

# What Is Your Calling?



by DAVID POWLISON

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Our Father works personally and purposefully in each one of his children. Each of us is handmade, one-at-a-time, one-of-a-kind. You and I evidence Christ's workmanship and craftsmanship. We are not mass-produced. We are not clones or spare, interchangeable parts. We are individual components in one infinitely intricate living body of Christ, every component playing its part.

You have been made alive by the Holy Spirit with particular purposes. He places you on location. You live here and now—not anywhere, anytime. You are on call for particular people—not anyone and everyone. The sorrows you face, the happiness you find, these universal experiences take a personal shape. Your life story, your temperament and temptations, the things you know, your abilities and limitations, your experiences and perceptions, the way you think, and feel, and choose... every detail happens in specifics. Nothing happens in general. God's redemption repurposes you, gathering up *every* experience and characteristic into his purpose for you.

So each day, in each situation, you have the opportunity to do and say constructive things that no other human being could do or say. In the loving hands of God, your life is custom-designed and custom-built. And we will all fit together in the end. Every hand will do its work. Every voice will sing its part.

This is your *calling*.

And this article invites you to reflect on your calling.

The notion of *calling* provides a perspective on all of life and all of Scripture. The concept springs from the One who calls: God speaks. And because he is vocal,

he calls forth all that exists. Because he is vocal, he proclaims who he is. Because he is vocal, when he comes in person, he is the Word becoming flesh.

And because he is vocal, you have a vocation, a calling. Vocation is not a synonym for a professional career. Vocation is not restricted to those in “vocational ministry”: pastors, missionaries, monks, and nuns. God’s calling is personal with each of his children.

The concept of vocation or calling has a wide scope of meaning. This article will soon get very specific and personal, but first let’s orient ourselves. The word *calling* has five important meanings in Christian thought and practice, and these meanings build upon each other.

### **Calling: Five Meanings**

Calling #1 is the *universal call of creation*. God calls out through all that is and through everything that happens: “Here I am! Know me!” This voice comes without audible words. The sun, moon, and stars pour out a wordless speech and knowledge to everyone (Ps 19:1–6). God’s hand paints the sunrise and sunset, and sentient beings everywhere notice with awe and joy (Ps 65:8). The fruitfulness of the earth proclaims God’s continual generosity and goodness (Ps 65: 9–13; Acts 14:15–17). All creation proclaims his presence, power, goodness, and glory (Rom 1:19–20). The activity of the human conscience bears unwitting witness to him, whether that conscience is accurate, or distorted, or conflicted (Rom 1:32–2:1; 2:15–16). We know, but we suppress the knowing. Though we see and hear, we are instinctively willful, blind, and deaf to this universal call.

Calling #2 is the *universal call of redemption*. The gospel of Jesus Christ’s goodness and atoning death is freely offered as the only rescue from our badness and mortality. This offer of life is freely proclaimed to everyone everywhere: “Look, here he is. Look at what he has done. Return, call upon him, and live!” This voice of promise and invitation comes in both spoken and written words. A person must hear in order to believe, and so God’s Word and his servants freely call every human being to come and know him (Rom 10:13–15).

Calling #3 is the *effectual call*. God calls his children into Christ, powerfully speaking. He raises the dead to life. The deaf miraculously hear his life-giving voice, and they awaken to Christ. The blind miraculously see, and they come. The willful are miraculously humbled, and they turn. Not-my-people become “My people.” This new creation arises as the animating voice of God implants his saving word of life in hearts (James 1:18), this treasure beyond treasures, this gift of gifts. The God of surpassing power, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” shines into our hearts, giving us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus

Christ (2 Cor 4:6–7). In the Bible, the most frequent use of the actual word *calling* is this Calling #3: “the calling by which you were called” (Eph 4:1). God’s initiating power, love and glory in Christ bridge the relational estrangement between us and him. His voice breaks through our stupor of self-will. He awakens us, calling forth a people for himself.

Calling #4 is the *calling to holiness*. God calls us to a life of trust and a lifestyle of thankful obedience: “faith working through love.” He calls us into a lifelong discipleship unto the image of Jesus. He calls us to do his will: “love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.” The psalms become how you think and relate. The proverbs become how you evaluate and choose. The Christian life is a continual response to this calling to become like Jesus whom we believe. As Ephesians 4:1 puts it, we are called to live a life worthy (Calling #4) of the calling with which we have been called (Calling #3).

Calling #5 is the *specific vocational calling*. God calls you by tailor-making you and your circumstances so that you serve him here and now in a specific way. This is your calling in the narrow sense of finding yourself, your “vocation” in the most specific sense. What has God specifically made *you* for on the stage of your time, place, and experiences? Calling #5 defines the specific arenas where you most fruitfully work and serve.

These five uses of the word are logically connected. They build from the general to the specific in how sinful creatures are called into a living relationship with God (#1, #2, and #3). They build from the general to the specific in the shape of our obedience to Christ (#4 and #5). The fifth meaning culminates in a purposeful awareness of the fact that each person has a God-ordained calling. As Francis Schaeffer wrote, there are “no little people.” Your life counts in the details.

The rest of this article will do two things. First, we will focus on that fifth meaning, *your vocational calling*. What has God made you for? Where has he given you specific opportunities to serve him? What has God tailor-made you to do in your time and place? I hope that your awareness of God’s purposes for you will be clarified as you work this through.

Second, we will zero in on the *counseling* aspect within every calling. All of us are called to become verbally wise and constructive in how we interact with others. But we aren’t all good at the same kinds of conversations. I hope that working this through will boost your self-awareness of both strengths and weaknesses.

### **Your True Vocation: Why You Are Here**

How do we gain an awareness of our calling? It gets hammered out gradually in the process of living your Christian life honestly. We will look at five aspects of life that

intertwine as you come to know what you are made for. To put it a different way, your calling is like a river into which five tributary streams flow. I will ask you to reflect on five questions, each of which brings certain key matters into view.

You have been given *gifts and talents*. How are you wired? What are you good at?<sup>1</sup> There is an aspect of endowment.

You have a unique repertoire of *life experiences*: education, sufferings, training, achievements, skills. There is an aspect of experience.

You have been placed in a *life situation* with specific opportunities, challenges, responsibilities, and people whose lives you touch. There is a situational aspect.

You have *grown* to some degree in wisdom, faith, maturity, and love. You are still growing and changing as the Vinedresser is at work in you. There is an aspect of spiritual maturing.

You find joy and satisfaction in certain things that express what you *want* to do. Your calling brings the pleasure, passion, and purpose of doing what you are made for. There is a subjective aspect.



Figure 1. Five Questions to Help Discern Your Calling

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You will understand your calling as you understand the intermingling of these five things about you and your world. This calling is your true "vocation": what you are called to do in your life situation. Your vocation is much more than your occupation, how you make a living. It is much more than your avocation, what you do on the side. It is much more than your "ministry." It is about much more than God's guidance. Your vocation is expressed in all these and more. It is what you

<sup>1</sup> And what are you *not* good at?! Only in community do we cover all the bases.

have been made for. What are those specific good works which God has prepared beforehand for you to walk in (Eph 2:10)? Your understanding of your specific vocation grows as you bring together these five strands of self-knowledge.

The five questions are discussed below. For your ministry needs, we have provided a summary worksheet in Worksheet 1. Use it to help yourself or someone else to learn more about God's vocational calling.

**Question 1. *What are your gifts and talents?*** God gives gifts and talents in order for you to “go into business” for him (Matt 25:14–30). Some of these are listed in Romans 12:3–8 and 1 Corinthians 12–14. Which describe you? Think more widely also. These are “for instance” lists that give us key categories, with many subsets and variations on the gifts mentioned. In other places the Bible speaks generally, and expects us to make the application. For example, 1 Peter 4:10–11 simply mentions speaking (word gifts) and serving (helps gifts). How has God equipped you to serve practically and/or to speak helpfully? And 1 Peter 4:7–9 mentions things to which everybody is called to do to some degree: pray, show merciful love, show hospitality.

This first question is actually the easiest. If in doubt about your gifts and talents, just ask your mother or your best friend! This is a question about “original equipment,” how God has endowed you.

**Question 2. *What have you been given in life experience, learning, and background?*** The true God does not inhabit some religious sector or spiritual sphere, expecting us to come to him. He works in the mundane, and comes to us in the normal activities of daily life. Daniel and Moses were educated in the knowledge and ways of the governing class, and so could rise to positions of authority while living in exile. Paul could be the bridge from the Jews to the nations because he was both an educated Pharisee and a Roman citizen. Moses and David were equipped to look out for the welfare of others by years spent shepherding sheep. Older women are equipped to help younger women by their life experience (Titus 2:4). Paul could encourage people facing any sort of trouble because of how he found encouragement in his particular trouble (2 Cor 1:4). God uses everything. Have you worked in a factory? Learned Spanish? Battled cancer? Been disillusioned by a fallen leader? Made millions in business? Raised a disabled child? Been sexually molested? Had an abortion? Done a graduate degree? Come off of street drugs? Been fascinated by South Asia since childhood?

Your calling almost always unfolds along a trajectory. It bears an organic relationship to how your life has unfolded, and expresses the fundamental continuities in your story. This second question is a bit more complex than the first, because it

invites you to range widely over what you've experienced and learned.

**Question 3. *Where are the opportunities, responsibilities and challenges that surround you?*** Your calling is not simply individualistic self-fulfillment, a version of “follow your dreams.” It is keyed to the true needs of the people around you, and God's purposes for his people. What are the problems, troubles, and struggles of your time and place? In your family and home? Local church? Work place? Neighborhood or city? Nation? World? Wider body of Christ? The sons of Issachar were “men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do” (1 Chron 12:32). What are your times? What needs to be done? Abigail had “good understanding” (1 Sam 25:3, 33), and figured out what she needed to do to defuse a volatile situation. The story of the sheep and the goats addresses elemental human needs that take a thousand forms, and each of us encounters them in different ways (Matt 25:31–46). The Samaritan in Jesus' parable showed himself sensitive to God's call within the exigencies of a crisis situation (Luke 10:30–37). The situational realities in any particular family, community, work place, or church are not the same. What needs godly attention in your time and place, in your church, in your community?

This third question is important because it decenters us off ourselves and locates us in the bigger world. Jesus' calling was not shaped by the general need of fallen humankind, as if he lived, taught, healed, and died for a nameless abstraction. His life took its specific shape from a thousand particulars of the people with names among whom he walked and talked. God's calling to you is not individualistic. He connects you to your context. Where are you located?

**Question 4. *How have you grown wiser through faith, repentance, and learning to walk in the light?*** You are living out an unfolding story as God works in you to change you. Your growth process toward deeper faith and wiser love is crucial to understanding your fruitfulness. How are you growing? Where are you struggling? Are you moving from folly toward wisdom? How has your discipleship unfolded? Have you been learning Christ, walking in the truth that is in Jesus, hence equipped to help others? Wisdom grows in humility, integrity, and realism about yourself and others. Wisdom grows confident in the God of truth who searches hearts, and in gratitude to Jesus Christ. God creates a wise servant by teaching his children many things. Your calling is inextricable from how you are doing as his child. We learn many things in coming to know ourselves before the face of our God.

Are you actually growing to better know the true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent (John 17:3)?

What is your “characteristic flesh,” the pattern of your sinfulness? What

thematic desires, idolatries, fears, false hopes, and wrong beliefs show up in your attitude and thinking, in your sinful habits and patterns of behavior? In your typical struggles with yourself, are you finding the way of escape in Christ (1 Cor 10:6–14)?

Are your eyes open to the hardships and troubles in your own life? Are you learning to trust God instead of yourself when you experience life's pressures and uncertainties? Does the way you process difficulties lead you directly to God himself (as the psalmists demonstrate) and then lead to greater wisdom in helping others (2 Cor 1:3–11)?

What “logs” tend to blind you, making you unhelpful and unloving toward the failings of others? How has God opened your eyes to his mercies and gentled you toward others (Matt 5:3–10; 7:1–6; Luke 6:38–45)?

Where do you see the Spirit's fruitful generosity in working out wisdom, kindness, perceptiveness, and persistence? Where do you still need the Spirit's fruit (Gal 5:14–6:10)?

The first three questions about calling are relatively straightforward compared to this fourth question. But this question will be the difference maker in the *quality* of how you fulfill your calling. It is about how you are living. For example, let's say your gifts, education, and awareness of the church's needs all point to a calling to become a pastor. But if you are obtuse in the matters of question four, then you are not yet called to be a pastor.

**Question 5. *What do you want to do?*** What do you enjoy? What are you compelled to do? Where do you work eagerly and thrive? No doubt, our desires lead us astray in our sins. But, equally without a doubt, your calling will resonate in your desires. For example, key passages speak of the importance of personal willingness and desire to serve in a ministry (1 Tim 3:1; 1 Pet 5:2). This doesn't mean that your calling is always fun and games. From the heart, Jeremiah had to do what he was called to do, however difficult (Jer 20:9). Paul did his calling with all his might, because the Spirit was working in him for this purpose (1 Cor 15:10).

This final question asks about your desires. What do you delight in? What do you thrive doing? What do you *want* to do?

At the confluence of these five streams, you come to know and live your calling. Work these questions through. Make them part of how you come at life, how you come to know God, how you come to know yourself, and others, and why you are here. I hope that you find the process of reflection helpful and clarifying.

These questions have been hugely helpful to me. They are woven into the fabric of how I live. Reflection on these matters becomes second nature. It contributes

greatly to having a sense of orientation and purpose.

The interplay between these five elements is part of wisdom. You need all five to understand who you are within Christ's purposes. Your natural endowments (and your inabilities, too) matter. Your varied life experiences matter. The people and situations calling for your wisdom and love matter. It matters that growth in grace is hard-won and freely given. What you want to do matters.

One more comment before we move to the next section. A calling is not a fixed thing. It changes with time and circumstance. For example, your answer to Question 1 about your gifts usually remains relatively stable—but even that can morph. You may discover an unsuspected gift later in life. Illnesses, accidents, and aging will take away valuable talents—just like what happens with talented athletes. And your answers to the other four questions are always provisional. They will apply for a season, whether long or short. These five questions are not intended to give final answers. They are good for keeping you appropriately flexible and adaptable within the good purposes of God.

### **Get Specific: Think about Your Opportunities to Help and Counsel Others.**

Few people define themselves as “counselors,” but all of us counsel. You counsel others all the time, every time you open your mouth, however seemingly trivial the topic. And you either counsel well or poorly. The things you say are either wise or foolish. Your words offer either nourishing food, or empty calories, or poison. The effect of what you say is either constructive or destructive. This is the thrust of Ephesians 4:29: “Let no unwholesome words ever come out of your mouth, but only what is constructive, what meets the need of the moment, so that what you say gives grace to those who hear you” (paraphrase). All this is why Jesus pointedly says that every one of us will be judged for every single word that ever comes out of our mouths (Matt 12:33–37). We may be just mouthing off or running at the mouth, but God is listening closely. He hears the underlying reasons, attitudes and agendas operating in even the most casual conversation.

These five points will help you to look at yourself as a counselor. A summary is provided in Worksheet 2.

**1. Look around you.** Hebrews 3:12–14 envisions daily constructive conversations, both giving and receiving.

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But *encourage one another every day*, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end.

We all need help—every day. Sin is subtle, and we are forgetful and prone to drift off into darkness. So we are all called to give help. Who are the obvious people in your life whom you could “encourage daily” (or weekly, or monthly)? Think of people in your home, your neighborhood, your job, your church, your small group, your school.

Think carefully about each person. Consider each person’s strengths and weaknesses, joys and sorrows, fruitfulness and failings, gifts and the pressures they bear, the places they need the wisdom and power of God to be made perfect in their weakness. For what can you give thanks? For what should you intercede? Colossians 1:3–12 communicates the heart of biblical prayer for one another.

Write down names, and affirm, “I commit myself to pray regularly for the following people. I desire to be a source of encouragement and light, as God gives opportunity.”

As you write these names, stop and pray. Is there some practical way you can reach out now—getting together, sending a note, giving a call, doing something thoughtful and helpful?

**2. *Where? Who? What problems?*** In what settings do you have time and opportunity to counsel and encourage people? For example, lunchtime, prayer group, evening phone calls, pastor’s office, after church, taking a walk, etc.

What kinds of people seek you out and let you get to know them? For example, male or female? Elderly, middle-aged, young adults, teens or children? Married or single or divorced or widowed? What are the typical struggles, disabilities and abilities of those who gravitate toward you? Christian or non-Christian? Rich or poor? A particular ethnic group?

What kinds of people do you work well with? Usually these are people whose world you are able to enter, in order to bring both God’s love and truth. Are you best at admonishing the unruly, able to sniff out lies and confront constructively? Are you best at comforting the faint-hearted, able to come alongside anxious, discouraged people? Are you best at holding on to the weak, at finding practical ways to make a difference in someone else’s life?

What kinds of problems do you work well with? For example, you may be particularly equipped and oriented to one or more of the following: bereavement, interpersonal conflict, general stress of life, addictions, people who have suffered traumas, physical disabilities, anger, anxiety, criminal behavior, discipling new believers, financial counsel, etc.

Conversely, what kinds of people do you not work well with? Perhaps they intimidate you or confuse you or trigger impatience, or perhaps it is generally

inappropriate for you to counsel such people. Helping such folks is not ruled out—God will always stretch you—but it makes sense that your calling will usually operate closer to home in how God has made you.

What kinds of problems do you not work well with? Perhaps you are ignorant or overwhelmed or simply lack wisdom here. You can certainly grow. But this area may not end up being your specialty calling.<sup>2</sup>

**3. *Seek advice*** of people who know you well. Consider your pastor, wise Christian friends, spouse, parents, members of a ministry team, a small group. How do they answer the above questions regarding your gifts, opportunities, significant experience, maturity and eagerness? How do they answer the above questions regarding the sorts of people and problems you might work well with?

**4. *Summarize your current understanding*** of your counseling calling (within the general calling you worked through in the previous section of this article). What have you learned doing this self study? What are your hunches and instincts about where your life can be most useful to God? Where are things vague and you need more clarity?

**5. *Where do you go from here?*** This study aims to help you grow in clarity and confidence about God's purposes for you. Realistic and specific knowledge of your strengths and limitations is part of wisdom. It helps you focus on the right things. Wise self-knowing makes you both humble and confident—a rare combination.

So what are your next steps?

- Take initiative in your church?
- Faithfully continue to do what you are doing?
- Is there someone you need to talk to?
- Gather a group of people to pray with and for you?
- Do further study—reading, education, training?

As you take the next steps, your clarity, humility and confidence will lead you toward others in wise care and concern.

### **You Are Called by God**

The multi-layered reality of “calling” gives us such a lovely doorway into God's goodness. Our Creator and our Savior come calling for us. In love he calls us out when we stray. And he calls out to us, catching our ear, so that we come to him and live. He calls us to follow in his footsteps so that we live life in a most wondrous

<sup>2</sup> As a further resource, you might find my article “Familial Counseling” helpful. (*Journal of Biblical Counseling*, 25:1 [2007], 2-15.) It describes a range of ministry skills that adapt to a range of people and problems.

way. And he calls each of us by name to serve him within the grit, the choices, the interactions of daily life. He calls us to talk with other people the way he would, in the words we choose to say (and not say), in how and why we say anything and everything.

You have been called. I sincerely hope that as your awareness of his call grows, your joy and confidence will also grow.

## Worksheet 1

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### Five Questions to Help Discern Your Calling

1. What are your gifts and talents?
2. What have you been given in life experience, learning and background?
3. Where are the opportunities, responsibilities and challenges that surround you?
4. How have you grown wiser through faith, repentance, and learning to walk in the light?
5. What do you want to do?

## Worksheet 2

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### Defining Your Opportunities to Counsel Others

1. Look around you. Who needs help? Write down their names.
  
2. Where? Who? What problems?
  - a. What kinds of people seek you out?
  
  - b. What kinds of people do you work well with?
  
  - c. What kinds of problems do you work well with?
  
  - d. What kinds of people do you not work well with?
  
  - e. What kinds of problems do you not work well with?
  
3. Seek advice. What do others think about who you should work with and what kinds of problems?
  
4. Summarize your current understanding of your counseling calling.
  
5. Where do you go from here? What are your next steps?

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