allow Scripture to work in our lives in fresh ways. Of course Scripture is the most reliable resource for reflection on the concept of calling. And on this topic we are not left in a lurch for pertinent texts. Call narratives dot the landscape of the Bible and offer to us a place to come together, read together, and converse with one another about God's call. In what follows we set out on a trek to revisit these many well-known stories and perhaps a few that are not so well known. But in both cases we come with a set of questions we may not have considered before, questions about God's calling on the lives of the people in the text and God's calling upon our lives.

At the risk of immediate misunderstanding, I do need to address briefly two common misconceptions about calling in the Bible before we close this introduction. First, while God's call sometimes came upon people in mysterious and even miraculous ways (e.g., Isaiah, Moses), this was not always the case. As we will see, God called Joshua primarily through the work of Moses, just as God

called Timothy through Paul selecting and taking Timothy with him on his third missionary journey (Acts 16:1-3). In much the same way God calls elders (“the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” [Acts 20:28]) through the church’s process of identification and selection (Titus 1:5-9; I Timothy 3:1-7). There is no question that Joshua, Timothy, and the elders were all called by God, but they received their call through the mediation of others, including the church. Thus, God’s call does not necessarily require a mysterious or miraculous event.

Second, God’s call often summons a person to speak on God’s behalf, to be a prophet or preacher (e.g., Jeremiah, Ezekiel). But this is by no means the only commission to which God calls people in the Bible. God called Noah to build a boat and Moses (at least at first) to involve himself in the politics of justice. Joshua was summoned to be a military and political leader. And God called others such as Abraham, Sarah, Mary, and Zechariah to trust Him to do what He promised to do in their lives. God’s calling is not limited to preaching or prophesy in the Bible.

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Now, with some awareness of the history of this topic in the Stone-Campbell movement that continues to influence our thinking, with a recognition of both the traditional and newer attitudes toward divine calling, and with this brief corrective that divine calling in Scripture is not limited to miraculous means or prophetic purposes, we now turn to consider the form or pattern of call narratives in the Bible as a prelude to engaging the individual stories of what happens when God calls.

Discussion Questions:

1. Examine the list of people called by God included in this chapter. Identify others God called in the Bible. How did God call them? To what tasks did God call these servants? How did these calls and tasks fulfill God's purposes in each situation?
2. Brainstorm about songs that use the terms "call" or "calling." Examine the lyrics of these songs. What appears to be the original idea of the author? What have you thought while singing them? Compare your responses to the author's intent—is it the same or different? What accounts for the differences, if any?
3. Have you ever known anyone who claimed to have a special calling from God? How was it received by others? What was their story? How did you feel about their claim? Why?
4. On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being the strongest) how would you rate the strength of your spiritual DNA regarding calling? What effect would you say that the Stone-Campbell heritage has on your attitudes? Explain.
5. What do you hope to learn from this study of the call narratives? What questions do you have about this subject at this point in your reading?