

CALL AND VOCATION

The Faith and Order Committee meetings of 21 October 2022 and 3 March 2023 briefly discussed the paper prepared and endorsed by the Secretaries for Youth and Children's Work, Ministries, and Education and Learning, along with their respective committees, encouraging wider discussion about, and consideration of, call and vocation. The paper explicitly claimed not to offer any theological assessment of the topic. A version of this current paper was prepared for the Committee's meeting on 9 and 10 June 2023. What follows is certainly not definitive, but it offers some possible avenues for further exploration, if that is deemed necessary. This is not a document officially endorsed by the Faith and Order Committee.

Some biblical considerations:

In both Testaments, we find evidence of a God who calls people, first, to be a nation and, second, to be the church, while also calling individuals who, in varying ways, serve those wider groups. It does not seem that any distinction exists in the Scriptures between 'call' and 'vocation', and it is worth remembering that the etymology of 'vocation' associates it with the verb 'to call'. As a noun we could see 'vocation' as that which someone might *do* as a result of them hearing and responding to God's *call*. Beyond that, the two words are closely related and we should be wary of making too clear a distinction between them.

We learn a number of things about 'call' in the Scriptures.

1. God 'calls' Israel not because Israel in any way merits God's favour, but because God graciously elects the nation out of God's love for the Hebrew people ('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; 'because he loved your ancestors, he chose their descendants after them' Deut 4:37). Biblically, Israel existed 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), and so Israel is God's possession (Is 43:1). But Israel is not called by God to a privileged position. Instead, 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 thus also 'as a covenant people' (where God enters into a 'pact' or agreement with Israel) in which Israel is called to be 'a light to the nations' (Is 42:6).
2. It is not only the nation as a whole which is subject to God's call, 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). To Jeremiah's reluctance, God responds 'before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you'

(Jer 1:15). For both prophets the response to their call brought great responsibility as they brought to Israel a word of judgement and warning of severe repercussions because Israel had wandered away from the covenant.

3. In the New Testament, Jesus 'calls' disciples (Mth 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 (Mth 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), and tradition has it that (apart from Judas Iscariot) they all suffered persecution and martyrdom as a result of fidelity to their vocation.
4. Subsequently, God 'calls' people into the church. Etymologically, 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'.
5. On numerous occasions, the New Testament letters refer to God's choosing (e.g., Eph 1:5) or predestining (e.g., Rom 8:29-30) those who make up the church, called to be the 'saints' (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2) at Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae (etc.). It is the whole assembly of Christ's followers in these places which is called to be clothed 'with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience' (Col 3:12), or to be 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation' (1 Pet 2:9 – written to the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, 1 Pet 1:1). As with Israel, the call into the church is not the call to privileged status, despite what could be inferred from some of the language used. Instead the call is to witness through being a fellowship (*koinonia*), through worship, mutual oversight and accountability, and through proclaiming and living the gospel in the world (Acts 2:42-47).
6. 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. The advice given to slaves possibly can, *mutatis mutandis*, be applied more widely: 'Whatever your task, put yourselves into it as done for the Lord and not for your masters' (Col 3:23); 'Render services with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women' (Eph 6:7). As a result, those who belong to the church work as if they are doing what they do for Christ. Daily work is therefore sanctified, made holy in that it is set apart for God. But day-to-day work is not to be confused with the call to be part of the communion (*koinonia*) of the church. There is a 'vocation' by which Christians employ gifts and graces in whatever area of life in which they are employed and do so to the glory of God alone. But this does not appear to be the 'calling' which derives from hearing and responding to the gospel. This is the call to be part of the body of Christ and to serve the body in an appropriate way, according to the gifts and graces

one might possess. 'Call', then, is the call which comes through the proclamation of the good news.

7. There are those who are set apart for ministry in the church, known as *episkopoi*, *presbyteroi* and *diakono*i. 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 and overseers. In that sense, the church, in some form, identifies those who should occupy leadership offices. See, for example, Acts 6:5 (the appointment of deacons) and 1 Timothy 3:1-13 (on bishops and deacons). There may be a sense, then, where occupying an office occurs in response to the church's call rather than any clear and confirmed divine calling (unless we hold that the former infers the latter). The call of Ambrose to be bishop of Milan might be a historical case in point: he was a Roman official who attended a fractious meeting tasked with electing a bishop in order to keep the peace but found himself the only candidate acceptable to all sides and facing the cry 'Ambrose for bishop'. A Christian, he reluctantly yielded to the crowd's demand, though possibly more to avoid a riot than because he felt himself drawn to the office.

The biblical material seems to tell us that:

- God's call reflects in some ways a choice on God's part (represented biblically, perhaps uncomfortably to our ears, by words such as 'election' and 'predestination' as well as 'call');
- those called are not called because of any merit on their part but because God graciously calls. It can be assumed that those 'called' possess the gifts and graces by which they can fulfill their calling (or that God would not call them to something they could not do);
- God calls groups (nation of Israel or the church) and individuals (prophets or apostles) but they are called not to enjoy privilege but to serve;
- call revolves primarily around hearing and responding to God's message (or the gospel) and how that is worked out and acknowledged in the community of faith.

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).

Some historical points:

1. By the middle ages, 'vocation' was associated exclusively with those called to service in the church, usually into the regular (or monastic) orders but to some degree for those in secular or parish ministry. There emerged the distinction between a 'spiritual' and 'temporal' estate, the 'clergy' occupying the former, which was considered to be

the better of the two. This reflected an apparent growth in specialism or expertise, where those who were 'lay' (from *laos*) were at best considered to be 'amateurs' and, at worst, were almost considered to be outside the ecclesial community which was formed by 'professionals'. Such a development is difficult to square with the New Testament's presentation of the whole people of God as being involved in the ministry of the church. See also, Basis of Union paragraph 19: 'The Lord Jesus Christ continues his ministry in and through the Church, the whole people of God called and committed to his service and equipped by him for it'.

2. The Reformers considered the clergy/laity distinction to result in an unacceptable 'double standard' where those in monastic or priestly orders were considered more authentically Christian than those who were not. As a result, they transformed the meaning of 'vocation' in order to sanctify the work undertaken by people in their everyday lives (Luther used the word *Beruf* which could be translated as 'calling' or as 'occupation'). While on the one hand this confirmed that God could be served outside holy orders, the Reformers made the connection more explicit than what seems to be present in the biblical material. David Cornick warns: 'Calvin's theology of vocation is compelling, but this is not a biblical concept. In vain we will look in Scripture to find God calling anyone to be a merchant or even a healer. Rather, God calls individuals to particular God-given tasks. The fact that Paul was a tent-maker was incidental; his calling was to be an apostle' (Cornick, *Letting God be God*, 2008, p. 112).
3. One distinction upheld by Reformers was that between a 'general' or 'spiritual' vocation which concerned being part of the Church as the 'priesthood of all believers', entry to which was through baptism and maintained by faith, and a 'particular' or 'eternal' vocation which concerned what the Christian contributed either through work or through office in the church (R. Ward Holder, ed., *Theologies of the Reformation*, p. 167).
4. We find a useful distinction in Calvin's work between 'inner' and 'outer' call. The 'inner' call is a mystery known only to the person called and to God. He declares that he is not interested in this ('I pass over' it, he says, *Institutes*, 4.iii.11) because it cannot be fully known outside that personal relationship between someone and God. But there is an 'outward and solemn call which has to do with the public order of the church', call where the church identifies a need and determines that some of its members might possess gifts and skills to meet that need (*Institutes*, 4.iii.11).
5. In some ways, 'vocation' was used of people doing the jobs they were gifted to do, or volunteering to meet societal need where they were able to do so. Luther once wrote: 'Therefore, should you see that there is a lack of hangmen, beadles, judges, lords, or princes, and find that you are qualified, you should offer your services and seek the place, that necessary government may by no means be despised and become inefficient or perish' ('Secular Authority: To what extent it should be obeyed'). While this may have given (and may continue to give) the Christian a sense of living and working to God's glory, it resulted in the word being separated from its association

with God's call, or the call of the gospel, especially in countries where Protestantism dominated, and in being used of someone's own sense of commitment to a career in, for example, nursing, medicine, teaching.

These historical considerations highlight:

- people can serve God through all kinds of roles they may play in the world. This can mean the world of work but it is not necessarily restricted to it;
- such 'vocation' has more to do with a natural gifting which is able to fulfill certain requirements or responsibilities in society: the Christian performs such duties as if for God;
- such 'vocation' might be worked out in the community of faith when the church identifies gifts and graces in individuals which can be employed in service to the church;
- there remains a possibility for individual human beings to sense God's call on their life, but this in itself does not lead to fulfilling any particular role in the church;
- the church is left needing a process of discernment in which the last two points are brought into dialogue and any 'call' worked out.

Some tentative conclusions:

1. Christians are 'called' into the church where they naturally offer their service. In the United Reformed Church, this is reflected in baptismal/membership promises. See, for example, 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', where the question is asked (in Version I): '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?*' (emphasis added). Any discussion about 'call' and 'vocation' should give due notice to these promises and how Christians might fulfill them in their daily living.
2. 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'. Barth sees this sense of vocation or calling as arising from God's act in creation. All people have a *calling* from God for which they are equipped because they are created in God's image for life and service in the world. They possess this because of their status as created beings, whether they realise it or not. Calvin puts it in this way: 'each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wander about through life' (*Institutes*, 3.x.6). Those who do not confess faith might not acknowledge their 'vocation', but it is part of their life as created beings. To see one's vocation, according to Calvin, requires revelation. He quotes, as evidence in Scripture of this claim, Eph

1:18: 'so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you' (*Institutes*, 2.ii.21).

3. Within a general sense of 'vocation', there is also a specific calling of people to offices in the church. Barth links this sense of vocation to the revelation of God's Word which brings, and effects, the message of salvation. People called in this way are called to enable the ministry of the whole people of God. See the Basis of Union, paragraph 20: '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'.
4. The challenge to the church is twofold: (1) the church needs a means of discerning when someone is 'called' to a particular office or ministry; (2) the church needs to support people in being a Christian witness in all aspects of their lives.

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