

## CALL AND VOCATION

Being called is fundamental to any understanding of discipleship. The Bible says much about the variety of tasks to which people may be called, perhaps most notably in Paul's use of the image of the body (1 Corinthians 12). The 'call' is primarily the call of God but may be heard and interpreted in various ways. If we look at our church as a community of disciples, then we need to consider how we are called and what call may require of us.

### **Some biblical considerations**

*(this section offers an edited summary of the biblical considerations in Robert Pope's paper on call and vocation)*

In the Old and New Testaments there are over 700 occurrences of 'call' and 'calling', as verb, noun or adjective. Six things to note:

**God's call reflects in some ways a choice on God's part.** In both the Old and New Testaments, we find evidence of a God who calls people, first, to be a nation and, second, to be the church. There does not seem to be any distinction between 'call' and 'vocation'. In fact, 'vocation' comes from the Latin 'vocare' meaning call. As a noun 'vocation' is a task someone might do as a result of them hearing and responding to God's call. We are called to play our part in the purposes of God, through the roles and tasks we are given (Eph 2:10).

**Those called are not called because of any merit on their part but because God graciously calls.** God elects the nation of Israel out of God's love for the Hebrews. (It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you ... It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors ...' Deut 7:7-8). Israel exists in a covenant relationship where God will be Israel's God and Israel will be God's people (Gen 17:7; Ex 6:7, Jer 32:38). To be called by God means to be the people of God, bearing the 'noble name to whom you belong' (James 2:7).

**God calls not to privilege but to service.** Israel is called to service in the world in God's name. Israel is to be a 'priestly' (ensuring two-way communication by standing between God and the world) and 'holy' (in the sense of set apart) nation (Ex 19: 6) and 'as a covenant people' to be 'a light to the nations' (Is 42:6). Our calling to serve is not a call out of the world but into it to serve as Christ did (Phil. 2:5-7).

**God does not just call groups (nation and church) but also individuals who are given specific roles.** Abraham is called to be 'a great and mighty nation' and there is a purpose to this: 'all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him' (Gen 18:17-18). Isaiah responds to the question 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' by saying 'Here am I, send me!' (Is 6:8). For both prophets the response to their call brought

heavy responsibility as they brought to Israel a word of judgement and warning of difficulties because Israel had wandered away from the Covenant. In the New Testament, Jesus 'calls' disciples (Mt 4:18-22; Mk 1:16-20; Lk 6:13-16; Jn 1:40-49) whom he subsequently sends into the world to proclaim the good news and to convert and baptize (Mt 28:19-20). At one point, Jesus is recorded as saying 'You did not choose me but I chose you' (Jn 15:16). As the prophets before them, the disciples found their calling to be costly: they left their livings (Mth 4:20), they are warned that following Christ will bring division in their family life (Lk 12:53). The call of the individual includes an ultimate destiny in Christ: "the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:14).

**God 'calls' people into the church.** The Greek word translated 'church' (ekklesia) has the literal sense of 'called out'. This is not because those who belong to the church are expected to withdraw from worldly activity because the Greek word was used of the public assemblies in ancient Greece. But it confirms that those who are members of the church are those who have responded to God's 'call'.

**God's call is to excellence.** The people of God should serve God in the world out of love for God and his world, and to trust that "your Father knows what you need – but put God's work first, and all these things will be yours as well" (Luke 12:30-1). Vocation is a call to excellence (1 Tim 2:15), for at the last call "the fire will test the quality of each person's work" (1 Cor 3:13). Work should be done well (Col 3:23) and wholeheartedly (Eph 6:5-7), as a response of obedience and duty to the heavenly master (Luke 17:10).

God's call revolves primarily around hearing and responding to God's message and how that is worked out and acknowledged in community, for most people that will be the church. In calling people through Christ into the church, God calls people to the life of faith. That faith is to be lived out in daily life, whatever it might be that occupies them. There are, of course, those who are set apart for ministry in the church, known as episkopoi, presbyteroi and diakonoi. It is not clear that any of these offices, biblically, result from God's 'call'. Instead, all members of the church are called by God and it is the church which elects from among its members those who live in a way that suggests they might be appropriate leaders.

Although there is a sense that all life is lived to God's glory, there is little biblical support for 'vocation' outside the community of faith. For Christians this means the call into the church and the call to serve in the church. In the New Testament the emphasis seems to be on the ministry of the whole people (laos) of God under the oversight of those elected to leadership offices (bishops and elders).

## **So what does the URC say to us about call and vocation?**

*(here Nicola Furley-Smith offers some further reflections about the URC's beliefs and ideas on call and vocation)*

The United Reformed Church believes that all are called by God. There is a ministry for each one of us, and those ministries are many and varied, but all are valued. We also recognise that calls come in many different ways just as, for example, David was picked out of a procession of candidates (1 Sam 16.1-13), Mary was visited by an angel (Lk 1.26-38), and Matthias was appointed through the drawing of lots (Acts 1.20b – 26).

Christians are 'called' into the Church where they naturally offer their service. In the United Reformed Church, this is reflected in baptismal/membership promises. Schedule A of the Basis of Union, 'Affirmation of faith to be made at admission to the full privileges and responsibilities of membership of the Church (Version 1) asks', *'Do you promise, in dependence on God's grace, to be faithful in private and public worship, to live in the fellowship of the Church and to share in its work, and to give and serve, as God enables you, for the advancement of his kingdom throughout the world?'*

As such, Christians are 'called' to live for Christ. This means working in whatever sphere they might find themselves as if they were working for Christ. This is sometimes considered to be 'vocation'. People called in this way are called to enable the ministry of the whole people of God. The Basis of Union, paragraph 20 states: *'For the equipment of his people for this total ministry the Lord Jesus Christ gives particular gifts for particular ministries and calls some of his servants to exercise them in offices duly recognised within his Church'.*

However, within the whole people of God "the Lord Jesus Christ gives particular gifts for particular ministries and calls some of his servants to exercise them in offices duly recognised within his Church". Here we see that a sense of personal, inward call alone known only to God is not the measure by which the Church acknowledges call, but also by the particular gifts individuals bring. This is done in the spirit of discernment. Responding to call is of major importance and should not be minimised. God calls and we work out our vocation. For some that will be through the more formal ministries of the church, Minister of Word and Sacraments, Church Related Community Workers, Elders, Assembly Accredited Lay Preachers...to name but a few. What is clear in the Basis of Union, is that the call or appointment to particular ministries always lies with one of the Councils of the Church.

God calls and we respond by working out our vocation which, at points, may be tested by others through the spirit of discernment.

*The Revd Nicola Furley-Smith - URC Secretary for Ministries  
Sept 2023*