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Followers of Christ in Business



by Thomas Addington

Introduction

I thought that we had done at least an adequate job speaking, and the people in the auditorium seemed at least adequately interested in what we had to say. I wouldn't claim that they were riveted to our every word, but neither did I see anyone fall asleep. They took notes, and when we were done they clapped. Then a woman raised her

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hand and asked the question, "So, how do you know that you are called to your job?" Suddenly the room went completely silent; all side conversations stopped. People quit writing and looked up from their pads of paper; they took a break from putting all their stuff in briefcases. She said, with her hand raised, "How do you know you are called to your job?" We had everyone's full attention for the first time in our session—and ironically it was after we had finished speaking.

We really weren't sure how to answer because Steve Graves and I were not speaking to a church group here; this was not a spiritual retreat. It was in Detroit at one of the Big Three auto companies. This was a gathering of their senior design engineers from around the world: Europe, India, Asia, and the U. S. The men and women who design all of the company's cars and trucks seemed much more interested in the woman's question regarding calling than in anything we had to say.

Why weren't we sure how to answer? Because calling is a God term. It comes straight from Scripture. It is a word Jesus uses to describe the talking He does with His followers regarding how they will be released in life, regarding what He wants them to do in life. To be called, you have to know God and listen when He talks. So our answer would have been relevant to any followers of Christ in the group. And everyone else in the auditorium would be free to come in; but to be called you have to know Jesus.

I understand why calling is such a big deal these days. After all, if we are living out our calling we are doing exactly what we were designed to do.

We are perfectly fit for our work. Who wouldn't want that? But when *Fast Company*—perhaps the most popular business magazine in America—features a cover story that shouts the question “Are You Called to Your Job?” there is a limited amount of help they can offer their readers because calling is not getting in touch with yourself. Instead, it is letting God touch you. I do not determine my calling by holding a personal intellectual summit with myself where I look deep within and figure out what God wants me to do. I determine my calling by listening to God coach me through the work path that he wants me to take. What could be more freeing than knowing that I am doing what God designed me to do? What could be more releasing? What could be more exhilarating?

God calls every one of us personally to a specific work assignment. He designed me to do something for Him. We are men and women who do consulting, banking, truck driving, plumbing, doctoring, full-time parenting, teaching, pastoring, and a host of other things. His job is to talk, to call. My job is to listen, to act. From the day that you begin your very first full-time job until the day that you retire, you will log between 90,000 hours and 130,000 hours at work, somewhere around 100,000 hours of doing stuff with other people: conversing, traveling, meeting, and dining; digging ditches and selling products; persuading, listening, agreeing, thinking, and doing. You will plan things, build stuff, celebrate successes, and share failures. The great majority of the folks with whom you work will not know Christ personally. Many of those non-believers will see Christ only if they see Christ in us. And what will they see in us? I really believe that we have one of two choices. We can have a career, or we can live a calling. Our English word “career” comes from a Latin word for “cart” and the French word for “circular racetrack.” The word picture of career is pushing a cart in a circle—a kind of medieval picture of a treadmill. Calling is not treadmill living. Calling is being released to be exactly who I am supposed to be, doing exactly what I am supposed to do.

A Sense of History

It is not surprising that followers of Christ understand calling and seek to find it. Biblical mandates are meant to be followed. What is interesting,

however, is that our culture in general hungers for the same thing, and it is interested in how we integrate the different parts of our life so that our work life is not just separated from every other part of life. And to understand why that's true, why the general culture out there, as a whole, thinks that's important, we have to look at some history.

1. Separation: 300 A.D. to 1517 A.D.

There wasn't always a time when work was separate from our walk with Christ. The early church evidenced no such separation. But somewhere around 300 A.D., perhaps a little bit sooner, the church began to make this distinction between what was sacred and what was secular. In fact, the church began to privilege things that were sacred and denigrate things that were secular. The secular was unimportant and insignificant. Calling became connected with the church or ministry because that's where life really was. If you were called to be in the church, that gave your life significance: your calling allowed you to participate in eternal relevance. If you were involved in the church, it was intrinsically important. If you were involved in anything else, which included most of the careers and most of the people, you were somewhat a second-class citizen. And that perpetuated itself all the way through from 300 A.D. through the Middle Ages until a very significant event took place, called the Reformation.

2. Reformation: 1517 A.D. to 1730 A.D.

Around 1517, a biblical understanding of work emerged. That biblical understanding basically claimed that all of us are called, but the question is to what. Some people are called to be pastors, some people are called to be missionaries, some people, Luther even said, are called to be plumbers, and there is no distinction in importance between those two different camps because really there aren't two different camps. All of us are about God's work and the question is whether we are doing what we are supposed to be doing. And so the Reformation gave dignity to millions of people who were engaged in work that was not connected with the church. The Reformation absolutely hammered down the wall between the

sacred and the secular and it said, what's important is that are you called, and if you are called, then whatever you are doing has eternal significance even though you might not understand exactly how. You might not get the whole picture as to why the calling happened or what it means.

In summary, from around 300 A.D. to 1517 A.D. we had what we could call a sacred/secular separation. However, from the Reformation up until the time of the Industrial Revolution, we had what we call reformation, a new way of thinking. This thinking put things back together. The church drove the wedge between sacred and secular callings, and the church removed that wedge.

3. Fragmentation: 1730 A.D. to 1990 A.D.

Then the Industrial Revolution happened. Beginning in approximately 1730, the Industrial Revolution gathered strength into the nineteenth century. In the book *Wealth of Nations* (a 1776 publication that was one of the key drivers of the Industrial Revolution), Adam Smith described how you do work right. He said, "Look, the way that we do work is very inefficient," and he took farmers as an example. He said, "They get up in the morning, they get out, they hook up their plow to their horse, they go out and they plow for a while, then they come back in, they unhook the plow, they take up a hoe and a rake, they do something else with it. After a while, they come back from lunch and they take up a paintbrush and they go paint something. They put those tools down. They pick up some other tools and they go fix stuff." Adam Smith concluded, "Look, that's pretty inefficient. If you want to be efficient at work, what you really ought to do is specialize in tasks. So somebody does the plowing, somebody does the fixing, somebody does the painting, and on and on down the line." Before Smith the only way to do right vocationally was basically to be involved in the whole process. If you were a blacksmith, you got the metal, forged it, designed the product, hammered it into being, and sold it. You were involved in the process from start to finish.

In *Wealth of Nations*, Smith argued that the full process method was inefficient. What you need to do is specialize, break tasks down, and separate them. The result, of course, was the assembly line.

In the assembly line, you went from someone being involved in the whole process to someone being involved in a very little bit of a process. I now put the bolts on the left hand door on the bottom right corner: that's what I do for this car. What had happened to it before it got to me, I don't have a clue. What happens after it leaves me I don't really know except that I see the finished product. I don't really know how the rest of the car is done.

Therefore, the Industrial Revolution drove fragmentation into the work process. And that fragmentation has been with us from the eighteenth century until just recently.

The "spiritual" concerns of business today provide an opportunity to use work to advance the cause of Christ.

4. Integration: 1990 to present

During the late 1980's and the early 1990's, another phenomenon began to take place. That is, people started to believe that breaking work into segments is efficient but it's not always very effective. In addition, the product doesn't always look very good. People began, through the *total quality movement* primarily at first, involving that person on the assembly line in more than one little job. Suddenly I not only put the bolt on the left hand side, left hand door down in the right corner, but I also was involved in the kind of paint that went on that car, what happened to it before I got it, what happened to it after I left it. In addition, I was asked for suggestions on how to make the product better. In other words, I got to be involved in a greater portion of the process again. And the *total quality movement* basically acknowledged that if the product was going to be good in the end, the people who put it together needed to have a say in, be involved in, and be knowledgeable about what went on before and after—upstream and downstream, to use a business or total-quality term—in the whole process.

In other words, what the church took apart—

called separation—and what the church put together—called reformation—the culture took apart in fragmentation during the Industrial Revolution, but now the culture is putting it back together in the form of integration.

However, besides this work and business phenomenon happening right now, a parallel phenomenon complicates matters. Processes do need to be divided up into many different parts like they were before, because a cultural, generational shift is not yet complete in the workplace. Members of the builder generation were interested in and able to segment and separate parts of life. They could say, this is my work life, this is my home life, and this is my church life, but they don't really come together very well.

One time, I was talking with a member of that generation, and he said, "You know, I built a great retail empire and it's been very successful, but my wife kept asking me when I was going to quit and focus on the family, and I kept saying another couple of stores, another couple of stores, and finally she quit asking because I couldn't be trusted with the answer." And he said, "I built a really, really great empire of retail stores but in the process I've lost my family." Well, that wasn't a great statement for him to make, but he could live with that. He was still seen as a success.

The baby boomer generation doesn't agree with that perspective at all. They are not into segmentation. Instead, what they have done in mid-life is redirect their energies. This sociological phenomenon is called "half-time." Basically, by mid-life—again using statistics as a general rule—a baby boomer has made as much money as his or her parents made by the time they retired. So baby-boomers are saying, "We've been there, done that. We want to go in a different direction." What they are doing is going from success to significance. In other words, the baby boomers are saying that separation is no longer adequate. They want meaning to be infused in their jobs, in their work, in a way that their parents did not allow or did not expect to have happen.

Then you have the Gen-Xers, who are a whole different deal. They want total integration right now. They dress at work like they dress at home.

They don't dress at home like they are supposed to dress at work; instead, they dress at work like they want to dress at home. Their hours are irregular. Sometimes they work from home, sometimes they work from work. Moreover, relationships are very important to them. If a builder once had a career, if a baby-boomer has a job, then a Gen-X person has a project. Gen-Xers are involved in projects, and if the project doesn't make sense or if they can't make it happen now, they drop the project and go find another one.

Now, we can criticize any of those three generations of people, but that's not the point. The point is that culturally we are moving closer and closer to an integration between our work life and the rest of life. That's where the culture is going! And that movement is not being driven by the church, the government, the university. It's being driven by business.

Business books of 10 years ago were on the hard side of the business; they now are on the soft side, addressing issues like principles, values, and spirituality. In addition, business is driving the moral and ethical agenda of our global culture—not government, not the church, not the university. Popular business books today are spiritual, but the problem is that most of them have nothing to do with biblical spirituality or Christ-centered spirituality. Nevertheless, the "spiritual" concerns of business today provide a greater opportunity than ever before to use work as a primary environment through which to advance the cause of Christ. That opportunity brings us back to calling. Calling makes me effective, gives me passion, creates joy and provides focus. Calling makes my work more outstanding and my witness more compelling. Calling will make people say, "I want to be like you when I grow up."

So how do I get a handle on my calling? First, let's talk theory; then let's get practical and personal.

Calling: Theory

There are two kinds of calling in Scripture: God calls us to Himself, and God calls us to a task. When the apostle Paul proclaims that we are "called according to His purpose" in Romans 8:28, he is explaining how Jesus saves and adopts us into His family. But turn to Jeremiah 1:5 and this

calling is a specific work assignment. The same pattern is evident with Abraham in Genesis 12, Joshua in Numbers 27, Deborah in Judges 4, Nehemiah 1, Matthew, Mark 2:14, and so on.

I used to think that calling was what God did when He was short of pastors and missionaries. I was a missionary kid: I grew up in Hong Kong, my father was a surgeon, and he was called to be a missionary. I thought that when the numbers went down too low, God got His calling card out and started dialing numbers: need more pastors, need more missionaries. And in fact, if you look at the Bible page by page, and you look at the hundreds of instances where an individual was called to work, less than half of those, less than 50% of those, had to do with what we would term or call full-time Christian service. A calling is for people like us who are pastors, and professors, and farmers, and doctors, and consultants, and everything across the board!

What, then, is calling? Calling is Christ's personal invitation to me to work on His agenda, using talents I've been given, in ways that are eternally significant. The concept of calling is confusing if we don't understand the difference between calling, purpose, and meaning. In Scripture these are closely linked. As I've said, *calling* is God's invitation. To be called, I have to listen to God when He talks and do what He asks me to do. This true for everybody who is a follower of Christ. With calling, it is my job to know what He wants me to do.

The second word is *purpose*. That has to do with God's overarching agenda in this world, in this time. Purpose is God's job, and I may not be privy to His knowledge of that purpose. In other words, He has an agenda, and if I'm called then I fit into that agenda but I may not know what that agenda is. There are a few people in history who understood God's agenda. Daniel was one of them. You read the book of Daniel and you see that God gave Daniel a window to look through into the future where he could say, "I understand how my calling is relevant to God's purpose—His overarching agenda." But very seldom do we know that. Which means we take on faith the fact that if we live out our calling, we are fulfilling some eternal purpose of God that we might not understand until we get to heaven.

If I'm called and therefore live out God's purpose for me, then there's a third word that becomes important. That word is *satisfaction*. It is very clear that satisfaction in my work or earning in my work is a gift from God. If God doesn't give it, I don't have it. In Ecclesiastes 2: 24 (Ecclesiastes, by the way, is an important book especially for people who work) the preacher says:

A man can do nothing better than eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God. For without Him, who could eat or find enjoyment.

*To be called, I have to listen
to God when He talks and
do what He asks me to do.*

Then he adds:

To the man who pleases Him God gives wisdom, knowledge, and happiness. But to the sinner He gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand over to the one who pleases God.

In other words, the preacher is describing the difference between a calling that involves meaning and purpose, and a career treadmill. And he's saying that if I'm called by Christ to what I'm doing, then my work has meaning and I gain satisfaction from it no matter what it is. However, if I am not called by God to what I'm doing, I'm on a treadmill, and I'm storing stuff up for somebody else.

So how does God call us? I think Scripture portrays four ways that God calls and as far as I've been able to determine, there ARE only four. One of these ways may seem obvious, but sometimes God calls me directly by name. That is, He asks me to do a task by saying, "Tom, I need you to go over there at this point and take care of that." He did that with Moses. Moses was out minding his own business, when a bush started talking and burning. The presence of God was in that bush, and He said, "Moses, Moses." He even called Moses by name. He did the same thing with Paul in Acts 9. When Paul had his conversion experience, God said "I need you to go and take this message to the Gentiles: that's your job, that's

your task.” Paul was called by name. We might think, without really searching Scripture, that most of the people in Scripture who were called to a task were called by name by God. But that’s not true. In fact, very few of them were. It’s the exception. But sometimes God does call directly by name. It is a tool He has at His disposal. He’s allowed to do that. He could talk, so I need to listen.

A second way God calls us is that He places a desire on our hearts that we just cannot escape. If you read Nehemiah 1, that’s the picture you have. Nehemiah is cupbearer to the king. It would be the equivalent to being chief of staff to a president. The king is the commander of an empire, the most significant ruler of his day, in the world. And Nehemiah gets this news that the walls are broken down and he goes absolutely to pieces. And it’s not because Nehemiah is not used to bad news. After all, he’s cup-bearer to a pagan king, so bad news is the bread and butter of his day. There’s bad news everywhere: people are dying, problems have to be fixed. Yet, when he hears that the walls are down in some distant city, he can’t sleep, he can’t eat, he’s emotional, he cries, and finally the king says, “What is up with this?” And Nehemiah says, “The walls in Jerusalem are down.” The king probably said to himself, “So what?” But Nehemiah couldn’t shake it, and finally the king said, “Look Nehemiah, I guess you need to go take care of that.” And Nehemiah does. When you read the Bible account, there’s no question that’s what he was supposed to do. He was called to it. By the way, it wasn’t his lifetime calling. Instead, it was for a project, limited to a particular period of time.

Another person in whose heart God placed a desire was Isaiah. In Isaiah, chapter 6, Isaiah, though not called by name, heard God speak. He was so taken with what God said that he just couldn’t get away from the information and the situation. So he volunteered and said, “I’ll go do that.” Even though he volunteered, it was clear over time that he was called to do that. So, sometimes God places a desire in our hearts. We can’t get rid of it, even though sometimes we would like to. People around us look at us and say, “What is up with you?” And you say, “I don’t know. I can’t explain it but this is where I am.”

The third way God calls is by arranging our path in a very unique way. For example, read the account of King Josiah. Josiah was going to be king and everyone knew it before he was even born. Before the person is born, everybody has the line of succession figured out: Josiah was one of those people. God arranged his path, so that’s what Josiah did. John the Baptist was exactly the same. He was born with a job to do. God arranged his path in such a way that there were no other options. That is sometimes how God calls us.

Finally, God calls us a fourth way by preparing an attractive option. You see something that you find hard to ignore. It doesn’t necessarily grab you emotionally, but you say, “I could do that. I could really be good at that. I’m really drawn to that.” And when you look at Elisha in I Kings 19, he was one of those kinds of people. Elisha looked at Elijah. You know, Elisha was a farmer plowing a field. He saw this weird-looking prophet come by, and he basically said, “I want to go spend time with that guy right there.” Then he chopped up his plow, set fire to it, roasted his ox right there, and the two went off together. Again, clear from Scripture, both were called to what they did.

The same is true with Stephen in Acts 6. There was a need, there was administration that had to be done. So the apostles looked at all the possibilities of who could do that work, and they finally said, “Steven, you’re the man.” He replied, “You know what, I have gifts of administration, I think I could do that.” And he operated and served very effectively in that capacity.

As far as I’m aware, all of us, if we’re called, are called one of these ways. God either calls us by name, places a desire on our hearts that we can’t shake, arranges our path, or prepares an attractive option.

Calling: Personal

Finding that calling can be difficult, but it is important to know what kind of difficulty we are talking about here. We are not talking about persecution or digging for gold hard. It is God’s job to call, and my job to listen and understand. If I am not hearing, it is not because God is not talking. It is our job to go somewhere and somehow arrange our life so that we can hear God talk.

So here is the question: What are you called to as your primary work task? Do you know? What do you have to do to figure that out? I can speak personally of what I have done. The first thing I've done is come to God with an intense desire to hear His voice, to hear what He has to say to me. I have to desire it more than I desire anything else. I need to pray towards that end. I need to put myself in a position where I can hear Him talk. I need to be quiet and let Him talk.

The second thing I've had to do is pray, think, and talk my way through the four ways that God calls me. I can eliminate one easily: He's never called me by name, at least that I've heard. And when I say "talk," I literally mean get together with somebody who understands and knows you and can help explain you. Recently, I was having a long conversation with a friend who's thinking about a job switch, and he wants to make the right decision. He wants to know which one he's called to. During that conversation, we went through a protocol of things that helped define what he was good at, what he preferred, what his wiring was, what frustrated him, but then I said, "You know it's not enough for you to tell me what you think about yourself. I need to know what your wife thinks." And he went and asked her and her answer was diametrically different than his. So he went to his dad and he said, "Which category do you think I'm in?" and his dad said, "Oh, no question, you're over here." And he had put himself over there. So when I say to pray, think, and talk your way through, I mean find people who know you, understand you, love you, and can give you some honest feedback.

The third thing I've had to do is distinguish between the kind of work I do and the actual job I have. This is an important distinction. If I'm called to do something, it is incomprehensible to me that I be called to do something I'm not made for and I'm not good at. If I'm supposed to be an auto mechanic because I'm called to that, but when I get under a hood I can't figure anything out and my tools keep dropping into the carburetor, who would think that God designed me from the creation of the world to do work that I'm not good at?

On the other hand, I may be in a situation where I'm doing the work I'm called to do but I'm in a job I don't like. Look at Daniel: Was Daniel good

at administration, was he good at leadership? I would hope so. The guy served under three or four different empires—always at the top—as a prisoner and as a slave. He must have been good. Did he like working for a pagan king? Did he like his job? I'm not really sure he did. There are times when I am called to do work that I am good at in a job situation that is less than perfect. In other words, it might not be laughs and smiles every day when I come home, but I'm still doing what I'm called to do where I'm called to do it, and therefore my work fits into God's overarching purpose or agenda.

*It is our job to arrange
our life so that we can
hear God talk.*

Finally, there is one last issue. That is that we can't give up. We don't know how long it will take. We don't know how much sweat will be expended, how many tears will be shed, or what the time line looks like, but we need to figure out what our calling is. This takes us back to where we started: if we live out our calling, we are a picture of Jesus Christ in our jobs to a world which right now is more open to seeing and understanding that picture than it has been for centuries.

Conclusion

I don't want a career. I don't want to live my work life pushing a cart in circles, working the treadmill. The good news of Jesus is that He calls each one of us, He does not leave us to wander aimlessly to figure this out on our own. With God's promise in mind, I would like to close with a benediction, a prayer for all of us:

May God call us personally to do His work and to help accomplish His agenda, using talents we've been given, in ways that are eternally significant.

May God release us to do the exact work He has for us right now, without any further delay.

May God give us incredible passion, excitement, and enthusiasm for accomplishing our calling.