

# CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF “THE WAY”

---

## *What is My Calling (and Is that Even a Good Question)?*

by Kevin DeYoung

Graduation season is upon us. And that means in addition to much pomp and circumstance, many young people are thinking about what’s next. They are asking the question (and probably will for years to come): what is my calling?

As the *Just Do Something* guy, it will come as no surprise to hear that I think the language of “calling” is vastly overdone in Christian circles. Here’s what I find in Scripture: We have an upward call in Christ to be with Jesus and to be like Jesus (Phil. 3:14). We have been called to freedom, not bondage (Gal. 5:13). God has saved us and called us to a holy calling (2 Tim. 1:9). He has called us to his own glory and excellence (2 Peter 1:3). Not many of us were called to noble things (in the world’s eyes), but, amazingly, we have been called to Christ (1 Cor. 1:26). And if called, then justified, and if justified, then glorified (Rom. 8:30).

In other words, I do not see in Scripture where we are told to expect or look for a specific call to a specific task in life. And that includes pastoral ministry and missionary service.

Although I’ve told the story of my “call to ministry” hundreds of times, I do not see biblical warrant for thinking that God picks up the phone in a special way to dial up pastors and missionaries for their life’s work. Moreover, I worry that by emphasizing the need for a supernatural hear-from-the-Lord call to ministry, we end up convincing some people that ministry and missions are for them (when they aren’t), while unintentionally leading other people (who should be serving a church or overseas) to conclude that they can’t sign up without a special word from God.

Does this mean we should abandon the language of “calling”?

Not necessarily. There’s no rule that says we can’t take a word from our English Bibles and then use that word in a different way in normal conversation (e.g., it’s tilting at windmills to think we are going to outlaw “church” in reference to a building). But if we are going to use the language of calling outside of the biblical pattern, let’s be careful about how we use the word.

I love talking with seminarians about discerning a call to ministry if we mean, “How do I know this is a wise, appropriate step for me to take?” as opposed to, “How do I know that I’ve received a special word from God himself that I must be a pastor?” Most ministry books talk about three aspects of a call: an internal call (I desire this), an external call (I have recognized gifts for ministry and discernible fruit of maturity), and a formal call (I have been offered a position by a particular church or ministry). Those three elements make good sense as a prudent approach to making good decisions.

In fact, these three factors can be used to determine almost any kind of “call.” Should I be a doctor? Well, are you really interested in medicine and in helping people? Do your trusted friends and family members think this is a good fit for you? Is there an opportunity for you to enter into this profession? Of course, at times we push ahead in the face of opposition and try to pry open closed doors. But in general, in a society where we have many choices in front of us, it’s good advice to find something we like, something we are good at, and something that others are asking us to do.

In short, if this is what is meant by “calling”—know yourself, listen to others, find where you are needed—then, by all means, let’s try to discern our callings. But if “calling” involves waiting for promptings, listening for still small voices, and attaching divine authority to our vocational decisions, then we’d be better off dropping the language altogether (except as its used in the Bible) and labor less mysteriously to help each other grow in wisdom.