

WHAT CALL ARE YOU HEARING?

I do know, as well as anyone here, that there are highly intelligent, highly regarded, very wonderful and respected members of every congregation I have served who insist that they have never heard God calling them. That seems really sad to me, not because it refutes one of the basic pillars of my own faith, but because one of the most exciting and fulfilling experiences of the Christian Life is responding to the call of the Holy Spirit. I hate to see anyone missing that part of Life.

If we read and pay attention to the stories unfolding in the Bible, it does not take long to realize that this is what is going on with more and more of the players in the biblical drama. This is what is getting them so excited. This is what is getting them into so much trouble. This is what is changing their lives. This is what brings them into an entirely different level of relationship and love and trust with God. It is the calling of God – the calling of the Holy Spirit – that puts us into the story with what God is doing in our realm. And it puts us into the story in a very up-front, personal, and challenging way.

This is not something we have never heard about before. There is no such thing as a genuine conversion without an assignment. I am only reminding us. At the great catch of fish which accompanied Peter's first conversion, Peter wants to call it off. *"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."* But it's too late for Peter. I certainly do not mean to imply that Jesus is not being playful. He has a wondrous sense of humor, irony, and incredible timing. But Jesus is not merely playing games; He is not merely entertaining Peter with spiritual card tricks. *"Do not be afraid,"* Jesus says to Peter. *"I will make you a fisher of men."* This is no longer just a game. This is a calling.

On the way to Damascus, Paul is stunned, startled – blown out of one life and into another. But the *calling* is unmistakable: *"I will send you as an apostle to the Gentiles."* Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Luke, Timothy, Silas, Onesimus – no matter where we turn in the Scriptures or through all subsequent church history, there is no such thing as a conversion without an assignment.

Bingo! Are we on the same page now? An assignment is a calling. Vocatio: vocation: vocal cord – God calling us. That means a purpose for our lives; it is all part of the same pattern – the call of God. In the

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Christian understanding of Life, we are all “called” by the Holy Spirit – not once, but many times – all through our spiritual lives. We keep getting assignments from the Holy Spirit that we are supposed to be living for – something we are trying to accomplish for God. Much of Christendom in our time has tried to fall back to a generic “feed the hungry” or “help the poor.” Everybody wants “world peace” – as long as it doesn’t interfere with their own temper tantrums. But Christianity is a lot more intentional and specific than that.

“Helping the poor” and “feeding the hungry” are generic cheap-shot substitutes by the modern church for following the guidance of the Holy Spirit. You know the litmus test: Is it personal – is it relational? If the assignment is from the Holy Spirit, it will be personal and relational. Do we have a personal relationship with the people we are trying to help? Do they end up inside the faith family we are part of? Do they end up genuine friends in Christ? Or is it just us being magnanimous or superior or working off a little guilt?

I’m sure none of us have any idea what I’m talking about. In any case, it is a New Year and I am asking: What call are you hearing? What is your calling in Christ Jesus? Of course, I would not mention it in public, but in comparison to a calling from the Holy Spirit, making a New Year’s resolution is like the proverbial spit-wad in Hell.

We read some comments a few minutes ago from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Many scholars have suggested that Paul was writing not just to one congregation, but to all the churches in the Ephesian area. Ephesus was the most important city in Asia Minor at the time. Paul very possibly writes this letter toward the end of his life, when he was a prisoner in Rome awaiting trial before the Emperor.

“I implore you then – I, a prisoner for the Lord’s sake: as God has called you, live up to your calling.” A simple statement, with nearly endless implications. A calling is not and cannot be generic. A calling comes from personal contact between an individual and the Holy Spirit. Nearly all the programs, efforts, and appeals of the modern church are generic. We are continually urged to do good “in general” – even to *be* good “in general.” Has that got anything to do with why our appeals to various missions have such a meager response? And does that, in turn, have anything to do with why our churches are getting smaller and less effective all the time? Oh sure, it can sound impressive (or at least we try to make it sound that way) if we send twenty-five or fifty thousand dollars to some orphanage in Africa. But if it turns out

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to be the result of each of us giving twenty-five cents, that is less impressive.

Paul is writing to *every* Christian in the entire area. Paul assumes that each one of them has a specific calling from the Holy Spirit of the Risen Lord. And that is the true mission of “the church” as Paul understands it. Nothing general or generic here. It is not about our spare dollars or our spare time. Each member of the Body of Christ has a specific purpose, a calling – an assignment that requires a huge investment of time, gifts, prayer, and resources, day in and day out. But it is never easy or automatic. So Paul implores us: “*live up to your calling.*” Yes, indeed! That would restore, reenergize, and revitalize the church.

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Sometimes you have to be a little patient with my vocabulary. Well, you don't *have* to be, but all communication is about to cease if you are not. It has been many, many years now since I have thought of the church of Jesus the Christ as a volunteer organization. Volunteers are of little use to the Kingdom. Volunteers, because they have donated their precious time, think they should be able to control things, get their own way, even order the pros around. Volunteers assume they can quit any time they want to. Volunteers do not have a “boss” that they are working for or are trying to please. If you have a church full of volunteers, you can get nothing done, and you have endless squabbles, hurt feelings, and counterproductive efforts while you are doing it. Of course, not everyone who calls themselves a “volunteer” is one – thank God.

A real church is a fellowship of the “called.” We are not only the *ecclesia* and instructed to love each other – we are also the called. “*The life I now live is not my life [says Paul], but the life which Christ lives within me.*” (Galatians 2:20) “*I have been crucified with Christ*”: I have drowned in the waters of baptism – I have died to the old self.

There is no “volunteerism” in the life of the called. “*You did not choose me, I chose you,*” says Jesus. (John 15:16) The called do not try to take over and run things by their own whims or opinions. They each have a “boss” – a “Guide” – that they want very much to obey and please. They do not get to quit any time they feel disgruntled or unappreciated. Nor, by the way, can they be controlled by me or anyone else, no matter what the outer titles or positions may imply.

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The called live by a much deeper and stronger bond than mere membership in an organization. But they also have a Master: the One who called them. So once they begin to hone in on their purpose under Christ, what will it take to discourage or dissuade them from their calling? Hard to say, but it will not be anything in this world.

Are we in charge of each other's calling? Hardly! But we are fascinated by what others have been called to do and spend their energies trying to accomplish. And at times we even find ways to strengthen each other's hand. The Spirit is an ace at timing, and at finding ways to put us together when and where we most need each other. It is one of the many things we cannot do very well for ourselves. But we feel endless gratitude and wonder each time another Christian brother or sister comes along just at the right moment – with the right gifts.

And what does it do to our friendships and our relationships with each other to know that all of us have a calling? It puts a very new note of importance into the mix, and also a different kind of respect and appreciation.

What if I don't know what somebody else's call is? What if they have no awareness of their own calling? Well, maybe we should pay attention to what we do know, and be patient and expectant with what we do not know.

By the way, one of the mysteries for me is the realization that I know people who declare straight out that they have no calling from God. Yet I can see and feel the focus and the energy and the power of the way they are living, just as if they *did* have a calling. Where do such things come from? Do these folks merely use different words for it? I have long wondered.

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One of the things we are going to want to start talking about together in 2016 is: Why did this church start to unravel – why did it start down the slippery slope? Some among us probably will not want to admit that this was the reality; they will not want to look at it. But you know the principle: If we will not admit our mistakes, we are doomed to repeat them.

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There are doubtless several factors – more than one principle – at work. But in the larger picture, the answer is quite simple. A church goes downhill, and eventually “under,” when its members no longer think it is important enough to be worth their time and their resources. Okay, we have said it. Usually the demise of a church is blamed on demographics or the economy or any one of a number of external circumstances, like it was “bad luck” or something. But always there are other churches around, facing the same outer circumstances, that are not going under. So guess what? The real issues are internal. The real issues are about faith and prayer and our covenant bonds with the Holy Spirit.

A CHURCH GOES DOWNHILL, AND EVENTUALLY “UNDER,” WHEN ITS MEMBERS NO LONGER THINK IT IS IMPORTANT ENOUGH TO BE WORTH THEIR TIME AND THEIR RESOURCES. There are always some members of every church who do not act like the church is very important. But that does not take a church under, if most of the other members stay faithful.

A second principle is more subtle, and some of you will not agree (surprise, surprise). But a second principle is this: Does the church pay attention to its primary purpose? The church’s primary purpose is never ever about its outside missions. The church itself – the faith family – is always the primary mission. That is, if the church’s members are trying themselves to live faithful lives in response to Jesus the Christ, that is always their primary mission. And if that is true, they are also drawing other people into living faithful lives in response to Jesus the Christ. To be as blunt and clear as possible: The church is a waystation where spiritual pilgrims can meet, find each other, and help each other along the WAY – help each other to live the New Life in Jesus the Christ. That’s top priority. Churches who know this is their true and most important mission do not go under. Jesus will not let them. Jesus needs this kind of *ecclesia* too much to let one go under. The Holy Spirit is always tracking every person willing to wake up to the spiritual realms and to their own spiritual purpose and destiny. And when such a connection is made, where can people go – where do you send them?

The “church” is not our idea. It has been part of Jesus’ plan from the very beginning. So where people are gathered together “in His Name,” that is crucial to Jesus’ mission. Lots of churches are pretty fuzzy about their primary mission and purpose, and many are too distracted to pay much attention to it. Lots of churches in our time

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are trying to build an audience rather than a faith family. So when the Holy Spirit knows a congregation that wants to stay awake and be faithful to Him, that congregation gets a lot of help. In return for this, Jesus gets to send that faith family some of the people He has been working to reach. This is, of course, a huge favor in the long run. But early on, sometimes the people Jesus sends to us are – how can we say it? They are sometimes a bit prickly, a little defensive. Sometimes they have chips on their shoulders, especially spiritual chips. Don't we remember when *we* did?

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So we are all entering a New Year. Check your partnership with the Holy Spirit. Callings are not singular or one-dimensional. Are you called to a special participation in this church? Do you have a calling at your work? Or at home? Or with a group of people you spend time with? Are any of your callings being ignored or neglected? Are you spending time and energy where you have *not* been called? It is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day, and that's because we have a lot of agenda to keep up with and some of it changes from time to time. The Holy Spirit is seldom static or dull or boring. What I frequently hear from the Spirit is: "Here I come – ready or not."

Thankfully and gratefully, we go together now to the communion meal that sustains and nourishes us for whatever is to come. That is always our ace in the hole: "*Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the Age.*"