

## Session 3, Essay 2

# CALLING & PRESENCE

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Understood as vocation by the protestant reformers, *calling* encompassed all work. There was no distinction between that which was sacred and that which was ordinary, or secular. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the notion of calling shifted from this earlier conception to a narrower view that only applied to church or parachurch work.

There has been a resurgent interest in vocation. This has been life-giving to those who have languished under the teaching that everyday life and work have no meaning or purpose. Broadened to include all work, calling is no longer solely identified with “the ministry.”

While the topic of calling is most often associated with vocation, it would be difficult to overstate the importance of calling to all of life. It provides the foundation of the Christian’s experience with God. God’s call is transformative, completely reorienting those who respond. In addition, calling provides the entryway to the new life offered in Christ and is the model for a public expression of faith. To untangle the thinking about work, we must look at the topic of calling as portrayed in the biblical narrative.

In the Bible, calling is repeatedly described in terms of God’s faithful and enduring presence. God is present and available to humanity and He continually calls us to *return* to His presence and *be* present with Him.

God’s call is represented by various “calling” words throughout the biblical text. “Return to me” is the refrain of the Old Testament prophets. The Psalms repeatedly call us to “come into God’s presence.” *Dwell* and *abide* are also favorites of the Psalmists. Jesus uses words like, *repent*, *come*, *follow*, *love*, and *abide*. Calling words tend to be directional, all drawing the responder to God.

Of all these words, *abide* best captures the full picture of God’s calling to humanity. *Abide* suggests lasting presence and fullness of life, both of which are offered to the responder as a present reality and a future hope.

*Calling words* are usually accompanied by *presence words*. *Presence words* tend to be positional, describing our relational position to God - *in*, *with*, *one with*, *indwelling*, *at hand*, and *at the right hand* are a few. *Presence words* describe the mysterious and yet extremely close position of God in our life. We are called to

“walk *in* the Spirit” and “abide *in* Christ.”

### Calling Defined

Simply put, God calls His people to abide in His presence. God’s presence informs our response to the call; we are to be present with God as He is present with us. This calling to God’s faithful presence is also very pertinent to work. God’s presence provides a model for public faith, which is enacted in part through our faithful presence in vocation. By enacting the love and wisdom of Christ through work, we bear witness to the gospel in every sphere of society.

In addition, when God’s call is linked to His faithful presence, vocation is safeguarded from becoming an idol. In this light, calling isn’t so much about meaning and significance as it is about being present with God.

The purpose of this essay is to help the reader develop a biblically faithful understanding of calling and the comprehensive response that God seeks in return. *Calling* and *sending* then become foundational for the vocational outworking of public faith.

### Calling In The Biblical Narrative

God’s call is forever. And God’s call is inextricably linked with His commitment to be faithfully present and available to His people. Throughout the biblical narrative, God’s call reveals a love so great that it will stop at nothing to restore the intimacy with humanity that was shattered through sin.

From the beginning, God’s desire and intention has been to make His dwelling place with humanity. In the garden, before the Fall, God lived in perfect fellowship with humanity and His presence was known directly.

The tragedy of the Fall was cosmic in scope, affecting the entire created order. The first recorded consequence of sin was the shattering of human intimacy with God; God

called and Adam hid himself from the presence of the Lord:

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” And He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” (Gen. 3: 8-10)

After the Fall, through the long history of *Redemption*, God has been making himself present and available to His people in increasingly tangible ways. He was present in the covenant with Abraham. He was present in the pillars of fire and cloud, on Mt. Sinai, and through the law and the prophets.

In the incarnate Christ, He lived on earth in the flesh. The announcement that “the kingdom of God is at hand,” present and accessible to all who repent, was the next inbreaking of God’s presence. When Christ ascended, humanity was not left as orphans, alone in the world; God makes His presence with us even now in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. And on one very real and very fine day, we shall see God’s face and He will once again be physically present with His people in the new creation.

The thread that runs all through the story of God’s faithful presence is God’s calling. God has actively and with assertive love made His presence known. And He has consistently called His people to turn and be present and available to Him as well.

In explaining the theology of God’s faithful presence, James Hunter, in *To Change the World*, explains, “The point of God’s active and committed presence of course has always been to restore our relationship with him.”<sup>7</sup> God’s constant presence is the most tangible display of His love: “God sent forth his Son... so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4). God is present with his people through

the Holy Spirit, as a Father and friend. God's love is not an abstract idea but a reality born through his active pursuit of his people: "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

The whole story of human redemption is enacted through God making His presence known and available. He calls humanity to turn back and be present to Him as well. See Appendix 1 for a survey of calling through the biblical narrative.

### The Character of God's Faithful Presence

Since God's presence is to inform our response to His call, it is important to understand the character of God's faithful presence.

***God's faithful presence is available through His initiative alone.*** From creation to new creation, the story of God's relationship with humanity always begins with God. He designed and created humanity to enjoy His presence forever. Even after the Fall God begins the curse resulting from sin with a promise that looks to humanity's restoration to God's presence. Who starts a curse with a promise? Our ever-pursuing, initiative-taking God does. This is an example of His initiative to redeem His people. We don't seek God on our own; we are called to seek Him and promised that He will respond (Deut. 4:29; Matt. 6:33).

***God's faithful presence is available because of His sacrificial love.*** Restoring human relationship with God is costly. And we have absolutely nothing with which to pay or even contribute to the payment of our own restoration. It is only because of Christ's atonement on the cross that it is possible for us to respond to God's call and return to His presence.

It is through sacrifice that God identifies with our human nature, making His presence

in our lives intelligible. Philippians 2:7 says, "He made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." Through sacrifice, He paid the cost for our restoration: "He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8).

***God's faithful presence is always active.*** It would be easy to think of God's faithful presence as inactive, like "hanging out" with friends but not doing much. In reality, God's presence is not idle; it is expressed through active commitment. Consider Psalm 24:1-6, Psalm 91:1-4, and Psalm 100 as just a few examples.

Psalm 23 portrays a beautiful picture of God's active, pursuing, drawing and calling presence: The Lord is my shepherd! He **provides** for me and **gives** me good places to rest. He **leads** me in safety, **protects** me, and **restores** me when I sin. The Lord **apprentices** me in righteousness. He **stays with** me in danger, **disciplines** and **comforts** me. He **honors** and **anoints** me. He **makes me prosper** and **pursues** me with goodness and mercy. The Lord is active in making his presence available forever.

God's active presence takes on additional significance because we are sent into the world to emulate His presence and become a conduit of His grace and presence to others.

***God's faithful presence is life-giving.*** The *Redemption* chapter of the biblical story refers to God's process of redeeming and renewing "all things," which means that God is restoring His relationship with humanity. He is healing the inner workings of the human soul, restoring each of us to ourselves. He is reconciling humanity one to another. He is healing the entire created order, material and immaterial, including our bodies.

Our calling includes participating in this restoration of God's relationship with humanity. But it is impossible to isolate one part of redemption from the others. This is because with redemption, God gives new life and this

life includes healing and restoration in all areas, not just in our relationship to God. The life we find in God's presence is comprehensive; it is new (Rom. 6:4), abundant (John 10:10), and eternal (1 John 5:11):

Through God's presence, we have a new life force; the indwelling of the Holy Spirit now animates us (Eph. 5:18; Acts 1:8; Rom. 14:17; Rom. 15:13). Our life is completely reoriented in God's presence. Because the kingdom is now available, repentance involves not only turning from sin but also turning toward God. We are called to reorient our lives to the King and the kingdom life. God's presence inaugurates personal transformation; we are new creatures (Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 5:17), being restored to the image of our creator (Col. 3:10, Rom. 8:29). Our new life brings with it new social structures (in Christ we are part of His body, the church) and new social relationships (we are reconciled to Christ together with those who were once enemies). We have new allegiances in that we are now citizens of a new order and members of a new family. God's presence generates new productivity because Christ's life bears fruit through our lives (John 15).

### Summary

God's presence is available on His initiative and because of His sacrificial love. It is active and life-giving. As we respond to God's call to abide in His presence, we receive life that is inclusive, reorienting, reconciling, transformative, and productive. A new life of faithful presence is one that is grounded in grace and full of truth.

Our response to God's call involves turning back to Him and making ourselves faithfully present to Him. This is always marked by obedience, blessing, and renewed intimacy. Psalm 51 is a beautiful record of how King David heeded the call to repent and turn back to God:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to

your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight...

Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you...

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

There is a pattern in the Psalm. God's presence pursues David through pre-existing "steadfast love." David recognizes that he is dependent on God for reconciliation because only God can "blot out transgression" that separates him from God.

But this is not merely a confession of sin. It is a call to be present with God. As such, David made himself available and present to God in the most profound way, offering God "truth in the inward being" and submitting himself to be taught "wisdom in the secret heart." Unlike Adam, who hid from God's presence, David asked God to "hide your face from my sins."

He knew that it was God's steadfast presence that he had shunned when he sinned. As David turns to worship God, he asks, "[L]et the bones that you have broken rejoice." All of this results in David's proclaiming that God's pursuit of him and His restoration to God would result in David teaching transgressors your ways.

### **As God Calls, So Does He Send**

The call to abide in God's presence is vital to the Christian conception of work and vocation. As we respond to God's call, we simultaneously live in His presence and are sent into the world to be a conduit of God's presence for others.

Jesus' prayer, recorded in John 17, provides insight into how we are sent into the world of work. Jesus' intercession for His followers inextricably links God's presence and the manner in which God sends His church into the world: "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." Jesus was sent into the world with an inner-connectedness with the Father ("just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you") so that we might also join this inner-connectedness ("that they also may be in us"). And so Jesus modeled for us how we are sent into the world – interconnected to God and to one another:

As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world... I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me... I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me (John 17: 15-23).

John 15 is another example of how God's presence shapes our role in the world. Those who abide in God's presence are expected to

bear fruit in all they do:

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me...By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love...These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you...No longer do I call you servants...but I have called you friends...You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide...These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

### **Conclusion**

God's call to abide in His presence gives shape and meaning to our entire life. The Psalmist declares, "You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11). Understanding calling in terms of reflecting this faithful presence in our work brings definition to our work in the world because as God calls us He also sends us. (See Appendix 2 for further biblical references on the extensive topic of calling and presence in the Bible.)

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7. James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 243.