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Called To Do Meaningful Work: A Blessing or a Curse?

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ABSTRACT

Two groups of people are particularly inclined to mention a calling when talking about their work motivation: those who are spiritual (because the concept of calling originated in the religious realm) and those in serving occupations (such as hospitals, schools, and nongovernmental organizations). Because Christian professors are in both groups, the concept of calling is likely to emerge. In this article, I trace the development of calling as a concept of work motivation from its traditional religious origin to its daily use in organizational scholarship. Several positive sides of callings are described, as well as the potential downsides that come with high aspirations. At the end of this exploration, I conclude with three practical suggestions for Christian professors and educators who live out a calling.

This paper explores what it means to have a calling as a professor, and the different facets of such a calling. On the one hand, having a personal calling is seen as a way of having a meaningful working life. Researchers who have focused on the topic of calling have documented that awareness of one's calling contributes to intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction, and greater determination (see Duffy & Dik, 2013, for a review). From that perspective, it seems to be very beneficial to have a calling. Similarly, professors and teachers often mention that they feel called to follow their vocation, which gives their work meaning.

On the other hand, having a calling can be a stressful experience. Most often, the goals pursued by someone with a sense of calling, which comes from afar, are hard to accomplish. They make individuals reach for higher ground, and this realization can make people suffer. Having a meaningful life is by no means a guarantee for a happy life (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2013). Viktor Frankl (1984) made the point in *Man's Search for Meaning* that burning is often required in order to give light. In a recent review of the literature on calling, Gazica and Spector (2015) stated that having no calling is preferable to having an unmet calling. So, answering a calling can be seen as having both inspiring and troublesome elements, a double-edged sword (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009).

Two groups of people are particularly inclined to mention calling, namely those who are spiritual (because the concept of calling originated in the religious realm) and those in serving occupations (such as hospitals, schools, and nongovernmental organizations). Being a member of either group means that the concept of calling is likely to emerge. Christian

professors comprise such a group. Those who choose to invest their lives in educating the next generation often experience a calling; if not, they may well have to account for its absence given the expectations of other people that they have one.

In this article, I reflect on some underlying dynamics of a calling using a range of sources from organizational sciences, philosophy, and practical theology. The aim of this reflection is to aid Christian teaching professionals to benefit from the positive side of calling while avoiding the pitfalls. The article is structured in three parts, with the first providing a definition of the concept of calling. In the second section, the tensions that come with a calling are explored. Finally, suggestions for Christian teaching professionals are offered, based on this elaboration of calling dynamics.

The Concept of Calling

Historically, having a calling was understood in a purely spiritual context (Steger, Pickering, Shin, & Dik, 2010). Generally, people maintained a regular active life (the *vita activa*) and a “worldly” profession unless they felt called, by God Himself, to a higher and better life (a *vita contemplativa*). Being called meant an urgent invitation to live a life close to God, and hence away from the world. Already during the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, the term *calling* was broadened from the religious call of a select few, to the notion of God’s calling to encompass all people, ascribing value to all types of work done faithfully and in service to others (Hahnenberg, 2010). The reformer Martin Luther, in particular, refuted the legitimacy of any distinction between a regular and a spiritual life, arguing that there should be no hierarchy in callings or vocations. This leveling perspective downgraded the spiritual and contemplative calling (in effect, removing the claim that some special works could lead to salvation), and upgraded mundane vocations into work for God. Luther’s view of vocation was based on the doctrine of divine providence, with God providing for the needs of others through all forms of work. He considered, for example, that it was God who milks the cows through the vocation of the milkmaids. Over time, a calling became less existential and religious. Initially, it was still God who called someone to accomplish a goal that suited both talents and life circumstances (see Hagmeier & Abele, 2012). Later, a calling could also refer to an inner voice that inspired the subjective experience of determination toward one’s work (Novak, 1996), effectively linking work directly to one’s purpose in life (Duffy, Dik, & Steger, 2011; Hall & Chandler, 2005). Accordingly, I define a professional calling as a *moral, urgent, and identity-defining determination to aspire and pursue a transformational goal*. Let me start by explaining the different aspects of this definition.

Note, first of all, that a calling is depicted here as a *determination*. Calling refers not primarily to the summoning itself, the moment when one experienced being signaled to do something, but the response by the person who is called. Having a calling is the conviction of having received a plea, and deciding to act in accordance with that call.

This determination is *moral*, because one cannot ignore the ethically laden vocabulary that surrounds the concept of calling. It is hard to imagine how a healthy existential indifferent person (Schnell, 2010) could experience a calling. There needs to be some sort of idealistic frame of reference in which a plea can be heard, through which a privileged individual wants to reach out to overcome a distance, promote a prosocial cause, or prevent suffering. The importance of the case to which one is called makes a calling also *urgent*. A particular person has characteristics that make it timely and appropriate to work toward a certain goal.

At the same time, this goal is not yet achieved. A call presumes some volume, an intense plea, spoken from a distance. Similar to the vision that motivated the Apostle Paul to take the Gospel to Macedonia (Acts 16: 9–10), there is a sense of being called: “Come over and help us.” One cannot settle for a whisper here—a call is loud.

Therefore, a personal calling includes awareness of a goal (toward which someone is working), a gap (because this goal is not yet achieved), and a gift (which makes it possible for a person to start working in the direction of that goal in order to overcome the gap). This combination of awareness of one’s position and a certain distance to reach the goal that needs to be overcome provides a highly individualized calling, linking the concept of calling to identity issues. This link is explored in depth by Charles Taylor (1989) in his brilliant book titled *Sources of the Self*. Taylor began the work with insisting that a *moral* horizon is needed as a frame of reference. This horizon not only identifies the ideal, but also serves as a way to identify *oneself*. To personalize this approach, knowing who I am is derived from knowing where I stand in relation to this horizon (Van Vuuren & Westerhof, 2015)—and where I am going. For Taylor, knowing my identity means: (a) an awareness of my moral horizon, (b) being oriented toward this moral horizon starting from my own position, and (c) making an effort to navigate toward it. A possible deep uncertainty about my position in relation to the moral framework is therefore “an acute form of disorientation” (Taylor, 1989, p. 27); that is, an identity crisis. Awareness of a calling is the opposite of such disorientation. Being called means knowing where to go, a personal translation of a generic ethical idea about what a good and meaningful life might entail into a specific answer to the question what *I* should do with *my* life.

Tensions and Aspirations: Mind the Gap

Elaborating on the aspects of the definition reveals how the concept of a calling is personally fulfilling, making work a value-laden endeavor. Because reaching the goal and bridging the gap can have an identity-defining dimension, a calling can be seen as both powerful and scary. Work becomes much more than just a means through which resources are acquired in order to survive and thrive. Through a calling, daily work collides with a sense of purpose (Baumeister, 1991), awareness about one’s identity (Dobrow, 2004), the power to make a difference (Grant & Parker, 2009), and also the moral obligation to make the best of whatever life brings (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009).

There are reports in academic literature about divine call, as exemplified by the contributions of Scheitle and Adamczyk (2016). These scholars report stories told by people in which dreams, visions, puzzling coincidences, and casual remarks had a major impact on their life direction. In those cases, the people involved tended to approach their work with great confidence. They believed that with the call came the guidance and provision needed to accomplish their goals. Their task is simply to obey through an affirming answer to the call, as reflected in this participant comment: “What I have learned is to continue doing what you are doing until God tells you differently.... His last instructions were to do what we are doing now” (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2016, p. 10).

In addition to the boost of confidence that typically accompanies a sense of having been called, having such a conviction is reportedly motivating. However, a thorny responsibility issue may also arise with such convictions. It is hard to argue with someone who is convinced about his or her calling. Because these individuals typically see themselves as

authorized to do something, anyone raising questions or concerns can be viewed as criticizing the higher power that sent them. This phenomenon adds a moral dimension to every critical reflection on the calling-related work of others (see Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). People who understand themselves to be on mission can, in some ways, become unguided missiles—individuals who are deaf to all other voices and perspectives. Relying on a calling, people can abdicate their own agency.

In the context of obedience to authority, Stanley Milgram (1974) called this an “agentic shift” (p. 132), depicting oneself as an obedient subject, ultimately not responsible for the actions that come from the calling. Reflecting on this agentic shift, Card (2005) elaborated: “[the obedient subject] divests himself of responsibility by attributing all initiative to the experimenter, a legitimate authority. He sees himself not as a person acting in a morally accountable way but as the agent of external authority” (p. 398). This explanation is a critical edge to the concept of calling that provides a more nuanced view than just depicting it as the holy grail of work motivation.

Many people, however, do not hear a concrete call like the spiritual type of calling mentioned above. For them, a need they feel deeply becomes the call. Frederick Buechner (1993) identified work as “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need” (p. 95). With or without external intervention, a calling views work as the place where individuals can make a difference with their talents, at the intersection of delight and need (Witherington, 2011). For Christians, these needs are seen in the light of God’s purpose with the world. People must take a step, heading in a *certain* direction (not *certain* as in sense of “particular, but not specified, ill-defined,” but as “assured”)—known as the Kingdom of God. As Miroslav Volf (2001) wrote: “A theological interpretation of work is only valid if it facilitates transformation of work toward ever-greater correspondence with the coming new creation” (p. 83).

This ambition is massive, because the gap is wide. A pressing question for discerning how to answer a call thus becomes: How should these aspirations be translated into daily practice? The high hopes and ambitions are not directly met, do not smoothly become visible, at the start of such a process. Expressing the urge to make a difference in closing this gap means communicating in terms of “aspirational talk” (p. 372), a term used by Christensen, Morsing, and Thyssen (2013) related to their research on corporate social responsibility. This type of utterance “announces ideals and intentions rather than reflect actual behaviors” (p. 373). Working toward high goals implies that—at least momentarily—one’s words are not met with deeds right away ... being on the way, but not there yet.

In organizational contexts, where aspirational talk could refer to policies of corporate social responsibility (Christensen et al., 2013) and core values (Van Vuuren, 2015), announcing ideals can be challenging. A lack of proof for the actuality of good behavior can damage an organization’s image, especially in skeptical contexts. Expressing good intentions to a cynical crowd may pave the road to a reputational hell. Having said that, a paradox is that having a calling can induce stress. In the words of Christensen et al., (2013):

If we do not allow ourselves to possess and propagate higher values than those portrayed in our actions—if we do not allow for sin and hypocrisy—then we run the risk of not having very high morals at all. (p. 384)

This statement is sobering: We need to sin in order to become saints? What kind of theology is this? But seen from a different perspective, it is precisely in the high ambitions that a

degree of relaxation is possible. March (2007) quoted Reinhold Niebuhr, stating that hypocrisy is “an inevitable byproduct of all virtuous endeavor” (p. xx). The gap is too wide to be crossed at once, if at all. Does a ship ever reach the horizon? Perhaps this phenomenon is what Dallas Willard (2014) referred to when he suggested that saints burn more grace than sinners.

It is important to pause for a while by the gap we are attempting to close. Organizational scholars have shown that having high hopes to close wide gaps can turn professionals into trying aspirants. For example, the sense of calling in the lives of elite British paratroopers was researched by Thornborrow and Brown (2009). Like people with another calling, the participants in this study had an aspirational identity, which was defined as “a template in which an individual construes him- or herself as an aspirant who is (i) earnestly desirous of being a particular kind of person and (ii) self-consciously and consistently pursuing this objective” (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009, p. 370). The zeal with which paratroopers aimed for the ideal state of professionalism made them both strong and vulnerable. Strong, because of their achievements following their disciplined work. Vulnerable, because they felt they never really met the expectations. They were subject to a tight system that disciplined them, requiring a high level of trust in the system in order to act with such a high degree of consent. As Ashforth and Vaidyanath (2002) have noted, exploitation and exhaustion are hard to avert in a workplace that is sacralized.

This double-edged sword of calling was also identified in research by Bunderson and Thompson (2009) that focused on zookeepers. Although these zoo volunteers viewed themselves as being part of something bigger than themselves and experienced a sense of purpose and pride, they often sacrificed too much on the altar of their calling, and others knew how to continuously push them to do more. When setbacks, mistakes, or less-than-optimal performances occurred, the zookeepers in this study perceived them to be moral faults. In other words, not only had they made a mistake, but they were disobedient to their call. This level of stress contributed to burnout; hence, people who equate their work with their calling must protect against burnout.

Christian Teaching Professionals: Are We There Yet?

Subsequent to the discussion of the concept of calling and the tensions that arise when answering a call, the particular case of Christian teaching professionals is now addressed. Although each professional or occupational context raises its own set of issues, because this *CHE* special issue focuses specifically on the context of Christian higher education, I close this reflection with three practical suggestions for Christians who have chosen to work in teaching professions. My desire is for these thoughts to help direct the activities and motivations of current and future teachers, without concern about collapsing under the pressure of their calling.

First, a word on competencies: Teachers need to identify the ways in which they pursue their calling. Hopefully I have made clear that the distinction between a spiritual and a mundane calling is not as strict as previously assumed. (Luther fought that battle, and I think he won it.) As a result, answering one’s calling can be mundane as well, in the sense that professionals do not have to constantly talk about their faith, and specifically spiritual issues, in order to fulfill their calling. *Professional* and *missionary* are not synonyms. For Christians who serve in the field of education, being competent is a way of fulfilling your calling.

Therefore, train yourself to become really good at what you do as a teacher. Your students are your neighbors, hence those who are to be loved through the practice of your teaching. Reflect on the question: What do you consider to be a good job, a job well done? It can be helpful to think through your personal conceptualization of professional competence in this regard. The gift you have been given and the effort you put into closing the gap that separates you from that professional goal requires a determined involvement to be competent in your core business (cf. Sandberg & Pinnington, 2009). Being a teacher can be a wonderful profession, and it is important to aim high in becoming as effective as possible if that role is what you were called to do. Martin Luther King, Jr., illustrated this point well when he said: “If it falls to your lot to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures, like Shakespeare wrote poetry, like Beethoven composed music; Sweep streets so well that all the host of heaven and earth will have to pause and say: Here lived a great street sweeper, who swept his job well” (Nelson, 2011, p. 83).

Second, a word about relaxation: Talking about calling in organizational contexts brought spirituality into the schools, colleges, and universities in an entirely new way. Work became a place where the meaning of one’s life had to be found. Unfortunately, this perspective turned office desks into altars and deans into priests (Ashforth & Vaidyanath, 2002). Instead of easing the yoke, this mindset to one’s work provided a new burden. As Tim Keller (2012), a New York City pastor, wrote: “Most people work for salvation, self-worth, a good conscience, and peace” (p. 73) and then added for contrast that Christians believe that they “already have this in Christ, so now we may work simply to love God and our neighbors” (p. 73). What a liberating perspective on job satisfaction and work meaning. Teachers who look for the meaning of their life in their work will probably suffer. Teachers who have found the meaning of their lives outside of the working context, find in their jobs a wonderful context to live out the meaning of their lives. In particular, teachers who treat their profession as answering a calling could benefit from a hopeful and realistic reassessment of what work must bring them compared to what they already have.

Third and finally: A word about cooperation. People with a calling can become loners. Their zeal can isolate them from others. Teachers are in a context where they do not have to be alone, given the interdependencies of modern curricula. Being in close communication with others is crucial for the motivation of educational professionals, so make sure that you do not end up alone at work. The relevance of the moral horizon for one’s identity already points at the truth that identities are accomplished in interaction with the environment. Identities are relational (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007) and being a teacher is possible only because you are granted that position by others: colleagues, deans, and students (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). In a Christian context, one could add that “[w]e are not called to work for God, but with God” (Ortberg, 2001, p. 70). In the modern context, these are all reasons to focus on the collaborative endeavor that work is. This process is not always easy. Cooperation is a craft, as Sennett (2012) insisted: “[Cooperation] requires of people the skill of understanding and responding to one another in order to act together” (p. x). Awareness of one’s surroundings will make traveling lighter, navigation easier, and adaptation more natural.

A calling to the profession of teaching, or the work of education more broadly, can be a blessing because it indicates the purpose of the work teaching includes. The thorny, dangerous, and sometimes even destructive side effects of unhealthy zeal can become a curse in the

determined pursue of goals. Therefore, reflection on one's conceptualization of calling, openness to others, and time for relaxation can be helpful to stay on course.

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