

Biblical perspectives on call

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Biblical scholar Martin Buss defines call in the context of ministry in this way: “A call summons a person to a specialized role.”¹ We might add that the call may be to a specific type of ministry or to a specific place of ministry.

Mennonites have started to use the language of call, as in a “call to ministry,” only fairly recently. In the past, ministers were chosen by lot without reference to whether they had a sense of call. The process followed a biblical model described in Acts 1 for choosing a leader to take the place of Judas. The disciples selected two who had been with them all along and therefore had known Jesus, heard his teachings, and with the other disciples had risked their lives when the Roman authorities turned on them. Because Jesus was no longer with them in the flesh, they prayed, asking for God’s guidance. Then they cast lots, and the lot fell on

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Matthias. The theology behind the lot method was that God would choose the person in the context of a community gathering. In the lot, as Mennonites practiced it, eligible men (not women) were asked to choose one of several Bibles, one of which had a paper with a scripture quotation inside. The one who selected the Bible containing the paper was deemed to be God’s choice.

When people today say that they are called, they mean they have a sense that God is calling them to ministry, or they have had an experience they interpret to be a call from

God. Like Samuel, they may have heard God calling them by name (1 Sam. 3:2–18). Some people speak about resisting the call at first and finally yielding when, like Jeremiah, they felt “something like a burning fire shut up in [their] bones” (Jer.

20:9).² The call in this sense is an individual experience which the person then conveys to the community. In many denominations, the individual's sense of call is tested and confirmed by the community.

This article will examine the language used in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and the New Testament for individuals summoned for a task or ministry. We will also examine the role of God and the community in the call, and how individuals respond. My goal is to determine whether we can identify patterns that might be of use to communities of faith as they seek leaders today.

The reader should keep in mind that the parts of the Bible were not written in the order in which they appear in our Bibles. We can guess at which texts might have been earlier or later; in a few cases we can be quite certain, but not always. As a result, it is difficult to trace the language and context of call from early forms to later ones. This study will note cases where a text is clearly earlier or later, but we will examine many without regard to date.

Call in the Hebrew Bible

In one story in Genesis (chaps. 6–9), God addresses Noah and tells him to build an ark in order to save human and animal life from the flood. In the language of the text, God first educates Noah about why God is acting against all living things. Then God “said” to Noah that all flesh is to be destroyed except for Noah and his family and some animals. God instructs (actually orders) Noah to build an ark. Noah complies. He successfully completes his mission, and that is the end of his specific ministry.

In Genesis 12 God speaks to Abram (whose name is later changed to Abraham) and instructs him to leave his country, kin, and father's house to go where God will send him. The language here is “said,” not “called.” Abram gives no verbal response in the story. But he does what God tells him to do. Abraham spends the rest of his life fulfilling the mission to father descendants, be a blessing, and acquire land in Canaan. In the cases of Noah and Abraham, their acceptance of the charge is indicated by their behavior rather than their words. They do what God instructs them to do.

In some of the Genesis stories, such as those about Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Hagar, Jacob, and Joseph, people fulfill a mission

without a specific reference to being called or God having appointed them to a specific ministry or task. For example, only after the fact does Joseph realize that God has used him to save his family. He was not called ahead of time for such a purpose. In fact, at first Joseph was only looking after his own interests (Gen. 50:19–21), but his pursuit of his own interests results in his being in a position to be used by God to save his family.

In the canonical order of the Bible, Moses is perhaps the first person who is explicitly called. According to Exodus 3:4, “God called to him from the middle of the bush,”³ using his name,

Isaiah 6:8 is believed to be Isaiah’s “call” to ministry. Here the call is not to a specific individual. The call is for a volunteer. Isaiah volunteers to bring the word of God to the people of Israel.

Moses. Moses responds to the call. God informs him that he will send him to pharaoh to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses never says that he will accept God’s call and perform the mission God has assigned to him. He offers excuses, protesting that he is unsuited to the task, but in the end he returns to Egypt and does what God wants him to do. Reluctance is a characteristic of some but not all call narratives.

In the book of Judges, God is said to have “raised up” judges to deliver various tribes of

Israel from their enemies. They typically save the tribe or tribes that are endangered and then retire to a civil position. In the case of one of the judges, God uses a woman, Deborah, to “order” Barak to lead a battle (Judg. 4:5–6). Ruth performs an important function in ancient Israel when—like other women, such as Rebekah, Hagar, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, Zilpah—she gives birth to a special child; this one becomes an ancestor of David, the king. But she is not “called” to do so. Because she lived her life in the presence of God, she could be used by God.

God calls Samuel by name while he is still a child, according to the call narrative in 1 Samuel 3. Samuel does not recognize the voice of God. But his mentor, Eli, does. Eli tells him how to respond. Samuel follows Eli’s instructions and responds: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” But what follows is not a call to ministry; it is a statement about what will happen to the house of Eli. Eli himself affirms that God has indeed spoken to Samuel. The call in this case is to provide insight and understanding to

Samuel, some of which is conveyed to the people of Israel. Samuel's visions and auditions continue during his time at Shiloh.

Saul is told that God has anointed him to be king over Israel (1 Sam. 10:1). No response from Saul appears in the text. David is also anointed (1 Sam. 16:12–13). Neither of these kings is said to have been called. But in both cases the people affirm their role after they have demonstrated and confirmed their leadership abilities (1 Sam. 11; 2 Sam. 5).

Some of the prophets have what scholars refer to as “call narratives.” The question and answer dialogue in Isaiah 6:8 is believed to be Isaiah’s “call” to ministry. “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’ ” Here the call is not to a specific individual. The call is for a volunteer. Isaiah volunteers to bring the word of God to the people of Israel.

Cyrus, a Persian king, is “anointed” for a specific task: to “subdue nations” and “build my city.” The Jews were developing an expansive notion of who God is and whom God can work with.

Isaiah has a choice; not so Jeremiah. Jeremiah is told by God, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jer. 1:5). Jeremiah is not happy about his prophetic vocation, but he accepts it.

According to his call narrative, Amos had a vocation that he followed prior to being called to ministry. One day “the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel’ ” (Amos 7:15). Amos does so. It is not clear whether this becomes a lifelong vocation or simply a call for a time in his life.

Perhaps the most unexpected reference to what we would label a call is found in the story of Cyrus, a Persian king. This non-Israelite leader is “anointed” for a specific task: to “subdue nations” (Isa. 45:1) and “build my city” (Isa. 45:13). In Isaiah 45:4, Cyrus is told in direct address that the God of Israel has called him, even “though you do not know me” (45:3–4). According to 2 Chronicles 36:22–23 and Ezra 1:1–4, Cyrus responded to God’s call. This section of the book of Isaiah was written during the period of exile. It demonstrates that at that point in history, the Jews were developing an expansive notion of who God is and

whom God can work with. God can use even people believers might see as pagans to do God's work in the world. God can call anyone who is up to the task and in a position to do what God wills.

The Bible sometimes reflects on the call of a whole community, such as Israel (Isa. 44), who is to be a witness to God as creator, ruler, and redeemer, or the Rechabites (Jer. 35), who serve as a model of faithfulness to the people of Jerusalem and Judah.

In the cited examples, most often God instructs people to do something. They usually cooperate, whether or not they really want to do it. Typically they consent by their actions, not their words. At times God uses other people to convey the call. In some cases the process has two steps: a person is chosen by God and then affirmed by another person or a community. Sometimes people are used by God and only afterward become aware that they have done God's work. Sometimes an individual responds to a general call for someone to fulfill a task. Sometimes a person is not given a choice.

Call in the New Testament

According to the earliest Gospel, Mark, Jesus said to particular individuals, "Follow me" (Mark 1:17). He calls the Zebedee brothers, who signal their willingness to follow not by saying they will follow but by doing so (Mark 1:20). At other times, Jesus gives a general invitation to a crowd to follow him. Some take him up on it, and some do not (Mark 8:34). Jesus encounters many people as he travels from place to place, but he does not instruct everyone to follow him. In Mark 3:13, the text says that he "called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him." Out of those who came, "he appointed twelve" (Mark 3:14) who are given the task of preaching and casting out demons. Jesus also calls people to be instructed rather than for ministry (Mark 3:23). Some people who are willing to follow him are told to turn back because their ministry is elsewhere (Mark 5).

In Luke, those who are called are given power and authority to cast out demons and to heal (Luke 9:1). The healing ministry is also a "called" vocation. Luke counts women among those who follow Jesus (8:1-3). The women who had come with Jesus from

Galilee to Jerusalem become witnesses to the empty tomb, and they inform the disciples that the resurrection has taken place (Luke 24:1–12).

In the Gospel of John (20:16–18), Mary Magdalene is chosen to inform the disciples that Jesus is alive. In John, the men who will become disciples take a more active role in their calling. They tell their friends about Jesus and then follow him. They had been following John earlier, before transferring their allegiance to Jesus.

In Acts, Paul (then Saul) receives his call not directly from God but through another person, Ananias (Acts 9:1–18 and 22:14–15). Paul is told that he has been chosen “to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard.”

In the Bible, sometimes people receive a direct order from God. Sometimes a call comes through another person. Sometimes awareness of a call comes only after the ministry has been performed.

Paul objects that he cannot be an effective witness, because he has been a known persecutor of those who follow the way of Jesus. While in a trance Jesus informs him that he will go primarily to Gentiles rather than to the Jewish communities who knew him as a persecutor. Paul’s call places him in a context where he can be effective rather than in one where he will fail.

Calls are not restricted to leaders in the New Testament. First Corinthians 1:2 and 1:26 indicate that all followers of Jesus have received a call. They are called to be saints.

That call should be uppermost in their minds, so they live in ways that reflect this vocation.

Conclusion

Reading through a variety of texts, one sees that the Bible in both testaments models a variety of ways people experience a summons to ministry. Sometimes they receive a direct order from God. Sometimes a general call is sent out for a volunteer. Sometimes a call comes through another human being. Sometimes awareness of a call comes only after the ministry has been performed. One does not have to be a Christian to receive a call. Even a “pagan” like Cyrus can serve God’s purposes. People may be called for tempo-

rary service or a lifelong vocation. The Bible also notes that people may be called to many types of ministry: preaching, witnessing, healing, teaching, learning, among others.

Today it is not unusual for an individual to speak about a personal call that he or she received. Sometimes this call comes through a particular experience the person has had; sometimes it arises through a feeling or a conviction; and sometimes it is a result of hearing the voice of God, seeing a vision, or becoming aware of God's prompting in everyday life.

Speaking to the question of prophetic ministry, the book of Deuteronomy (chapter 13) suggests caution. A vocational call should be tested. The test in essence examines whether the words of the prophet are consistent with the teachings received from God. If the word of the prophet directs people away from God, if it is soul destroying, that call is not authentic and the person is obviously not a prophet sent by God. From this counsel we may extrapolate the idea that one's calling must be confirmed by a community of believers, and when it has been confirmed the community must support it. When God calls, the result should promote life and blessing. It should draw others closer to the divine spirit.

Notes

¹ Martin J. Buss, "An Anthropological Perspective on Prophetic Call Narratives," *Semeia* 21 (1981): 11.

² All scripture quotations are taken from the NRSV, unless otherwise noted.

³ My translation.

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