

A Divine Selection: An Exegetical Analysis of Vocational Calling

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Abstract

Within Christian circles, the ‘calling’ of the vocational minister is frequently abused and misunderstood and muddled by the lack of Scriptural evidence for the overused term. The focus of this research is to observe first, the current cultural climate surrounding the nature of calling, and second, to compare this understanding to the authoritative Scriptural teaching on the subject in both the Old and New Testaments. This analysis reveals that the “internal” vocational call to minister is absent from the Bible and must be replaced by an alternative the Scripture directly teaches. It is concluded that God gives man the desire to become a minister but does not audibly select leaders in the manner of biblical characters.

A Divine Selection: An Exegetical Analysis of Vocational Calling

There is no doubt in the believer's mind that God empowers His children to minister and preach His Gospel for His glory, but prevalent evangelical vernacular has created significant confusion regarding God's "calling" in the lives of the average believer and the minister. A common perception is that only those who are "called" may adequately minister vocationally, but discerning this call proves indistinct and misleading. Broadly, the "call of God" has been misappropriated to proclaim a vocational ideal that the Scripture is silent on to the detriment of the theological reality of the term. It has been misapplied to hyper spiritualize the experience of the minister, which is worsened by the lack of substantive content regarding what it means to be called by God into pastoral work.

"Few concepts are talked about more and understood less in Christian circles than God's call."¹ Although, it is spoken of often few Christians can provide a clear definition on what the calling of God truly is, but it is accepted as a foundational pillar for any man entering ministry. Therefore, due to the over prevalence of the term in tandem with such lack of clarity the "calling" within the ministry is a concept that has been abused in evangelical circles to communicate a concept that holds little foundation in Scripture. Yet, this is not to doubt that God's divine will is accomplished through his ministers who He himself has divinely chosen, but suspicion is placed on the specific usage of "calling" to describe this phenomenon.

¹ Jeff Iorg, *Is God Calling Me?* (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 12.

A recent survey of undergraduate Pastoral Leadership students (administered by the researcher of this paper) resulted in 95.5% of these young men agreeing to the statement, “I have been called by God into the work of pastoral ministry.”² A generalized conviction is present that is only reinforced by their course work, which requires a paper testifying to such a calling.³ Therefore their experience of calling is molded by the cultural environment, and God’s role in ministry is elevated to its rightful place. Similarly, a suspicion suggests that to deny a personal ‘calling’ to some congregations could supersede the biblical qualifications of an elder. Scripture clearly advocates for the vocational role of the minister as well as God’s role in raising up these ministers, but limited academic study is provided on the subject resulting in poor theological expression in the life of the minister. Yet, it is challenging for any conservative Christian to deny God’s divine hand in the life of the minister for this is the power behind ministerial work. Therefore, God’s divine selection of ministers is not in question, but rather if the term ‘calling’ is the most appropriate term based on its broad misuse.

A Contemporary Understanding

A Secular Calling

Though this research pertains to ministerial calling it proves helpful to observe the cultural influences shaping the concept. At the most basic level a calling is, “a strong urge towards a particular way of life or career; a vocation.”⁴ A calling from the secular

² Timothy Nguyen, “Call to Ministry Survey Analysis” (Liberty University, Lynchburg, Fall 2017), 4.

³ David Adams, “PLED 201 Syllabus.” Liberty University, Fall 2015.

⁴ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Calling,” <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/calling> (accessed April 2, 2018).

perspective may be reduced to simply a strong urge or desire that is likely informed by one's natural talents, but it has become a nearly intangible achievement with countless blog articles dedicated to the topic oriented toward those disenchanted with their current careers hawking titles such as "Which Will Make You Happiest: A Job Or A Calling?"⁵ or "How to Find Your True Calling"⁶. According to secular thought, the way to true satisfaction in work and life is to discover the secret, hidden thing that you were created to do, which revolves around a mystical spirituality.

Poet and philosopher Mark Nepo in his book *The Book of Awakening* writes, "If you feel energy and excitement and a sense that life is happening for the first time, you are probably near your *God-given nature*. Joy in what we do is not an added feature; it is a sign of deep health (emphasis added)."⁷ It is here portrayed as an act of spirituality and pseudo worship where God is pleased in one finding their own hidden purpose that frees them. This philosophy is one fed to all of America through influential outlets such as Oprah Winfrey who advocates for Nepo's work.⁸ As a broad summary, such sentiments are an appropriate gauge of the American perspective on calling in life. A vague urge toward a secret talent God has planted in each person, which they must discover to achieve true peace and satisfaction.

⁵ Kathy Caprino, "Which Will Make You Happiest – A Job Or A Calling," *Forbes*, May 20, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kathycaprino/2016/05/20/which-will-make-you-happiest-a-job-or-a-calling/#354b61431e63>.

⁶ Andrew Merle, "How to Find Your True Calling," *Huffington Post: The Blog*, December 06, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/andrew-merle/how-to-find-your-true-cal_b_13445164.html.

⁷ Mark Nepo, *The Book of Awakening: Having the Life You Want by Being Present to the Life You Have* (San Francisco: Conari Press, 2000), 294.

⁸ Oprah Winfrey, "What Oprah Knows For Sure About Finding Your Calling," *OPRAH.COM*, (accessed September 8, 2018), <http://www.oprah.com/spirit/oprah-on-finding-your-calling-what-i-know-for-sure>.

Defining A Spiritual Vocational Calling

Considering a Christian perspective of pastoral calling, an understanding of what is currently being taught must be observed before we turn to the Scriptural answer. Historically, the issue of a pastor's calling has been a focal point of ministry with Charles Spurgeon writing that "It is a fearful calamity to a man to miss his calling, and to the church upon whom he imposes himself, his mistake involves an affliction of the most grievous kind."⁹ Speaking specifically of one who assumes the pulpit wrongly, it appears that Spurgeon believed a man can preach apart from the blessing of God. For it is a calamity for him to preach if God has not 'called' him to do so. The outcome of which is "fruitless ministries and decaying churches."¹⁰ Here again, God's mysterious will in empowering the minister is affirmed. Yet a sense is given that many have not discerned such a position due to false spirituality leading to an ignorance of God's pressing Spirit away from this role. But still, the term 'calling' functions intangibly and elusively where many could easily convince themselves of such a matter. Yet, Spurgeon remains determined that God has chosen a select few to function as His spiritual ministers. One is endowed by God's Spirit to teach and lead the congregation. Ultimately, it is God who selects His ministers and empowers them to accomplish his work.

From his book *Is God Calling Me?*, Current President of Gateway Seminary, Jeff Iorg claims, "A call is a profound impression from God that establishes parameters for your life and can be altered only by a subsequent, superseding impression from God."¹¹ A

⁹ C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (reprint of 1875 ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 22.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Jeff Iorg, *Is God Calling Me?* (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 13.

call is a profound impression. The minister's motivation is reduced to a feeling or emotion that can be continually modified once those feelings or convictions change. Can one be called for a time until the conviction is no longer there? Such a definition though appropriate contributes to the vague, generalized nature of the word resulting in theological confusion. However, some validity remains in this account because a "profound impression of God," is an experience common to most men who enter vocational ministry. The experiential nature of "calling" must be considered when observing its usage in the contemporary Church context. Perhaps, the greatest advocate for the "internal" call is not a scriptural argument, but the Holy Spirit experiences of the minister.

Albert Mohler, President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary expresses that there are two forms of calling in the minister's life; an internal call and an external call. The internal call is identified by an urgent compulsion to preach while the external is the congregational affirmation of one's readiness for ministry.¹² While the external call is verified by Scripture repeatedly, most notably in the Pastoral Epistles, the internal call has little Scriptural support with Mohler only able to cite 1 Corinthians 9:16, "For if I preach the gospel, I have no reason to boast, because I am compelled to preach—and woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" This single verse does not merit an entire theological understanding. Further, this passage itself does not explicitly mention 'calling' but a powerful God given desire. Yet, it can be recognized that within the traditional evangelical framework that this verse advocates will for the concept of "calling" though

¹² Albert Mohler, Donald S. Whitney, and Daniel S. Dumas, *The Call to Ministry* (Louisville: SBTS, 2013), 8-15.

not necessarily the terminology. Although this is the definition assigned to an ‘internal call’ according to this verse it may not accurately represent the text cited. By purposely placing the word ‘call’ rather than the evident word desire or conviction it is imposing the theological construct upon the text. This imposition is worsened when considering that very few verses merit the use of ‘internal call’ based on a traditional conservative hermeneutic. Again, it is observed that the “internal call” is a term ascribed to an experience with God.

Stemming from this confusion and sparing use of Scripture many writings used to explain calling appeal primarily to the experiential narrative. This narrative is rooted not in the Bible but in their own subjective emotional journey. Adam Bond of Virginia Union University shares his experience of numerous sleepless nights and hours of godly counsel that he might eventually surrender his desire to become a minister of the Gospel.¹³ This account might better be described as a divine desire rather than a literal audible calling for ‘internal calling’ is inadequate to describe the occasion considering the textual usage in Scripture continually refers to an audible voice of God commanding His servant. Similarly, Gordon MacDonald, Chancellor of Denver Seminary, shares that his mother and grandmother would pray that God would bring a preacher into their family, which combined with his own desire to preach from a young age.¹⁴ What can be learned from these experiences and definitions is that faithful ministers must wrestle with a supernaturally imparted conviction that they are to minister to God’s people and preach.

¹³ Adam L. Bond, *I’ve Been Called Now What?* (King of Prussia: Judson, 2012), 11.

¹⁴ Gordon MacDonald, “God’s Calling Plan,” *CTPastors*, Fall 2003.
<https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2003/fall/3.35.html>

Although, the calling is difficult to discern at times, these prominent Christian leaders testify to the nature of God's calling. That God selects and guides certain believers to pursue leadership within the Church. It would be a grave error to deny such an abundance of testimony supporting God's sovereign selection of leaders, but the common usage is far from this powerful weighty understanding of a pastoral call. To these men, God's call does not refer to the whims or momentary decisions in life, but rather it regards God's mighty purpose toward a specific identity as pastor or elder. God's call isn't to a certain role or to a specific location, but by these definitions God's call is to be someone not to do something. Further, the experiences of these men must not be denied for it is theologically and experientially evident that God places a powerful supernatural conviction into those he has selected to minister.

From the traditional definition, 'calling' would certainly be an appropriate word to use, but it may be advantageous to use clearer, specific language instead. To clarify, a powerful testimony can resonate with any man desiring to become a minister of the Gospel but using it to prove a theological point may be an improper application of the story. Rather, we must affirm the God given desire to serve as pastor, but not equate this as proof of the broader term "calling." Rather, there are objective measurements for ministry readiness which differ strongly from the experiential nature of the internal call primarily the Elder requirements of the Pastoral Epistles that can be measured and observed by outside sources rather than the singular testimony of the "internal call."

Identifying a Vocational Calling

Beyond the definition, there is an abundance of practical advice that may be given to potential ministers that prove helpful in discerning God's imprinted desire to minister.

William Gordon Blaikie provides six essential criteria for any young minister including salvation, a desire to serve, a desire to live a life conducive to service, intellectual ability, physical qualifications, and social elements.¹⁵ This understanding focuses on one's desires for the position as well as spiritual maturity. It includes many criteria indicative of a mature believer, but it does not suggest that there is a mysterious special purpose, which must be discovered first. A similar but succinct understanding makes use of the acrostic CALL; Confirmation, Abilities, Longings, and Life.¹⁶ The confirmation mentioned is specifically the confirming of the congregation and of God. Unfortunately, the confirmation of God is described merely as "open doors and God's blessing"¹⁷ leaving the reader wanting clarity. Surely if pastoral work rested upon the power of God a robust theology beyond "open doors" would be present proclaiming God's ordaining purpose.

Finally, the most convicting appeal to pastoral ministry is in Dr. Paul Blanchard's foundational requirements. The potential minister must exhibit 1) A deep sense of God's Spirit leading you into the ministry 2) A powerful urge to preach 3) The fact that satisfaction is found nowhere but in preaching.¹⁸ A call toward pastoral ministry is typified by the insatiable, supernatural desires to minister and to preach. Therefore, based on this collective understanding, the marks of pastoral conviction center around a

¹⁵ William Gordon Blaikie, *For the Work of the Ministry: A Manual of Homiletical and Pastoral Theology* (London: J. Nisbet, 1896), 18-25.

¹⁶ James M. George, "The Call to Pastoral Ministry" in *Pastoral Ministry: How to Shepherd Biblically*, ed. John MacArthur, 81-91 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 84-91.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 86.

¹⁸ Paul Blanchard, *Called to Minister: Committed to Serve* (Anniston: Eaton, 1988), 2.

divinely given, overwhelming desire to serve God through preaching and ministering.

Perhaps, Spurgeon's words were confrontational for this purpose; that many men standing in pulpits though educated and qualified lacked this essential passion. The grievous affliction he teaches would then be to have an apathetic, spiritually deaf pastor. Therefore, the symptom of the calling is this passionate desire, and the source is God's greater purposes manifested through his Holy Spirit.

Old Testament Analysis

Concerning the "call" of the Old Testament, God's sovereign hand is observed at work through the selection of many unique leaders, yet some principles may of "calling" may be applied to the contemporary Church, but perhaps not a direct correlation to their experiences. The Old Testament writings are littered with men and women who have been used by God to accomplish mighty works that exalted their God, YHWH. It is not doubt that from an evangelical interpretation that God Himself empowered these heroes of faith to accomplish His mysterious divine will. God instructs in the Old Testament writings that he has chosen many of these people for His purposes to follow after Him. Some follow after God's grander purposes such as Abraham or Moses, but others when granted authority and power abuse these gifts for selfish gain such as the cursed line of King Jeroboam that idolatrized Israel. Based on the current vernacular, many evangelical interpreters would claim that these people were "called" by God to their particular position. However, very rarely within Old Testament History does God literally call out someone to act.

Hebrew Word Study

According to the Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, the word "call" appears 193 times in the entirety of Scripture while "called" appears 623 times.¹⁹ This common word is translated almost exclusively as (קָרָא) within the context of God calling forth someone to accomplish his work. However, this term "קָרָא" most often is defined as "to call, call out, recite."²⁰ Quite often it is the word used when naming something such as a person or a place, as when Adam calls his new wife Eve in Genesis 3:20. This naming is also used to assert sovereignty over something such as when God named the day and night in Genesis 1:5 or when Adam was allowed to name the animals in the Garden of Genesis.²¹ However, it is rare that the word is used in calling out one specific man to serve God. It is far less common than the word call is attributed to a narrative.

Often, "קָרָא" is used in the contrasting sense such as in the psalms to reflect the upward calling of man toward God. Within the Old Testament, "Hebrew does not use one term for God speaking to man, another for man speaking to God, and still a third for man speaking to his fellow man."²² Used elsewhere as well, a passionate cry out to God is communicated such as when Jonah is commanded to call upon his God in Jonah 1:6 when God has sent a storm to destroy the ship Jonah was using to escape the presence and judgment of God, and in fact "control[s] the flow of the narrative and constitutes the

¹⁹ James Strong, *The Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 177-178.

²⁰ James Strong, *The New Strong's Expanded Dictionary of Bible Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 792.

²¹ Ibid.

²² *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament: Volume I* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 331.

vehicle of the theme”²³ for the entire book. Similarly, “qara besem yhwh” is used to denote an invoking of YHWH religiously, and is used five times in Genesis (4:26, 12:8, 13:4, 21:33, 26,25) as an expression meant to establish a relationship with the LORD God.²⁴ Nearly exclusively, it is the man calling out to God for a specific purpose, but far fewer times is this word used to signal God calling out to man. The exception to this is during times of special revelation. “This usage emphasizes that God’s revelation is spoken, transmissible, propositional, definite matter”²⁵ However, this usage is not indicative of the prevalent usage of the word appearing as an exception rather than the common definition. A relationship is signaled between the two parties, earthly and divine, but the great weight of a called purpose is largely absent from the word itself.

The difficulty arises when the traditional concept of calling is present but such an associated English or Hebrew word for “calling” is absent from the language. For many narrative headings the phrase “The Calling of” is present whether it be Noah, Abraham, or Isaiah. The literal English word “call” or Hebrew word “קָרָא” is undetectable in the majority of commonly associated stories though the term is often assigned to it. To place such a description on the passage based on a culturally influenced ill- understood definition fails to be faithful to the meaning of the text and thus misrepresents the Word of God unless it can be theologically verified through the whole of Scripture.

²³ *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament: Volume XIII* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 116.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 113.

²⁵ *Theological Workbook of the Old Testament: Volume I* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 55.

Samuel's Call

Perhaps the clearest use of “call” in reference to a man to a specific divine vocation is the prophet Samuel’s first encounter with the LORD in 1 Samuel 3. This passage is one of the rare Old Testament occurrences where the word translated as “call” appears to separate a man of God for service. As this is not a comprehensive account of God’s calling within the Old Testament, this passage will serve as an example in observing such calling biblically.

The word of the Lord was rare in Samuel’s time, which has come after the great Exodus and time of Judges. Though religious responsibility has been maintained as evidenced by Samuel’s own service in the temple and the presence of Eli the priest, the manifest power of God’s word has largely been absent from Israelite life with Samuel serving as the next male herald of God’s word since Moses. Though there was a religious pretext within the community as sacrifices and priestly duties were maintained, “it was as if sacred Scripture was covered in mold or dust. The study of Scripture was neglected when Samuel came along.”²⁶ Already the Torah and the Exodus were becoming antiquated traditions reserved for religious study rather than the divinely imparted word of God.

During this time of spiritual drought, Yahweh calls to Samuel simply and clearly from the Ark, “Samuel, Samuel.” This repetition of Samuel’s name parallels the divine interaction with both Abraham²⁷ and Moses²⁸ at the onset of their personal ministries.

²⁶ Viktorin Strigel, *Livri Samuelis, Regum et Paralipomenon: Ad Hebraicam Veritatem Recogniti, et Bravibus Commentariis Explicati*. (Leipzig: Ernst Voglin, 1569), 13.

²⁷ Genesis 22:1-11.

This paralleled story highlights the importance in both Samuel's life and in Israelite history alongside several other heroes of faith.²⁹ Therefore, the accounts of Moses³⁰ and Abraham can be more fully considered "callings" not on the basis of preconceived definition of the term, but on the basis of the biblical account where Samuel is clearly called out to and searched for by God.

It is critical to note the presence of the Levitical priests at this time for although there were performing their assigned function the family of Eli had failed to be follow after Yahweh properly by abusing their power and perverting the sacrifices and offerings meant for the Lord as described in 1 Samuel 2. Not only was Samuel called by God, he was also called for a purpose and in the immediate context that purpose was to declare judgement on the family of Eli. Hophni and Phinehas, "are portrayed as greedy, impious priests as well as disobedient sons of a father who, though completely aware of the situation, is unable to influence them for the better. [Although], there is no suggestion that Eli himself is wicked."³¹ The men who presumably would be closest to the presence of God instead receive His wrath. Eli's sons have already been judged by a man of God, but now Samuel is chosen to continue on this Oracle against Eli's house. "The iniquity of Eli's family will never be wiped out by either sacrifice or offering."³² Since Yahweh is

²⁸ Exodus 3:4.

²⁹ Robert D. Bergen, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Samuel*. (Nashville: B&H, 1996), 86.

³⁰ "קָרָא" is also used in Exodus 3:4 when God called out to Moses from the burning bush validating his commission as a genuine calling experience as well.

³¹ P. Kyle McCarter, Jr, *The Anchor Bible: 1 Samuel* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1980), 84.

³² 1 Samuel 3:14.

seeking to preserve his holiness in the nation of Israel not only does he appoint a new herald to speak His truths he is sanctifying his temple via curse. Since Hophni and Phinehas' guilt cannot be removed through sacrifice or offering they as the administrators of these practices cannot be atoned for by cultic means.³³ The system that they had disgraced and perverted could not help them just as the system itself never forgave a man for his iniquities. Yahweh is once again proving that He is the reason for the sacrifices and the reason one's sins must be atoned.

Therefore, the purpose of Samuel's calling was to deliver a harsh and difficult message to the man who had cared for him. He was given a burden to expose the wickedness that had dishonored Yahweh by defaming His great name and leading Israel forward into a renewed righteous living to worship God wholly and sincerely. From Samuel's narrative we can gather that a personal calling is twofold. First, a calling can only be imparted by supernatural initiation toward one who is righteous, and second, a calling is given for a specific and holy purpose that is meant to ultimately glorify the name of YHWH.

Isaiah's Call

The tone of the Prophet Isaiah's calling is remarkably different in tone and event, yet the condemning oracle remains similar. Contrasting, God's gentle prodding of Samuel, the LORD harshly confronts Isaiah to preach His message of confrontation and judgement. Yet, the content and tone of Isaiah 6 places greater importance of the glory of God than it does the calling of this man stating in verse 1, "I saw the Lord seated on a

³³ A. Graeme Auld, *The Old Testament Library: I & II Samuel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 59.

high and lofty throne, and the hem of his robe filled the temple.” The focal point of this chapter is not upon Isaiah, but upon worship of the LORD. Only an elite few in Israel’s history may testify to seeing God face to face, which is marked by the phrase “I have seen God.” An experience shared with men such as Moses, Jacob, and Gideon.³⁴ Isaiah’s experience is unique even in the commissioning of other prophets for Samuel did not see God’s face like Isaiah had.

The mighty presence of God instilled fear, which precedes the fearful message that the prophet will preach. That God will blind their eyes and deafen their ears until, “Until cities lie in ruins without inhabitants, houses are without people, the land is ruined and desolate, and the Lord drives the people far away, leaving great emptiness in the land.”³⁵ Two opposing parties are featured; the glorious throne of God’s righteous judgment and the people who have abandoned this glory for their own desires. Mirroring Samuel, Isaiah is called to preach a specific message of judgment to a people who have abandoned God. Beyond the Old Testament, this prophetic oracle is quoted by both Mark and John’s Gospels to harshly suggest that God willed for the people to be deafened and for Jesus to be rejected that the events of the cross might result.³⁶ Thus, Isaiah’s calling to make evident the wrathful divide between the earthly and divine is one experienced throughout much of Scripture as both preach judgment against those who refuse to believe.

³⁴ Alphonso Groenewald, "Isaiah 1:2–3 and Isaiah 6: Isaiah ‘a prophet like Moses,’ (Dt 18:18)" *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* [Online], Vol. 68 No. 1 (5 December 2012).

³⁵ Isaiah 6:11.

³⁶ Craig A. Evans, "The Function of Isaiah 6:9-10 in Mark and John," *Novum Testamentum* 24, no. 2 (1982): 124-38. doi:10.2307/1560554.

New Testament Analysis

The New Testament usage of “calling” is foundational to the contemporary Church identity in regard to apostleship and the calling every believer holds. The use of calling in the context of God’s purposes for service include four primary Greek words, **καλέω, λέγω, κλητός, and ἐπικαλέω**. All of these words are translated to call or to summon within the New Testament. Fortunately, much of the modern formation of the term is rooted in New Testament theology. Due to the highly contextual nature of the New Testament usage, detailed word study will prove ineffective, but rather the content of the message itself must be studied.

Selecting the Disciples

The clearest New Testament example of God calling individuals to His will is the calling of the disciples in the Gospels and later Paul’s supernatural encounter in Acts. These calling events are repeated throughout the Gospels from varying perspectives and reveal the nature of their callings by Jesus Christ. The first example comes from Matthew 4:18-22 with a group of fishermen, Simon Peter, Andrew, and the brothers James and John. In this text it specifically states that Jesus calls out to the two sets of men separately, but parallelism is used to point out the significance and repetition of the event. Because they are called by Jesus we know that the concept at the very least has a theological usage in the New Testament. Interestingly, Jesus does not walk in to the synagogue and begin summoning trained Pharisees or religious elite members of the community.

This calling transcends the expectation of who should be called against the reality of Jesus’ vision, similar to the anointing of David by Samuel for the LORD first observes

the heart rather than the exterior qualifications first. Jesus walks along the shore and calls four ordinary fishermen people who are actively working elsewhere. Stripping away theological complexity, Jesus command is simple, “Come, Follow me.” This command echoes Elijah placing his mantel upon Elisha in 1 Kings 19.³⁷ Just as Elisha immediately abandoned all other responsibility and followed God’s purposes for his life the disciples obey Jesus immediately to follow Him. Therefore, the calling of God requires a response. Scripture has made it evident that when God calls an immediate, faithful response is expected. A response that abandons all other responsibility for the sake of God’s work to be done just as Elisha sacrificed the oxen he used to plough the field and the disciples sacrificed their fishing careers; a divine call requires complete commitment to the purposes of God.

For the disciples, Jesus commands that they are to become “fishers of men.” The same talent they have developed in the sea will now translate to multiplying the Kingdom not by their own works but by the empowerment and training of Jesus Christ because He is the one who will make them into such fishers. “The invitation is accompanied by the promise that Jesus will equip them (make) for the new work to which he calls them; their obedience is followed by the promise of provision.”³⁸ By His words, Jesus further declares that He is the one who prepares them to do His work, which necessitates the original command to follow. For they cannot fish for men unless they are first trained by

³⁷ Craig L. Blomberg, *The New American Commentary: Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992),90.

³⁸ Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13* (Dallas: World Books, 1993), 76.

following after Jesus as His disciples, which links the two concepts of calling and discipleship in their lives.

The content of Mark 1 retells the same calling of the fisherman but later includes several other disciples. Mark 2: 14-15 harkens to the chapter before as Levi works in his career before Jesus approaches him with the same call to “Follow Me.” Immediately Levi submits by leaving his tax booth and inviting Jesus to his home. He believed the call and abandoned his previous way of life for the sake of Jesus mission. Jesus’ call extended not only to those unqualified such as simple fisherman but also to those despised by the community such as the tax collector Levi. As a tax collector for the Roman government, Levi was considered a traitor against his ethnic brothers and their shared religion, which held strong cultural roots.³⁹ If Jesus willingly calls a man such as this from among the people surely anyone can be called to service. Thus, the transformative power of the Gospel is seen at work alongside the responsibility of calling.

The Gospel of Luke adds additional detail to the fisherman narrative in Luke 5:1-11. Jesus proves his authority to the men by providing a miraculous payment of fish in exchange for the use of their boat. This stunning miracle declares the great provision given if they are to follow Him for they are secure not by their own livelihood but by the hand of God. This results in the humbled response of Simon Peter, “Go away from me, because I’m a sinful man.” In context, this confession prepares his own heart to receive his calling for Jesus repeatedly does not call those who are expecting authority or religious power but those who are humbled and entirely in need of Jesus leadership.

³⁹ William Hendrinsen, *New Testament Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 94.

Luke's early vague use of "sinner" will "indicate people who either recognize themselves in need of divine redemption or who are ostracized by others and so stand in the greatest need of gracious intervention, while at the same time highlighting Jesus' identity as one who crosses boundaries to bring good news to the unworthy."⁴⁰ Finally, John provides the longest narrative of the subject, but the call remains the same, "Come, follow me."

Consistently, within the life of the disciples the command was to follow Jesus who shepherded the apostles from flawed and failing men into replicating Christ-followers. For the greatest mark of the disciples was that they followed Him though they understood so little, and their capacity to understand the truth Jesus imparted only grew as they chose to continually follow Him.⁴¹ As they followed Jesus, Jesus transformed them into who He needed them to be, which was for them to become fully equipped apostles.

Paul's Discussion on Calling

Calling is used two ways in the Apostle Paul's writings; his own apostolic reference and the calling of the believer into Christ likeness. Yet, the most prevalent usage of calling is to that of every believer. The common vehicle for Paul to express his personal apostolic calling is at the beginning of his Epistles. From the onset of his Epistle to the Roman community, Paul explicitly declares that he is "called as an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God."⁴² Paul's use of calling here subordinates his role in the

⁴⁰ Joel B. Green, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 234.

⁴¹ Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1963), 47-48.

⁴² Romans 1:1.

Christian community to God for he had no authority to assume an apostolic role but by God's hand. This language recognizes not the position but the one who designates it. Further, the term 'set apart' is placed in the perfect tense in the Greek implying that Paul had been set apart by God from his birth for the specific purpose to minister to the Gentiles.⁴³

Therefore, the calling of God is presented as a valuable and powerful act that transcends human knowledge, expectations, or planning. For no man can operate with such sovereignty to declare and execute their purposes. Here the calling of God is synonymous with the authoritative will of God evidenced by Paul's use of "by the will" of God in his epistles. However, a conflict arises in verse 6 when Paul addresses the Roman believers, "who are also called by Christ Jesus." Paul uses the term "calling" in three distinct contexts in chapter 1. The first refers to Paul's apostolic authority given by Christ Jesus in verse 1, the second is every believer's identity in Christ as previously mentioned, and the third to Roman believers who are "called as saints" in verse 7. Calling is used quite differently by referring back to 'the obedience of faith' described in verse 5. Specifically, this obedience of faith is in relation to the salvation message for one cannot receive salvation simply by believing, but their salvation must be lived out daily by following Christ's example. "Together, faith and obedience manifest the inseparable two sides of the coin of salvation, which Paul here calls *the obedience of faith*."⁴⁴ If this verse

⁴³ Robert H. Mounce, *The New American Commentary: Romans* (Nashville: B&H Publishers, 1995), 60.

⁴⁴ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Romans 1-8* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1991), 25.

speaks to the salvation of all believers then the understanding of calling must be applied to the broader audience of all Christians.

Similar to Romans 1:1, Paul claims he has been called by God to his apostolic position in 1 Corinthians 1:1. However, in verse 2 he claims that the Corinthians are “called as saints” or “called to be holy.” The majority of Paul’s examples of calling are in reference to the generalized church for every believer is called to be holy, and again in 1 Corinthians 1:9, “[they] are called by Him (God) into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” Overwhelmingly God’s calling is mentioned in terms of the entire body of Christ (Rom 1:6, 7; 8:30; 9:24, 26; 1 Cor 1:2, 9, 26; 7:15, 17-24; Gal 1:6; 5:13; Eph 4:1-4; Col 3:15; 1 Thess 2:12; 4:7; 2 Thess 2:14; 1 Tim 6:12; 2 Tim 1:9; 1 Pet 1:15; 2:9, 21; 3:9; 5:10; 2 Pet 1:3; 1 John 3:1; Jude 1:1; Rev 17:14), which is contrasted with the sparing references to vocational or particular callings mentioned (Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:15; Hebrews 5:4, 10, 11:8). Upon observing such references even Paul’s use of personal apostolic calling is limited to his introductory title, but numerous New Testament writers and significantly greater number of verses proclaim that every believer is called to a corporate calling under Christ.

The New Testament authors primarily speak to the fact that every person who believes in Jesus Christ is called toward Christ likeness and salvation. This is in theological terms as an effective calling, which “is an act of God the Father, speaking through the human proclamation of the gospel, in which he summons people to himself in such a way that they respond in saving faith.”⁴⁵ This effective calling is contrasted with

⁴⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 693.

the general calling or plea of the Gospel message, but both find their source in God the Father through the vehicle of preaching for “How, then, can they call on him they have not believed in? And how can they believe without hearing about him? And how can they hear without a preacher?”⁴⁶ This call of God in the New Testament then is not toward a vocation or grand position, but rather the calling of God is overwhelmingly to Himself. This entire section of Romans lies in the grand argument of God’s sovereign selection in salvation for he has called His people to Himself. Although Paul emphasizes the “called” nature of his apostleship and the “calling” of every believer. He does little to emphasize in these contexts that lower leaders in the Church are “called” at the same level of his apostolic position. Thus, if calling is to be applied to Elders it must be considered at a significantly lower level of authority.

Finally, Ephesians 4:10-13 provides one significant argument for the concept of God’s role in designating leaders in the church structure. This from a traditional view would constitute the idea of “calling.” Yet, this passage is rarely utilized to argue for the pastoral “calling.” “And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, equipping the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ.”⁴⁷ Paul clearly affirms in this passage that God ultimately is sovereign even over the pastor’s role in the Church. A debate can be made between whether this passage refers to the office themselves or the individuals who assume the roles. From the normative interpretation, this passage would refer to the individuals that God designated each individual within the church to a specific ministry role such as

⁴⁶ Romans 10:14.

⁴⁷ Ephesians 4:12-13.

evangelist or teacher. Thus, one is “called” by God to be a pastor or evangelist. One alternative interpretation is that God sovereignly designated the specific offices of apostle, prophet, evangelist, or pastor allowing certain men to assume the role based on God’s leading. Though God’s hand is still present in selection the emphasis of the passage would be upon the office rather than the individuals who occupy it.

Eldership in view of Calling

The wealth of New Testament data contributes little to the thought of specific calling given to the average vocational pastor or elder. It does, however, teach that “If anyone aspires to be an overseer, he desires a noble work.”⁴⁸ Such aspiration may have a divine source, but little Scriptural evidence presses that each Elder within the Church must be set apart through miraculous vision. Though a response is still merited for if an internal desire is aroused they may seek the office of Elder. “Some respond to what they conceive to be God’s specific call to become pastors, teachers, evangelists, missionaries, or any of the varying functional roles of religious leadership and service. Paul cautioned that Christians were to ‘spiritually discern’ their gifts and fulfill their individual role within the church”⁴⁹ Service as an elder involves both spiritual and practical matters of discerning one’s abilities that they may build up the body rather than seeking a vague calling that God has never given words to. Further, Paul’s command in the Pastoral Epistles is not to call Elders or find those who God has called. Rather, Paul’s instruction

⁴⁸ 1 Timothy 3:1.

⁴⁹ George Willis Bennet. "Ministry as profession and calling." *Review & Expositor* 70, no. 1 (Wint 1973): 7. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed April 2, 2018).

is simply “to appoint elders in every town.”⁵⁰ Therefore, the average leader may hold a position that God has intended for him, but the term calling does not seem appropriate for the elder of a Church considering such language is not used in the New Testament.

Comparative Definition

Collectively, the testimony of Scripture challenges the modern understanding of vocational calling. Though the term calling may at times be appropriate it is not the word used when referring to Church leadership. In the Old Testament, the man of God was literally commissioned by the LORD to preach a very specific message to the people often of condemnation. These extravagant narratives likely influence the weight placed upon “being called by God” into pastoral service, but though there are many similarities a few distinctions separate the Church leader from the Prophets. The first being that they were literally and vocally called by God. This Scriptural distinction is critical. The most basic understanding of calling for a Prophet is that they had a physical encounter with God, in which He commissioned them to herald His message. Secondly, the role of prophet was one unique in Israel’s history for they had the ability to anoint kings (1 Kings 1:3-4; 1 Sam 16:10), approach kings, heal kings (Isa 38:10), and perform a priestly role within the community with many oracles containing temple imagery (Isa 6).⁵¹ This God appointed role held national and spiritual responsibility far beyond the scope of a minister’s position. Finally, the Prophet’s role was that of speaking as the voice of God originating the message of Scripture from their direct relationship to God.

⁵⁰ Titus 1:5.

⁵¹ *The New Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible: Volume 4* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 634-635.

The Old Testament prophets share a close relationship with the New Testament Apostles serving as the highest spiritual leaders of their Covenantal movement. The Apostles develop the theological framework for “calling” via their lives and writings. They were literally called to minister by the Son of God, Jesus Christ, held a unique place of authority within the Spiritual infrastructure of their time, contributed to the authorship of Scripture, spoke on behalf of God as herald, and used the previous prophets’ own words to declare the same truth of the Gospel that was present in their predecessors words. This too was a position that only a select few were allowed to occupy for the Apostles were appointed for a specific role - to found and build up the Church by God’s supernatural power wielding their authority as apostles to discipline the believers.⁵² Such uniqueness in the office is evidenced by the lack of further apostles raised up within the Church,⁵³ but instead the offices of deacon and elder are established to serve the body of Christ. Thus, the primary usage of personal calling in Scripture is toward a uniquely rare group who have literally encountered God, were commissioned to preach a specific message, and served a special role.

The second, most frequent usage, is that of the calling of all believers. This calling takes on many facets within Scripture but is centered on the salvation and sanctification of the entire universal Church. Continually, the believer is called to do or to be something such as in Galatians 5:13, “For you were called to be free, brothers and sisters.” Calling is rarely directed toward one person but often to the entire congregation. Finally, the word calling is not often associated with the office of Elder as described in

⁵² William Smith, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1896), 128.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

the Pastoral Epistles. These Elders are chosen not by self-proclaimed designations, but by how well they exhibit Christ-like character as the ideal image or role model of what every believer is called to be. The calling they follow is the same as every believer.

In his discussion on single elder led congregationalism, Danny Akin impresses that the role of the elder or overseer is not focused upon the office itself but on the functions they perform in leading and teaching.⁵⁴ The role of elder is a critical spiritual role within the church, and there is no doubt that spiritual leadership requires spiritual selection. Yet, it is challenging when at the conclusion of his essay Akin states that “anyone serving as an elder is to meet all the qualifications for the office – including a *call to ministry* and aptness to teach, that is, to preach.”⁵⁵ Despite providing a lengthy discussion on biblical qualifications of an elder including said teaching ability a conversation regarding a “call to ministry” is entirely absent from the work until this point. This “call” is so assumed that no biblical evidence is given by Akin to affirm this claim. Respectfully, Akin identifies a “calling” as a prerequisite for Gospel ministry, but such a claim cannot be made unless it is supported biblically. How then can a “call” be a requirement for ministry when the Bible does not list this as the requirement for an elder. If the office of elder merits such a thorough scriptural examination surely the concept of calling deserves the same treatment in the context of eldership requirements.

Although there is a great distinction between the divine calling of biblical characters and the common church leader the theological concept of spiritual leadership may generously be applied to the contemporary Church leadership. For God has his hand

⁵⁴ Daniel Akin, “The Single-Elder -Led Church” in *Perspectives of Church Government*, ed. Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: B&H Publishers, 2004), 43.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 54.

in appointing leaders including healthy pastors and elders. God selects by his divine will. It may not be a “calling”, but it is His Spirit, which impresses the desire to minister upon their heart. Therefore, based on the biblical evidence a precedent for God’s divine appointing of leadership is woven through out the Scriptures. Although in may not be in as magnificent a form as the prophets or apostles, God’s presence is still vital for a pastor to complete his work. Yet little detail is given concerning the average minister’s “calling” compared to its contemporary usage. The focus must be renewed by two critical factors in an effort to combat the rampant misuse of the word. First, it is best understood in retrospective terms. God’s placement is to be appreciated in observing the power of His divine hand of deliverance to accomplish his divine will. Second, for the pastor, calling should not be about the task, but to the one who has called him. God’s calling is primarily a beckoning toward greater fellowship with His presence.

Conclusion

Collectively, from this research it may be concluded that there is great confusion regarding the nature of calling in the Christian life. It is impossible to suggest that it is an antibiblical theme, but it has been misused through misinformation and lack of careful consideration to the scriptural authority. The concept of vocational calling from a cultural standpoint finds itself abused and overused stemming from a definition rooted in a secular, fallen worldview rather than a biblical one. Yet, a pastoral perspective, though theologically accurate concerning God’s divine hand in placing the minister, can often provide confusion as to what role this ‘calling’ plays in a pastor’s life. Although numerous helpful instruments such as those cited in the paper are afforded those seeking guidance. Therefore, a renewed focus on the biblical nature of calling must be applied to

the Church rather than the culturally conditioned nature of calling. A robust concept of God's power in the life of ministerial development may be proposed, but the term calling limits the impact of its concept. A powerful, piercing definition of vocational ministry can be contrived that centers specifically on God's divine hand, which ordains a supernatural conviction to minister to God's people. Stripping away the previous wording allows for God's purpose to be better manifested in ministerial life. Although the broader concept is evidenced within the discussion of this paper, the term calling itself does not best reflect the theological concept due to the confusion and wide range of uses contrary to the biblical position. Therefore, if the term "calling" is to be used, serious reform of its treatment in contemporary Church must be addressed to reflect an exposition of the term from biblical material and taught only within such confines to the congregation.

The calling of God stands as a concrete Scriptural concept, yet contemporary writings stray far from the clear literal interpretation in favor of a predetermined systematic theology relying on prooftexts. A divide exists between the pastoral and theological interpretations. The theological understanding focuses on topics discussed in the Scriptural sections of this passage referring to the calling of the Prophets and the calling of every believer excluding specifically pastoral calling, but the pastoral writings communicate from generalizations and cultural pressures to defend their views. However, the practical advice given on the subject is affirming to men desiring to be pastors.

It could potentially be argued that the term calling is similar to the theological use of trinity. Although not explicitly mentioned in Scripture, concept of the trinity is found throughout both testaments testifying to the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit as a unified divine being. This is a powerful example of a concept that is not explicitly stated

still serving as a foundational biblical truth. The term “calling” in Scripture, however, is much different because the term “calling” is used countless times in numerous varying contexts in Scripture. Yet, it is never used to refer to God verbally appointing an Elder to congregational leadership, which would constitute vocational pastoral ministry.

Therefore, “calling” is already a biblical term, but is defined much differently than the “internal pastoral call.” Further, an overwhelming number of biblical theological arguments have been made to advocate for the trinity, but most arguments for pastoral “calling” merely assume the validity of the concept as evidenced in this paper. If “calling” then is to be claimed as a theological construct it must be argued for like any other.

One cause for greater discussion is to discuss hermeneutical challenges of interpreting the specific revelatory callings of both the prophets and the apostles to pastoral ministry. Evangelical expositors seem to extend call far from the text. This would include the conjuring of the “internal call” juxtaposed against the literal confrontations the Prophets experienced. Consideration must be given to what cultural conditioning has impacted the interpretation of the “call stories.” Further, Scripture argues for an internal desire or conviction, but the language of ‘calling’ does not seem to fit these passages. A simplification of language and theology is necessary for it is redundant and confusing to have several phrases or terms for the same concept making ‘calling’ an unnecessary phrase compared to the abundance of biblical alternatives.

Altogether, the concept of calling is desperate for theological reform. The subject of a pastors, elders, or overseers calling is virtually invisible in the New Testament even though many of the conceptual applications of ‘calling’ are Scripturally viable and

beneficial notably the advice given to those pursuing a ministry career. Therefore, the vocabulary must be changed regarding God's role in selecting those who will minister in the Church. One that is biblically informed rather than biblically imposed. One pastor reminisces on his experience describing his 'call' as "personal, subjective, and ultimately between me and God," and that this subjective calling was the basis for his qualifications as an elder.⁵⁶ He proposes that emphasis should not be on discerning calling but in aspiring to the office of Elder for calling is not what leads the congregation but men dedicated to God ordained leadership. For the office of Elder is not subjective, but an objective position commanded to the Church. The focus of the minister must first be on the objective reality of their qualifications in God's Word to verify their readiness to serve vocationally.

On the basis of this current research, an alternative understanding of pastoral selection may be God's ordaining purpose manifested by a desire to serve as a minister. Further, because of the witness of Scripture the term calling may more frequently be applied to the Church as a whole on the basis of the frequent New Testament verses sighted earlier in the work. For the evangelical the term 'calling' must not be removed from one's vocabulary, but rather it must be refined and narrowed that a clear understanding of its significance might be appreciated. The original usage intended "calling" for the minute few such as prophets or apostles as well as for the entire body of Christ. Steps must now be taken to evaluate the current usage of "calling" with this reference in mind. The outcome of such study is to empower pastoral students to follow

⁵⁶ Dayton Hartman, "The Church Needs Fewer Men Who Feel 'Called' to Ministry," *9 Marks*, August 8, 2018, <https://www.9marks.org/article/the-church-needs-fewer-men-who-feel-called-to-ministry/>.

through in their convictions and preach the Gospel for the glory of God assured that their motivations are endowed by their creator and strengthened by the Holy Spirit within them.

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