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## A Biblical Foundation to Discover God's Circle of Calling for Your Life

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### Abstract

Calling is defined as a transcendent summons, finding meaning in a job, and making a difference in society. A majority of college students are concerned about calling and their careers. Some are concerned that they do not fully understand the origin of calling or what they are called to do. A student's philosophy of calling influences their choice of careers. Sometimes choose a job for reasons such as prestige or pay which may narrow their view and limit their choices. An absence of a theology of vocation leaves many students with no idea of how their faith connects to their life work. Clarity is needed about matching their gifts to their vocation. Recognizing the voice of God and a willingness to listen reconnects the link between faith and career. A biblical world view or philosophy of calling is developed by exploring the origin of work at creation and using Bible characters' experiences. Calling is actually a journey and not a destination that students can evaluate using steps in the Circle of Calling that is introduced. Increased awareness of calling through mentoring on an Adventist college campus can assist students in discovery of the biblical basis for God's Circle of Calling. Practical examples of raising this awareness are given.

**Key words:** calling, career, vocation, circle of calling, calling journey, career mentoring

"Charge to 300, there's no pulse!" Having just arrived in the emergency room, this patient fell back on the stretcher, clutching his chest. I grabbed the cardiac paddles and defibrillated the now unconscious 56-year-old man. His chest heaved in a contorted way as he jerked back to life while the cardiac monitor, now thankfully, scrolled out a normal heart rhythm.

"Give him 75 milligrams of Lidocaine!" The ER nurse had already drawn up the dose. Another nurse had just stuck an IV line in his left arm in record time.

"Hey, what are you doing?" he complained, as he grabbed his chest again and sat up. "As I said, I was digging a hole for a fence post and . . ." Suddenly the heart monitor was dinging wildly as he fell back into ventricular fibrillation again.

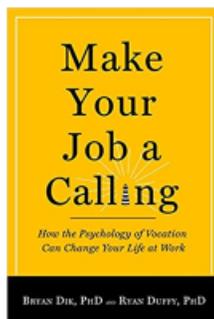
"Charge to 360" I ordered grabbing the paddles again. After yet a third shock and more lidocaine, he stabilized just enough for transfer to the heart center 30 miles away. A few minutes later, the chopper touched down and we whisked him out the door on his stretcher out the door to the landing pad and on to the cardiologist.

A month and a three-vessel cardiac bypass later, he walked into the emergency department. This time he was smiling. "I just wanted to thank-you for saving my life. Here's a jar of honey from my bee hives." His nurse-daughter was at his side again, this time beaming. I was just doing my job as all emergency providers do. My career as a physician was meaningful although much of the time a doctor's life consists of sore throats and sprained ankles. I made a difference in our small community. I enjoyed the study of science and attending medical educational meetings. As president of the country medical society, I was respected at the hospital. We had raised our children here. I was earning a good living. The call to medical school was clear during my college years with the career counselor's guidance and my subsequent acceptance to Loma Linda University School of Medicine. So why would I change careers just when I had "arrived"? And how did I recognize this new call to become a college professor? In what ways could I find meaning in my new career and feel I made a difference?

Calling, career and vocation are important to many and especially to college students. Many are concerned as they don't understand the origin of calling or what they are called to do in life. A career is commonly defined as a specific job, and a vocation can be thought of as a general line of work. But how is calling defined?

In the book *Make Your Job a Calling*, Bryan Dik and Ryan Duffy surveyed 435 college students. 68% said calling was important to them. 62% of older individuals were also concerned about career and calling in a similar survey. The participants in these studies defined calling in three ways. 1) Most felt calling is an external guiding force defined as God or destiny while a few others pointed to an inner drive or passion. 2) They identified calling as a sense of purpose in work. They believe using their gifts and talents creates meaning in their jobs. 3) Finally, making a difference or a positive impact on others they felt was an important feature of calling.

## A working definition of Calling:



1. An external guiding force defined as God or destiny.
2. A sense of purpose in work . Using talents creates meaning in a job.
3. Making a difference or a positive impact on others.

### Reasons Calling Matters

Most college students eventually seek career advice and especially upper classmen. Graduation looms on the horizon and they'll need employment soon, or continue on to graduate school. A number stop by my office and ask, "What should I do with my life? How do I know what God is calling me to do?"

Careers are chosen for many reasons. The CREDO study of enrolled students was conducted at Southern Adventist University in 2013 (Lee, 2013). It shows student career preparation and a faculty knowledgeable about their field as the two most important issues of matriculants. A close runner up was a faith based environment. Some students are instructed by their elders to choose a major leading to a good paying job and finish college as soon as possible. Another common fail-safe career position I've heard from nursing students that are also premedical is to take nursing "just in case I don't make it into medical school". Many aren't accepted into professional schools so perhaps this is good advance planning. But some don't want to be a nurse. The common comment of "I can earn a good living as a nurse" is soon replaced with "I hate my job." There's no question that supporting yourself is important; but do you want to work in a job you didn't really feel called to do for the rest of your life? A few years ago I learned of another student who regretted attending medical school and only did so at the insistence of her mother. Yet another medical student related how he and his buddies could always single out classmates who only enrolled due to their parents' wishes. It is true that students are ultimately responsible for their career choices. Our coordinator for prospective students sets up appointments for high school seniors to visit our campus. She notes about 70% of phone calls to arrange a visit are from parents. These sometimes frustrated parents, on the spot, choose majors for their children who have little to no clue as to their career goals.

### Nursing career

Student nurse: "I can earn a good living!"



Registered Nurse: "I hate my job!"



Students without a broad view of vocation are limited as to their career choices. David Brooks wrote in the New York Times about a Stanford professor who conducted an online discussion. He wondered why so many students and recent graduates were choosing finance:

. . . I was struck by the unspoken assumptions. Many of these students seem to have a blinkered view of their options. There's crass but affluent investment banking. There's the poor but noble nonprofit world. And then there is the world of high-tech start-ups, which magically provides money and coolness simultaneously. But there was little interest in or awareness of the ministry, the military, the academy, government service or the zillion other sectors (Brooks, 2012)

Choosing only vocations that 1) pay well, 2) are non-profit low paying jobs, 3) are “cool” high tech careers limit student choices. Other jobs that might match their talents better are not on their radar. Some may choose careers only to elevate their self-image. This can lead to an unfulfilled work life later (Keller, 2012, p. 102)

Another issue is the Greek view of work which permeates popular culture. Aristotle said unemployment and not having to work was a goal to pursue. Tim Keller (2012) further points out in his book *Every Good Endeavor* that the Greeks viewed manual labor as a lower level vocation. Knowledge-type endeavors were deemed superior and viewed as a way to true happiness. Today, mainstream Christian views are similar. Work is seen as a necessary evil in the world. Manual labor is not valued as highly as the knowledge class of careers. Thus what are termed menial tasks earn a lower wage. Higher waged jobs are esteemed as superior and carry an elevated status.

Jobs chosen solely for high salaries or status ignore the prosocial component of vocation. At a prestigious graduation a few years ago, the speaker extolled the virtues and wonderful accomplishments of the graduates. Making a difference to others was not mentioned. I was accustomed to commencement addresses at Southern that encourage service and was surprised by this omission. With lack of clarity of how vocation can make a difference, dissatisfaction may occur later in life (Keller, 2012). Losing sight of the “why” may creep in for any career. Recently I visited with a fund raiser of a major hospital corporation. She related how daily meetings could last from early morning till late evening. The pressure is intense at times. Whenever her “why” became a little unclear, a walk through the pediatric wing helped remind her of why it matters. Lack of knowledge of how faith and work are connected is taking its toll on the spiritual lives of millennials. In the book *You Lost Me*, author David Kinnaman (2011) from the Barna Group addresses several reasons why young Christian leave the church. His research shows that more than half (59%) of twentysomethings drop out of active involvement in church. One of three ways to address this exodus is to reconnect faith and work. Kinnaman feels the Christian community needs to rediscover a “theology of vocation.” Lack of knowing what God asks twenty-somethings to do with their lives exists as they “have no idea that their faith connects to their life work” (p. 206). A clear picture of our role as Christ’s followers focuses on what we’re put on earth to do, both as individuals and as a community. Disconnection of faith and work is no surprise. Amy Sherman (2011) mentions that almost no teaching takes place from the pulpit on the relationship of faith and work. Hyper-individualism is also emphasized in American culture. It dominates contemporary Christian music and “Christian living” books which makes it easy to ignore service oriented careers. This “reinforces the me-and-Jesus mindset” (Sherman, 2011, p. 69) and excludes the broader “concept of vocational stewardship for the common good” (p. 95). Young adults need clarity about God given talents and strengths and how to best use them to add value to society. We can’t fix broken work in a sinful world, but we can attempt some remediation by the introduction of a biblical view of calling (Keller, 2012).

### **A Biblical Foundation**

The views above demonstrate how work and career are broken. A biblical framework to realign vocation to God’s original design is illustrated in the following stories of Elisha, David and Dorcas. Their discovery and response to vocation outline the three parts of calling - a transcendent summons, meaning in work, and making a difference.

#### **A Transcendent Summons**

A supernatural call to a vocation is not common either today or in the Bible. More often God works through people and circumstances. The call of Elisha is a good example.

“So Elijah went from there and found Elisha . . . He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him . . . So Elisha . . . took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant. (I Kings 19:19, 21 New

- **God works through people and circumstances.** Elijah's message was clear when he threw his mantle across Elisha's shoulders. God easily could have spoken out loud as in the Pauline Damascus road narrative - but He didn't.
- **Elisha didn't sit around and wait for a call.** "He had taken up the work that lay nearest" (White, 1917, p. 218). Plowing a field is not traditionally considered a religious endeavor; but White notes he was in "active service to God while engaged in the ordinary everyday duties" (p. 219)
- **He heard the call clearly.** We hear more clearly when totally committed to God. Elisha's response shows his total dedication and is perhaps more dramatic than the summons itself. After he used the yokes for a fire he slew and boiled his oxen and "gave it to the people and they ate" (v. 21). 12 yoke of oxen makes a lot of beef stew! Note also the call didn't happen in an isolated venue between Elijah and Elisha. Many others were present.

How did I recognize my call to medical school? While in college, our director of counseling and careers strongly suggested I take the MCAT exam my junior year. I was not a premed student at the time and was pursuing a career in chemistry. That spring I sat for the MCAT exam and soon was delighted to be accepted to Loma Linda University. God uses circumstances and people. What about the call to teach college? Two years before coming to Southern, my brother-in-law became a professor at Southern. I was envious. He hung out with thoughtful (for the most part) young adults and was paid to study which I enjoy. I envied my brother-in-law, and told my sister so. Even my recurrent night time dreams envisioned me living in a dorm room or in a small apartment at Southern and joining academic life again. I even played tennis on our Southern courts. Well, that's happened exactly once since we moved here 10 years ago.

I remember standing in the driveway of my sister's home about to step into our minivan to drive the two hours back home. "I feel like I'll be stuck working in the emergency room the rest of my life." I actually liked my job but felt there was something even more important and fulfilling to accomplish in life. My sister listened quietly for a moment as she always does. Then she responded, "Well, why don't you do something about it."

Wow! What a concept. All of a sudden I realized I'd been waiting around for God to appear and something to magically happen. Magical thinking is occasionally seen among aspiring pre-professional students earning a low GPA. "If it's meant for me to go to medical school, then it will happen," they declare. My magical thinking back then was for the college president to walk up to me at alumni weekend. I could just hear him say, "Hi Rick, we want you to come teach for us at Southern."

On the drive back home that night, more than car wheels were turning as my mind raced as I talked to God about using the abilities He gave me. That month I visited a career counselor, ordered the book *Leaving the Bedside: The Search for a Nonclinical Medical Career*, and began to seek advice from trusted family and friends. God acted through my sister that day. He continues to use people and circumstances.

### **Purpose and Meaning in Work**

A job becomes more meaningful when people bring their faith and world philosophy to work. (Dik & Duffy, 2012). People with a strong spiritual world view are especially prone to view their work as a way to live out their philosophy of life. David realizes increased meaning in his job by carrying his worldview with him "to the office." Life goals aligned with career goals leads to a positive sense of meaning. David also uses his talents and he realizes the importance of outcomes in his job. To carry faith to work doesn't necessarily mean signing up coworker for Bible studies or quoting scripture during lunch time.

**First, David carries his world view to work.** In I Samuel 17, David's world view is symbolized by the five stones in his shepherd's pouch. His philosophy of life is evident in several when setting off to fight Goliath.

- **He trusts God's leading.** His dependence on God's power causes him to choose simple stones and a sling instead of the king's armor.
- **He acts in the present.** He doesn't wait on God to act or to be asked. He is proactive, volunteers, and chooses stones from the brook.
- **He plans for the future.** David makes future plans by choosing not one but five stones while maintaining an open ear for God's future directions.

**Second, he realizes importance of outcomes and uses his strengths.** By use of talents developed while protecting sheep "David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him" (v. 50).

Outcomes of patients recovering and skills I learned at Loma Linda impacted meaning in my medical career. Sometimes it involved support of a terminally ill patient as they died with dignity. As a professor, outcomes can be measured through grades and student course evaluations. Statements like "*Dr. Norskov's enthusiasm greatly enhanced my understanding*" or "*He really believes in us. I really like his passion about this class.*" add satisfaction to my work.

Several years ago, a student anonymously commented about my anatomy and physiology class. The student wrote "If I had but one hour left to live, I would spend it in this class. For it seems like an eternity!" This comment has meaning but it's not exactly the type for which I was looking.

### Serving Others

This classic story of prosocial behavior exemplifies what it means to make a difference. Dorcas was the Greek name for Tabitha, a resident of Joppa. (Acts 9:32-43). "She was always doing good and helping the poor" (v. 36) She found meaning by sewing robes and giving away clothing.

**Changed her world.** Dorcas did not focus on "Changing the world" but focused on conditions close to home. Influencing the immediate world around her in many little ways was sufficient. Little did she know that her story would someday change the whole world. When she grows sick and dies, Peter arrives and climbs the stairs to Tabitha's small, dark room. She was beloved; for "all the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes Dorcas had made (v. 39). You can almost hear him comfort Tabitha's friends and feel the fine stitching on garments she lovingly handcrafted. Peter then raises her from the dead. Dorcas dies a seamstress and but now rises as a walking miracle that "became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord" (v. 42). News of this miraculous event overshadows all the clothing or food Dorcas ever gave away.

As a professor in the biology department, I help train future health care professionals. Little did I realize at the onset of my teaching career I would instruct over a hundred future physicians and dentists and many times more future nurses. Service to others many times is narrowly defined as only volunteerism. But to be reimbursed for value added to society is no less prosocial. God works through circumstances and at times beyond what we can image.

Note that Elisha, David, and Dorcas all answer the call and it leads to the honor of God. They each know that "Whatever the profession, the work of revealing the gospel of their salvation is the goal" (White, 1917, p. 222). In all three stories, actions marked their decision to follow the call. It's also interesting that only one of them directly worked for the church; yet God used all three in powerful ways.

### Original Biblical Meaning of Work

The origin of work first appears in the creation narrative as God invents work. To study His original design for work can change our understanding of careers:

"Thus the heavens and the earth were finished. . . And on the seventh day God finished His work that He had done. . . So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all His work that He had done in creation. The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it. (Genesis 2:1-3; 15)

Many are surprised that work was created before the fall. Keller brings out that "Work is as much a basic human need as food, beauty, rest, friendship, prayer, and sexuality. . . Without fruitful work, we sense significant inner loss and emptiness" (Keller, 2012, p. 23). With the entrance of sin, the nature of work changed and today it can be viewed as a punishment.

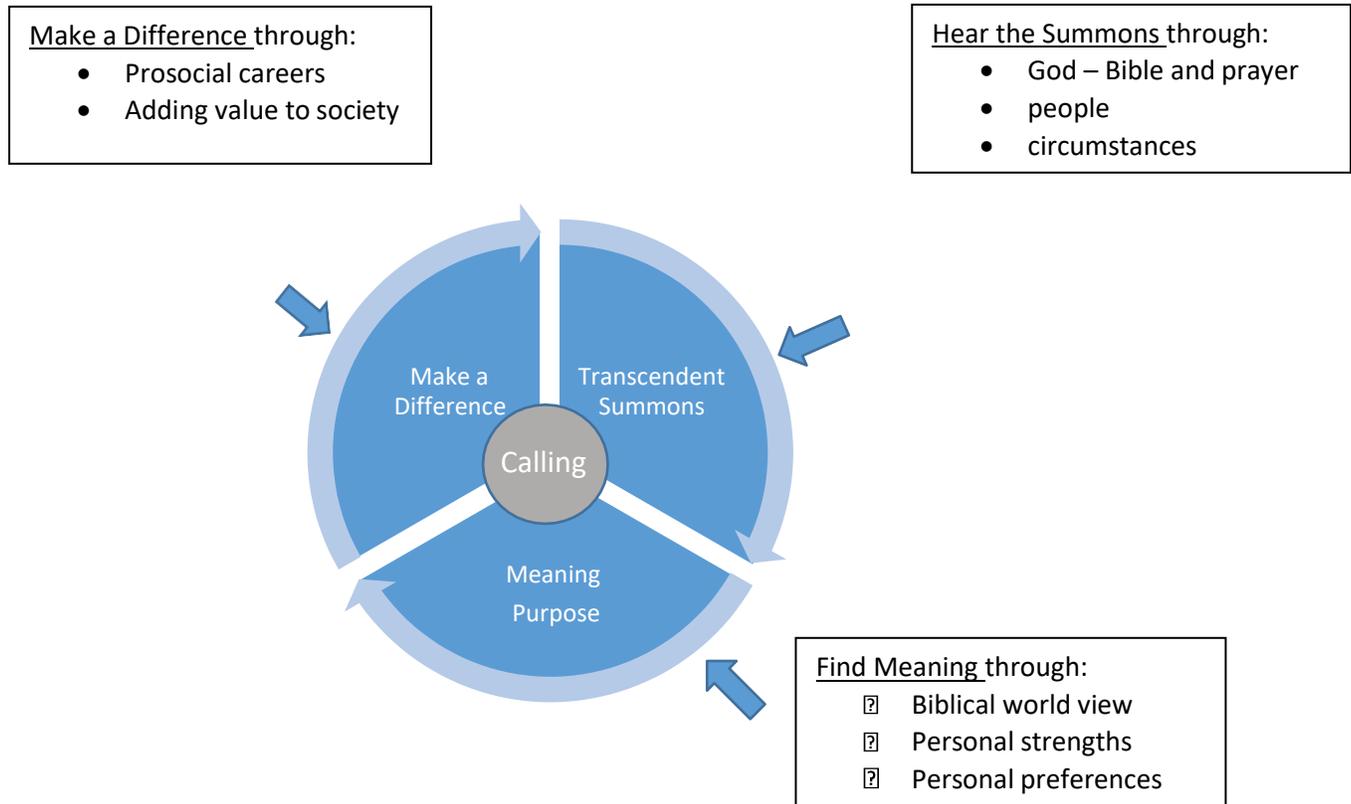
Since God and man labored before the fall, work has dignity. Jesus arrives not as the Greeks referred to as "knowledge class royalty" shunning work or even as a "royal statesman," but as a carpenter - a common laborer. This was no mistake; for it elevated the view of menial tasks (Jensen & Payne, p. 15; Keller, 2012, p. 37). God also links careers with service when humans are assigned work in the garden. "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it." (Genesis 2:15). With dominion comes responsibility. "Human beings are given the responsibility to till and to serve" (Tonstad, 2016, p. 96). The work of tilling the garden in Eden is paired with prosocial behavior - to "keep" the garden.

### **Increased Awareness of Calling**

To hear others calling stories can be inspiring. During my second year at Southern, several of us gathered for a Sabbath lunch at a faculty's home. Stories of how we arrived at Southern were shared and we noted how God had lead us here. Similar stories are now part of our on-campus Summer Institute for Faith and Learning, a yearly one week faculty development seminar. The last morning we spend time relating our career journeys. Many stories tell of divine appointments which are more clearly seen in retrospect. Before our move to Collegedale to teach in 2006, we listed our house with a relator on Friday afternoon. Choosing not to show our house on Sabbath, it was Monday morning when the realtor opened again. By that afternoon our house had sold for cash, twice what we paid for it.

### **The Calling Journey**

Many believe calling is discovered "once and for all." But this view can mean "I can stop listening now that I found it." To "discover your calling" places the emphasis on the destination. Life lived as only a destination misses the experience of the journey. The journey of calling continues throughout life as an on-going dynamic process (Dik & Duffy, 2012). The "Circle of Calling" diagram illustrates this dynamic journey (see figure 1).



## Circle of Calling

**Figure 1.** The arrows outside the circle indicate starting points to begin conversations about calling. A student's current understanding determines at what point they enter the Circle for this dialogue. (Adapted from Dik, B., & Duffy, R. (2012). *Make your job a calling: How the psychology of vocation can change your life at work*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press.)

### Increased awareness

Students will benefit if they recognize how and from where calling originates, find meaning in calling early in their career pathway, and evaluate how their choice of career adds to the greater good in society. Once made aware of calling students, should eventually be able to do the following:

- Analyze at which point their understanding leads them into the Circle of Calling.
- Assess their strengths and preferences for certain careers and match this with several appropriate prosocial careers.
- Apply their calling by selection of a course of study that leads to a graduation. This leads to either entry into the work force at graduation or enrollment in graduate/professional school.

### Resources to raise awareness

In what other practical ways can awareness of calling and career be increased on our college campus? One is help college staff and faculty find increased meaning in their work by interaction with students. Adam Grant (2007) shows evidence that the greater the frequency of face to face interactions with beneficiaries (i.e. students), the more commitment is felt by employees to those beneficiaries. Once more fully aware of what constitutes calling, faculty, staff, (and parents) don't need to work harder when visiting with students; they just need to think differently. Note that these conversations involve a slightly different set of questions.

Enhancement of other resources such as including this focus on God's calling in first year experience classes (e.g. Southern Connections) is one way. Another is through staff and faculty education. Southern has a group of employees that meet every month to discuss career journeys. Some ways to raise awareness off campus might include the encouragement of internships for all majors.

Promotion of LEAP (Leadership Education Alumni Partnership) mentoring for students is a powerful tool. An alumni mentor can reconnect faith and life work with the younger - but only as the older can articulate their own sense of calling. This vision is more difficult for the younger if the mentor is not fully aware of their own career journey (Kinnaman, 2011, p. 209).

### **Other Benefits**

Waiting to begin exploration of vocation in the first-year of college costs time and money. If college freshman focus on careers in high school, they'll finish college in four years instead of five or six. To fully know what career to pursue is rare and takes time. A few students in my anatomy and physiology class every semester perform poorly until they know "the why" and choose a career goal. Once focused, they become single minded and improve their performance. Awareness of the source of calling and the meaning of vocation increases satisfaction and reduces job switching later in life. Finally, once Southern is known for emphasis on choosing careers earlier in the light of God's calling, recruitment will be enhanced.

To discover the Circle of Calling is the "why" of Adventist education. To hear God's call, find meaning and purpose in our work, and make a difference in our world.

“Calling is a Journey, not just a  
Destination”

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