

1-1-2003

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Recommended Citation

Flynn, Carl F. (2003) "Learning to Walk: Theological Reflection on Vocation," *Leaven*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol11/iss1/6>

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Learning to Walk: Theological Reflection on Vocation

CARL F. FLYNN

Vocation is not a word I often hear in churches of the Restoration tradition. (I hear the word “vacation,” but that is another article). When the word *is* used, it generally functions as follows.

Scene One: Fellowship Hall. Girl meets boy and, with interested glance, asks, “So, where do you go to school?” Boy responds with a glow that only this sort of encounter can create, “Capital City Trade and Technical, a *vocational*-technical school over on Riverside Drive.”

Scene Two: Church foyer. An elder speaks with a visitor who has a very distinguished air about him. After determining the visitor’s place of origin and church affiliation, the elder inquires, “What is your *vocation*?”

In each scene, the term vocation refers to a particular job, area of employment, or task. However, when considered etymologically, the term has an entirely different sense. Vocation is derived from the Latin word *voco*. The basic meaning of this word is “call”; however, it has a broader range of meaning that includes summoning, calling together, announcing, invoking, appointing, urging, or nominating.¹

There are two ideas sustained throughout this range of meaning: (1) the appeal of one party to another, and (2) the end or motivation for the appeal. For example, if a judge issues a court summons, she “calls” (*vocat*) a witness: She (1) makes an appeal to a party to a case (2) for the purpose of serving as a witness. Or, if I “call” (*voco*) you to my house for dinner, (1) I invite you to come to my house (2) for the purpose of enjoying a meal and conversation. In each case there is a calling and a purpose.

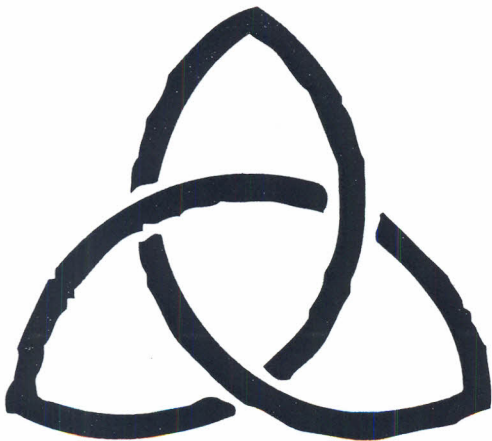
As the term is used, (1) the act of calling or being called is more significant than (2) the task or duty itself. In fact, the appeal creates the possibility for its particular end or purpose.

Our peculiar, modern understanding of vocation attempts to reverse the original relationship within this term by stressing the end or purpose over the act of appeal. This is why when we hear the word vocation we think job or area of employment instead of calling.

My aim in this article is to reinvigorate vocation by reinstating the dimension of calling to its proper, prior position within the term. I believe that doing so not only will reclaim a very helpful word for our Restoration tradition but also may help us revitalize the way we understand work in the modern world.

THE CALLING GOD

A Christian understanding of vocation must begin with “the calling God.” This affirmation does not simply mean that God calls creatures into either being or action. Rather, before God calls anything into being or action, God calls himself. In Genesis



I, for example, God speaks (“Let there be ...”) and then creation occurs (“and it was so ...”). When God speaks in creation, God is the only one who may respond because there is nothing besides God prior to God’s creative act. So, the pronouncements God speaks in creation are spoken to himself as creator.

The self-calling can be seen most clearly in the creation of humanity in Gen 1:26. Here, God’s self-calling is explicit (“Let us make humankind in our image”) as in Christian imagination we envision a *convocation* of God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit in the genesis of humanity. In all of God’s activities, God begins by calling himself as the Father calls the Son, the Son calls the Father, and the calling of Father, Son, and Spirit are carried out by the Spirit. The mutual call of the persons of the Trinity establishes the initial bounds for our understanding of calling within vocation.

Now, the Restoration tradition has not been comfortable (to say the least) with this sort of language. Trinitarian formulas are “unbiblical” and “papist.” However, since the earliest moments of the Christian faith, believers have exhibited some form of trinitarian understanding. The apostle Paul, for example, writes to the Christian community at Rome:

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom 8:3-4).

Although Paul’s language does not sound like that of the Nicene Creed, we see him wrestling with the fact that the one God of Israel became incarnate in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and that the work of God’s Spirit, which was characteristic of the experience of this same God of Israel, can be discerned in the activity of the Son.

This same wrestling occurs in John’s gospel as Jesus shares a meal with his disciples. In the presence of the disciples, Jesus speaks often of God as his Father and refers to himself as the Son of God, particularly in the prayer of John 16. In John 15, Jesus refers to a coming “advocate,” which is classically identified with that fiery Spirit that fell upon the disciples at Pentecost. In Paul and John, therefore, we see a similar struggle with the revelation of God as Father, Son and Spirit.

Theologian Thomas C. Oden calls these “prototrinitarian” understandings, which I find to be a helpful notion.² Paul, John, and others in the New Testament, wrestling with the identity of God as Father, Son, and Spirit are attempting to work through a complex dilemma that does not gain much clarity until the later formulations that emerge in the ecumenical councils of the early church. However, since the biblical writers saw God as Father, Son, and Spirit (however protological), the church is invited to extend her thinking to embrace this understanding.

But what might this trinitarian perspective look like from the perspective of scripture in regard to calling within vocation? I’ve already set out the general framework above, but let’s ground it in the text to see how it plays out.

The Father Calls the Son

Col 1:15-20 sheds light on the calling of the Father to the Son. In this early hymn, Christ, “his beloved Son” (1:13), not only participates in creation (“for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,” v. 16) but also fulfills the commission of the Father to redeem Creation (“and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,” v. 20) and oversee the communion of the redeemed, the church (“He is the head of the body, the church,” v. 18). God as Father, thereby, calls himself as God the Son to fulfill His desire for redemption.

This same calling resounds through the gospels. When God’s messenger visits Mary (in Luke’s birth narrative), the angel declares that Mary will bear a child who is God’s Son (1:35). She receives this obliga-

tion as the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel, as indicated by the *Magnificat*, her hymn of praise following the angelic pronouncement (1:46-55).

We find a similar scenario in Matthew's birth narrative. When the "angel of the Lord" visits Joseph, he informs Joseph that the child Mary will bear is the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel.

The names given to this child are indicative of the vocation of the Son of God. "Emmanuel" indicates the identity of this child with the God of Israel. "Jesus" signifies the vocation of the Son: to save. In both cases, it is clear that it is God as Father who calls his Son into being to fulfill his promises to his people.

The calling of the Son in the birth narratives is confirmed at Jesus' baptism when "a voice from heaven" declares, "this is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17; Luke 3:22). This divine confirmation establishes the calling of the Father to the Son that resonates throughout the entirety of Jesus' life.

God's self-calling, echoing through the entirety of the life and ministry of the Son, is magnified in John 5:19 in Jesus' declaration that "the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise." The Father calls the Son, and the Son, in his obedience to the Father, executes the Father's will. From these passages from scripture, the Father both formally and substantively calls the Son and points us toward an understanding of Christian vocation.

The Son Calls the Father

At several points throughout the New Testament, the Son calls the Father as a second dimension of the drama of God's self-calling. The most basic form of this calling is evident in the prayers of Jesus. In Matt 11:25-27, Jesus prays as a confirmation of his vocation:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

In this prayer, the Son calls upon the Father as a confirmation of his calling as the unique revelation of the God of Israel.

In a second prayer, Jesus calls upon the Father to confirm his identity as the Son through the power of God unveiled in the resuscitation of Lazarus: "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me" (John 11:41-42).

Jesus' identity as the Son of God and the significance of the interrelationship of the Son and the Father is further confirmed in John 12:28 with the response to Jesus' call, "Father, glorify your name": "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." In this scene, God the Father responds to the calling of his Son not only in act, as in John 11, but in speech, demonstrating the interrelationship between the Son and the Father in God's being.

Several other instances in the gospels also portray the Son's call to the Father. In Matthew 10, Jesus suggests that the Son has the power to appeal to the Father on behalf of people: "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven" (Matt. 10:32-33). Thus, the Son appeals to the Father either for or against a person depending on how they represent Jesus in the world.

Jesus further implicates his appeal to the Father during his arrest by the temple authorities in Matthew 26 when "one of those with Jesus" plays the zealot. Jesus asks, "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" (26:53). The obvious response to

the question demonstrates the point: Jesus as the Son of God could appeal to the Father if such an appeal were in step with the will of God. However, in this instance, the Father and the Son are obedient to the will of God as Jesus deliberately marches toward the cross.

So far we have established that according to the biblical witness, the Father and the Son call one another in accordance with the will of God. Now, we turn to a consideration of the call of the Father and Son to the Spirit.

The Calling of Father, Son, and Spirit Executed by the Spirit

The treatments of the relationship between the Father and Son in the previous sections have been intentionally literalistic. The selected passages use the language of Father and Son to best demonstrate the vocational relationship I am arguing for in this article. This approach becomes quite a bit trickier when considering the person of God the Spirit. For there are few passages in the biblical witness where the Spirit calls the Father or the Spirit calls the Son.³ The “Spirit of the Lord,” “Holy Spirit,” “Spirit of God,” or simply the “Spirit” throughout Scripture always acts as an agent of God’s will. Yet, throughout Scripture this Spirit is not a separate being alongside God but is God’s powerful presence over and within the world.

As we watch God’s Spirit work throughout scripture, the Spirit participates in creation, inspires prophets, guides those faithful to the Lord, effects the coming of the Son, empowers the disciples at Pentecost, directs the progress and growth of the Christian movement, and continues to breathe new life into the church.

As the agent of God’s work, the Spirit simultaneously plays two roles within the being of God. First, the Spirit participates in God’s calling along with the Father and the Son. God as Spirit participates in the convocation of God’s will with the Father and the Son. Second, as part of the divine self-calling, the Spirit calls the Father, the Son, and *the Spirit* to carry out God’s will. So, while the Spirit acts in scripture as the agent of God’s action, the Spirit participates to the same degree as both Father and Son in the being of God.

A good demonstration of this notion of the Spirit at work can be seen in the birth narratives. In Matthew and Luke, the Holy Spirit is said to be the genesis of Mary’s child in the angelic witness to Joseph and Mary. We could understand this as an instance of the Spirit calling the Son. However, the incarnation of the Son, while certainly carried out by the Spirit, is an expression of the divine will expressed through each person of the Godhead.

As the calling God, he calls himself as Father, Son, and Spirit, setting in motion his will throughout creation.

This divine interplay becomes evident as the gospels unfold and this child identifies himself as the

Son of God who calls upon his Father, who he identifies as God. Thus, from the beginning, the involvement of all three persons are evident in the birth of Christ, as the Father, Son, and Spirit call one another to the glorious mystery of incarnation, which is carried out by the Spirit.

This convocation among the persons is seen most clearly in the gospel of John. In John 14:26, Jesus says to his disciples, “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” We see again the interrelationship of the persons: At the behest of the Son, the Father sends the Spirit to extend the same presence and power that has “tabernacled” (John 1:14) among the disciples in the Son, whose existence was initially effected by that same Spirit.

Therefore, the Father, Son, and Spirit call the Spirit as the will of God continues to extend into the future through the Christian community.

These biblical meditations on the relationship in the divine life between Father, Son, and Spirit reveal that God is a “calling God.” As the calling God, he calls himself as Father, Son, and Spirit, setting in motion his will throughout creation. The significance of this theological affirmation for the purposes of our inquiry

is that vocation is at the essence of God's very being! Therefore, as the church wrestles corporately and individually with vocation, it must do so in the understanding that this "calling" has already been defined in the mutual calling within God's being.

God as our creator, redeemer, and sustainer has already called himself and, as a result, is at work in the world enacting his will. God's call to the church is not to seek out its own, individual callings but to take up this vocation in all of its corporate and individual activities in the world.

But what must we do in response to God's calling? We have seen the origin of vocation as calling *within the being of God*, but where is God's will realized and demonstrated in such a way that we may hear his calling to the church in the world?

"COME, FOLLOW ME"

In the incarnation of this calling God in Jesus, the Messiah, the vocation of the Father, Son, and Spirit is extended to all creation. This extension is most clearly demonstrated throughout the ministry of Jesus in one simple phrase spoken to those who would become his disciples: "Come, follow me."

To follow did not simply mean to walk around Galilee with Jesus. To follow meant to embody the practices of Jesus in every aspect of life and to comprehend the world through the experiences of Jesus. In essence, "come, follow me" meant and means to take up into one's being the same calling that resounds in the internal life of God.

But what does this look like? For those first disciples, following Jesus led them to bring God's release and restoration to an adulterous woman, to heal many who were blind and lame, to welcome into their midst undesirables (children, tax collectors, political revolutionaries, prostitutes, etc.) who had been cast out of society, to reaffirm the holiness of God amidst a culture that had transformed the worship of God into a lucrative industry, to confront political authorities who did not understand the divine calling inherent in their office, to pray fervently that in their lives God's will would be accomplished, to understand anew the long-standing desire of God for his people expressed through the covenant with Israel, and to suffer because of the absolute misunderstanding by the hoards that God's presence and power is in their midst.

Through the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, and in the continuation of the work of the Son of God through the Spirit in the church beyond the resurrection, we hear a peculiar calling that serves as the basis

for a proper understanding of vocation. So, how may we respond to such a vocation in the modern world? Simply put, we also must answer the call to "come, follow me."

In our corporate existence as the church and in our personal responses to the call to discipleship, our vocation is bound by what God is already doing in the world. Therefore, all of our activities ought to reflect the reality that in Jesus Christ, God reconciled all things to himself in the cross and that God

is actively working to make that reconciliation a social and political reality. This reality should be expressed not only in the life of the church, but also in our homes, our places of employment, our businesses, our government—any place we find ourselves involved in the world. God's vocation ought to manifest itself in all of these places in ways that mirror the activity of Jesus Christ and his disciples—activity that resonates through scripture and the history of the church.

As Restorationists, we face two particular challenges in fulfilling God's vocation so understood. First, we must understand that God's calling to us extends beyond the call to salvation. I think that the reason I do not hear the word vocation resonating through our foyers in the sense described above is that we have truncated the notion of calling in our theology to the "gospel call." In our corporate life, we have limited God's

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calling to hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized. Once these steps are accomplished, we have fulfilled God's calling. God's call for us, in other words, has simply been the call to individual conversion.

I am by no means denouncing the significance of this understanding of calling; however, I am suggesting that calling as demonstrated in the life and activity of God is a broader phenomenon that includes the gospel call but extends outward into a broader vocation that the Christian theological tradition has called "sanctification." Sanctification is the working out of our embrace of God's salvation in every dimension of our lives. In sanctification, we are literally being made by God into the image of Christ. Embracing God's vocation means allowing God's calling to reverberate to the core of our being both as individuals and as the church.

Embracing God's vocation means allowing God's calling to reverberate to the core of our being both as individuals and as the church.

Second, we must understand that this renewed understanding of Christian vocation may prohibit us from participating in particular forms of work in the world. Along with many other things that the Restoration tradition has inherited from the Protestant reformers, we took up Martin Luther's idea that Christian vocation may be carried out through any office within society. Whether judge, police officer, butcher, baker, or cobbler, one fulfills God's vocation not simply in a monastic office but through any of the structures of society that God, as lord over the governing authorities, has set in place.

Although I agree with Luther's criticism against medieval Christianity's unfaithfully narrow definition of vocation, I think that God's vocation may not readily be expressed in any office in society. In fact, there may even be some societal offices that simply cannot function to embody God's particular calling in and for the world.

Vocation as I have defined it is not a matter of discerning what we feel we are good at given the options presented to us by the world in any particular place in time. Rather, in vocation, God calls us to follow his desire for the world and demands that we ask whether our activities in the world are responsible to this calling. Does our activity in the world further or hinder God's reconciliation of all creation? Does our job contribute to healing and restoration in the life of a corporation or individuals or does it contribute to the powers of oppression and domination in the world? Does our profession seek to serve people in truly redemptive ways as defined through the lens of God's redemption in Jesus Christ? In order to be faithful to our true vocation as the Christian community, we must ask these questions and let our responses transform us.

Both of these challenges call us to creative discipleship in the modern world. As we pursue God's vocation, we will discover innumerable creative possibilities to embody God's desire for healing and restoration in the world. These creative possibilities may cause you to rediscover the redemptive ends within your current job, or they may motivate you to leave your current work to engage in a venture where you see opportunities to more faithfully fulfill God's vocation.

Regardless, the church must pray for the eyes to see the possibilities that are both already at work and that are waiting to be unveiled before a watching world who will respond to God's calling through these ministries of loving, restorative, and redemptive service. It should be evident that I am not only talking about "what the church can do" as I consider this horizon of possibility but also about the extended life of the church as its membership carries out its life in the world.

Embracing these challenges and the creative possibilities of Christian discipleship will transform the way we understand work, politics, and our economic "reality." However, as the Christian community called to obedience to God's vocation, embracing such challenges embodied in God's vocation seems to be the most liberating option as the church embraces God's will being carried out in the world.

CONCLUSION: LEARNING TO WALK

This reclamation of the notion of vocation calls us to reconsider whether every aspect of our lives and the life of the church is oriented to God's will as expressed in his internal life and the expression of that life in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. As such, this call to vocation imagines reorienting our lives to the call set forth in 1 John 2:5-6: "By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, 'I abide in him,' ought to walk just as he walked." To "walk just as he walked" will radically transform the way that life is lived in the world both for the church and for those in the church.

There is a great risk involved in embracing this vision, but it must be embraced by the Christian community in trust that God's will being made manifest in the world is worth the self-sacrifice. And however "impractical" this understanding of vocation may seem, remember that it is only as impractical as the God who redeemed the world by becoming human, allowing himself to be crucified by his own creatures, raising himself from death as a demonstration of future hope for the very people who just murdered him, and then—as if that were not enough—ascending to heaven to reign until he ushers in the end of history.

If we readily declare such a reality before the world, then embodying such "foolishness" in our lives may not be such a stretch. Thus, falling in behind God's vocation is a matter of learning to walk, "just as he walked."

May God bless those who take up the challenge.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), citation retrieved December 2002 from "The Perseus Digital Library," Gregory Crane, ed., <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>.
- 2 Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God: Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1987), 194-209.
- 3 There are no passages that I can find where the Spirit calls the Father. More common are those passages where the Spirit calls the Son. For example, the Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness in each the temptation narratives in the gospels (Matt 4:1, Mark 1:12, Luke 4:1).

