

HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M CALLED?

“But even before I was born, God chose me and called me by His marvelous grace. Then it pleased Him to reveal His Son to me so that I would proclaim the Good News about Jesus . . .”

Galatians 1:15-16 (NLT)

God has not called everyone to be a full-time vocational minister, but all of us should be ministering with the entirety of our lives. In our homes, offices, at the grocery store, at the gym, in every area of our lives, we never let go of the mission of God. We are always contributing our part in fulfilling our role for God's mission on earth.

However, there is clear precedent in both the Old and New Testaments for full-time ministry, as we have previously defined it.

When God set out to restore His relationship with all of mankind, He started with one man and his family.¹⁶ Over time, that man and his family grew, from a clan to a nation, to be the twelve tribes of Israel.

In His sovereignty, God chose the Israelites to be His people on earth. Out of His love and desire to have a special relationship with them, He gave the law, His covenants, and His promises, so they would show to all the nations what it meant to be the people of God.

Part of His plan in setting them apart was to divide them into twelve distinct tribes. Each tribe was a part of the larger nation, but they also had their own unique role. You may recall that Jesus was of the Tribe of Judah, which is

¹⁶ That man's name was Abram, which later became Abraham. You can find the story beginning in Genesis 11:27 and follow it through the rest of Scripture.

why He is called “the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.” That was His family heritage.¹⁷

The Levites were one of the twelve tribes given a unique role. God chose this tribe to be His priests, to serve in the temple, and to be responsible for all the ministerial duties the law required. Though the Levites were different than the other tribes, they were still just one of the twelve with their own strengths and weaknesses. God created special arrangements in order that their basic needs would be provided for and so they could give their full time and attention to the person of the Lord and the service of His people.¹⁸

In the earliest days of the church, the apostles followed the spirit of this approach, though not the structure. When Jesus chose His disciples, they left their vocations to follow and serve Jesus full-time. They were not all Levites, and God did not choose them on the basis of their family line. He said they were given to Him by His Father.¹⁹

In Acts 6, through the preaching and ministry of “the twelve,” the church experienced explosive growth. So many disciples were being added that some of the responsibilities were being overlooked. They gathered as a group and divided the work so that the twelve could give themselves full-time to “prayer and the ministry of the Word.” Today, God is still calling people to give their time and attention to the work of the Lord, to prayer, and to the ministry of the Word.

It is not based on your family line. The presence or lack of a full-time minister in your family does not determine your calling. Unlike the original disciples, Jesus does not have to reveal Himself in person for you to follow Him into ministry. It may not be as simple as knowing your family history. It may not be as crystal clear as the Son of God in human form showing up at your job, calling you to follow Him. But the calling *does* happen. The often-mysterious nature of the call always carries with it the opportunity to draw closer to Him

¹⁷ To be precise, the tribe of Judah was Joseph’s heritage, because Jesus was born of a virgin, and the family line was always traced through the man. To learn more about Jesus as the Son of God and the second Adam, read Romans 5.

¹⁸ 1 Deuteronomy 18:1-8

¹⁹ John 6:37, 44, 45

Before explaining this calling any further, it is imperative to understand that our primary calling as a follower of Jesus is unto Him before being called unto anything else. Os Guinness explains: “first and foremost we are called to Someone (God), not to something (such as motherhood, politics, or teaching) or to somewhere (such as the inner city or Outer Mongolia).”²⁰ Although not the focus of this book, I must stress that the Caller, God our Father, is far more important than the calling. Without God, we will certainly make our calling—whatever it may be—an idol, and it could lead to ruin.

Our primary calling is unto God. Our secondary calling, the focus of this book, has to do with our specific purpose for His glory. Discerning this is important, as God knows best what we should be doing with our lives, and that a sense of calling should precede a career choice. For some of us, that is a calling into full-time vocational ministry.

How do you know if God is calling you into full-time ministry? I have found the following four aspects of the calling to be helpful.

1. THE CALL

The realization of calling is not always clear-cut. It rarely answers all the questions at once. Sometimes, it does not answer any. Most of the time, it is as unique as the person being called.

As mentioned,²¹ with salvation comes a holy calling. No two are alike, though in a broad sense, we all are given the same one based on His grace. Once you experience the call to full-time ministry, you are never the same. Here is how it happened for me.

I will never forget my experience at Alexander Dorm at UNC in the early ‘80s. Michael Jordan was often in the headlines in Chapel Hill, but God was moving, and amazing things were happening off court, as well. Some of the students on my hall were giving their lives to Christ, and some whom I had written off as unreachable were asking me salvation and eternal life. Those were good times.

²⁰ Os Guinness, *The Call*, p. 31.

²¹ I am referring again to 2 Timothy 1:9. By the end of the book, you’ll have it memorized!

I would regularly read the Bible for hours at a time. One month, all I could focus on in Scripture was how the disciples would go out and preach. In Mark 16, it says they went out and preached everywhere and the Lord worked with them.²² Jesus specifically called them to go out and preach. It was all I could see. It was as if every Scripture on preaching and teaching was speaking to me too. I felt that, like them, Jesus was calling me.

I was beginning to feel anxious about it. It was such a strange thought for me as a first-generation Christian²³ in my family. It was not long thereafter that I had a life-defining moment

I was on a Greyhound bus going from school in Chapel Hill to my hometown of Greensboro. In those days, it was common for students who wanted a quick trip home to jump on the bus line. It was quick and cheap, and you could study during the ride. At that point in my life, it was hard for me to study anything other than the Bible. On the bus, I pulled my Bible out of my backpack and continued to ponder all the Lord had been saying to me. Suddenly, something strange began to occur. I closed my eyes and really listened intently to the still, small voice.

Although the bus was filled with a variety of people, it was as if it was only me and the Invisible One. He was there, and I could hear Him so clearly inside my heart saying, “Get up, and tell these people your story.”

I could not believe it, or, perhaps more accurately, I did not want to believe it. Not me! Oh no, this could not be the Lord. Does He not know I have to keep my reputation of being a nice, normal guy?

Vivid images of what might happen were racing through my mind. They would probably stone me, like Stephen. At the very least, they would want to tie me down. Worse yet, they might tie me down and throw me out the doors without slowing down. Maybe the bus driver would slam on the breaks, sending me flying out of his huge windshield in a bloody mess on Interstate 40. I began to wonder if this whole thing could be the voice of the devil. It quickly occurred to me that the devil is not interested in getting God’s kids out of their seats and onto the front of the bus to share the love of Christ.

²² Mark 16:20

²³ At that time, very few in my extended family were Christian.

I devised a backup plan. I told the Lord that I would obey the bus driver's rules. This seemed like a safe way out. Certainly, the driver would never allow anyone to get up and preach Christ on a Greyhound. I thought my spontaneous excuse out of answering the "divine squeeze" was clever: I would ask for the bus driver's permission, get denied, and quietly return to my seat.

I timidly walked to the front and said, "Excuse me, sir. My name is Ron Lewis. I am sure that you have rules about not letting people give talks on your bus, but I wanted to see if you would, by chance, let me share my story about how God changed my life and Jesus Christ became my Lord. I know you probably won't let me, but I thought I would just ask anyway."

As I waited, hoping he would reject me, I took a deep breath. What happened next would mark me forever. He smiled and said he had no objection. He then went on to explain he was a Pentecostal²⁴ Christian and would be praying for me as I spoke. He made it even easier by handing me his microphone, so my voice could be amplified through the entire bus!

God called my bluff and led me straight out of my comfort zone. All I lacked was a choir, because, for the next twenty-five minutes, we had a powerful church service. I preached while the bus driver silently prayed. And, glory to God, the people responded!

I invited people to repent of their sins and give their lives to Christ, and they responded all over the bus. Some people requested counsel. Others smiled. Everyone prayed and was encouraged. To my surprise, not one person had any issue or objection.

As the bus arrived in Greensboro, I rushed forward, so I could jump off first and stand at the bottom of the bus exit door. I was like the pastor at the greeting line of a church. The passengers exited the bus, shook my hand, hugged my neck, or sincerely thanked me. Everyone was smiling, because, for the previous hour, the joy of the Lord had taken over that bus. It was quite a moment. If I ever had any doubts about my call, they were gone.

I was consumed with the knowledge that people needed to be reached, the

²⁴ Pentecostal refers to a particular Christian, charismatic denomination.

poor helped, new churches planted, and all I could say was, “Yes, Lord!” The Scriptures on “preaching everywhere” were now in full revelation in my heart. My calling was being realized right in front of my eyes.

The call can come through unusual means, as it did for me. Other calls, as we shall read about later, could be characterized as a process, instead of an event or moment. For example:

God called Moses through a burning bush.²⁵

Moses’ brother, Aaron, was called through hearing about Moses’ talk with God.²⁶

Joseph was called through a series of mysterious dreams and the persecution of his brothers.²⁷

Jesus appeared to Paul in a vision and spoke in an audible voice on the road to Damascus.²⁸

Timothy was called through prophetic words and the leadership and spiritual upbringing he received from Paul.²⁹

Augustine³⁰ was called in a garden by the voice of an unseen child.

Martin Luther³¹ was saved and called through a terrifying lightning storm.

²⁵ You can find this story in Exodus 3.

²⁶ This story follows in Exodus 4.

²⁷ This happens in Genesis 37. Joseph’s story is one of the longest in Genesis and continues until chapter 50.

²⁸ You can find this story in Acts 9. Remember, at this point, he was still known as Saul. God would later change his name, as a sign of a new beginning. ²⁹ The prophetic words are referenced in 1 Timothy 1:18-19, and both of Paul’s letters to Timothy are evidence of the mentoring role that he played in the life of this young leader.

³⁰ Widely recognized as one of the most significant theologians in church history, Augustine heard a child that he couldn’t see say “tolle lege” which means “take up and read.” He took it to mean the Bible, and, when he opened it randomly to Romans 13:13, he felt God was calling him to follow Him.

³¹ Martin Luther is best remembered for his pivotal role in the Protestant Reformation and is one of the most important figures in Christian history.

John Wesley³² was called during a storm at sea as he feared for his life.

John Newton, author of the hymn Amazing Grace, was called to ministry after attempting to reform the slave trade, of which he was once a part.

These callings are unique, but they share a single characteristic. When God called, the call was answered and obeyed.

2. DESIRE

At the risk of stating the obvious, at some point along the way, you need desire to do the work of the ministry.³³ Sometimes at a Christian conference or in a powerful moment in which many of your friends are feeling called to ministry, it is easy to get swept up in the moment. The call sounds impressive and it makes you feel holy, perhaps even spiritually strong.

In the long-run, the desire to do full-time ministry will not be enough. But, it can be a great place to start. Over time, the stress, pressure, adversity, and challenges of this assignment have a way of revealing motives and clarifying your call.

Keep in mind that there is nothing wrong with simply volunteering. Andy Stanley, the lead pastor of one of the largest churches in America, says that as intently as he wanted to minister full-time early in his life, he never felt truly called.³⁴ He asked his dad, Charles Stanley (also pastor of a large church), if someone had to be called to go into full-time ministry, or if it is enough to simply volunteer?

His dad thought it was fine just to begin as a volunteer, so that is exactly what Andy did. Before long, God confirmed his initial desire was truly a calling through the obvious gifts and ministry success that Andy experienced.

From the simple, small act of volunteering, his calling was confirmed, and

³² John Wesley is most remembered as the founder of Methodism, for circuit-riding, for large outreach events, and a penchant for writing popular hymns.

³³ 1 Timothy 3:1 says “If someone aspires to be a church leader, he desires an honorable position.” (NLT) The same holds true for full-time ministry.

³⁴ Andy shares this story on page 9 of the Introduction. Stanley, Andy. *Communicating for A Change*. Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 2006.

God used Andy to see thousands of lives changed. We can see from this story that sometimes, desire grows into calling.

Often, God uses availability over ability. When you are willing to simply volunteer and obey Him, He will be faithful to reveal the unique spot He has designed specifically for you. A willing heart is filled with possibility, because it is in motion and able to be led exactly where God leads. As the saying goes, “God doesn’t call the equipped; he equips the called.”

This reminds me of my dear friends, Jeff and Anna Bullock. Their story shows what can happen when you love God and are willing to follow His call. While attending North Carolina State University, Jeff became a Christian, and his life was never the same. After a few years of growing and maturing as a believer, he had a dream from God. In the dream, he was boarding a plane to Russia to start a new church. Interestingly enough, that same night, his pastor also had a dream of starting churches in the former Soviet Union. The dreams made him wonder if this is what God wanted him to do.

Within four months, a good friend Mike Watkins was ministering in Lviv, Ukraine (a university town of a million people on the eastern border of Ukraine). A short-term mission trip was soon to follow with Jeff leading the team, and, by the time the trip was over, a church had been launched.

As he returned to the United States with the rest of the team, Jeff had no idea that this trip had given him a glimpse of God’s calling for his life. He wanted to lead other mission teams into Eastern Europe.

One afternoon, while lying on his sofa, he was overwhelmed by the presence of God. He had a deep sense that God was calling him to move to Ukraine, to serve God, love people, and build the church. He had never imagined living in Europe before, so this calling made it clear to him that it must, indeed, be his diving calling.

Immediately, he announced the “good news” to his wife, Anna. Good news to some isn’t good news to all. She said, “Well . . . you can go without me!” Until she had heard from God as well, they decided to wait. Jeff did not want to arrive in Ukraine and have Anna angry with him for making her live in Eastern Europe. Anna’s response to Jeff’s call underscores an

immovable boundary within a marriage that all decisions toward full-time ministry must have 100 percent agreement between a husband and wife.

A few months later, she realized this dream was not simply her husband's, but, rather, that it was God's purpose for their family. Today, in the wake of their calling, there are several churches in Ukraine, and a dynamic church in Krakow, Poland. The team is growing, and it is clear that there is no end in sight.

The desire within Jeff and Anna has been like the caboose on a train. It has always been there, but it has never led way. Often, passion is espoused as the chief driver of calling. While it can and does fuel the flame, it is not enough and often falls short, in and of itself. When vision, character, and the Cross are present, the calling can be fulfilled.

Initially, moving to Ukraine was not Jeff and Anna's burning desire, but, when God called, they went.

3. GIFTING BEYOND THE ORDINARY

If God calls, He also gives the gifts for the calling.

When athletes compete for a team, they are given the shoes, uniforms, and equipment they need to play. Soldiers are given a helmet, camouflage, armor, and a variety of weapons and tools necessary for success. In the same way, God gives gifts to His people.³⁵ These gifts help us fulfill the ministry we have been called to do. A divine calling, spiritual gifts, proven character, and acquired skills are non-negotiables for a ministry calling to be effective. Regarding the gifts, one may not be using them regularly early on, but it should be clear that the potential is there. With a call comes the grace and talents to fulfill it.

I have heard many young, passionate leaders assure me they are going to be the next mega-pastor like Rick Warren.³⁶ However, upon closer examination,

³⁵ You can see this idea developed in Ephesians 4:11-16 and 1 Peter 4:10. These gifts are given to serve the body of Christ and to accomplish the Great Commission.

³⁶ Rick Warren is the founding pastor of Saddleback Church in Southern California and author of *The Purpose Driven Life*. The church has regular weekend attendance of 22,000, and, according to *Publisher's Weekly*, the book has sold more than 30 million copies, perhaps making it the best-selling non-fiction hard-cover book in history.

many of these young dreamers have never led people to Christ or started a Bible study.

Maybe they feel certain their newly started non-profit organization will have the same global impact achieved by Mother Teresa or Scott Harrison.³⁷ This, too, seems out of place, when you consider the fact they have never even wiped a single runny nose serving in a church nursery.³⁸

It is important to point out here that the need to demonstrate gifts is not the same thing as having talent. There are certain elements of ministry that someone with talent can be successful through their own abilities. A charismatic leader with excellent communication skills can draw a crowd and grow an organization, but God often builds His kingdom through His grace and the gifts He gives to us in our weakness.

Moses struggled with a speech impediment, yet he led a congregation of several million through the Red Sea and the wilderness. The Apostle Thomas had his doubts, yet he was one of the Twelve and eventually became the apostle to India. Though many of us may know him as “doubting Thomas,” he did not doubt for long.

Rahab may have been a prostitute, an unlikely candidate to be used of God. Yet, through her faith, God used her to help the Israelites inherit the promise. She is honored for her faith in Hebrews 11:31 and is found in the lineage of Jesus.³⁹

Paul went so far as to call his weakness a gift, because it helped him not to confuse his role in the work of God. Though he was a significant leader who regularly performed miracles, was divinely inspired to write Scripture, and was the primary authority in discipline and conflict management in the early church, he was, above all, a servant.⁴⁰

Although Paul had a great background with strong credentials and is

³⁷ Scott Harrison is the founder of Charity Water, which has provided clean water to millions of people around the world.

³⁸ Paul describes this paradox and the tension between our weakness and God’s strength in several places.

Check out chapter 4 in both 1 and 2 Corinthians.

³⁹ Matthew 1:5

⁴⁰ 1 Corinthians 4:1

considered by many to be one of the great minds of history, he did not lead on the basis of talent or intellect. When he considered his own shortcomings and the enormity of the task he was attempting, his only chance for success was to trust in God's strength working in his weakness and to be a good steward⁴¹ of what God had entrusted to him.

In the long-run, in order for lives to be transformed, the sick to be healed, the captive to be set free, the gospel to be preached in power and not just persuasion, it takes God's grace working through the gifts He has given those servants who have demonstrated great character and humility before the Lord.

If you think God has given you a gift in an area of ministry, volunteer to serve in that area. See if God's grace is there working on your behalf. Do you enjoy it? Are you good at it? Has anyone ever commented on your gift in that area? If so, these can be helpful clues that will lead you to understand the gifts God has given you.

4. CONFIRMATION

When God is leading someone into full-time ministry through a real calling, a growing desire, and the evidence and operation of necessary gifts, the confirmation will always come. Confirmation is a clear stamp of approval. It is God's endorsement. It is not always loud and dramatic, but it always acknowledges and points to God, and not necessarily the minister. Every person in the Bible who received a call to serve the Lord full-time also received a confirmation of that calling from the Lord and His people.

For the Levites, it was without question. It had been their birthright from the time Jacob blessed his son, Levi. For the Old Testament prophets, it was the moment when they obeyed and spoke the Word of the Lord. Their position as God's ministers was not always immediately obvious; sometimes God asked prophets to do crazy things that the people did not understand.⁴² But,

⁴¹ A steward was the manager of the household, and that term applies to the management of responsibilities, based on the commissioning of the one in authority. It is a concept used throughout Scripture. Jesus used it on several occasions, including as a dividing line in a difficult parable in Luke 12:35-48.

⁴² He told Jeremiah that the people would fight him and try to kill him when he spoke, but He would rescue them. He told and showed Ezekiel so many crazy things I can't believe he actually wrote them down to show anybody else. He told Hosea to marry a prostitute! He told Jonah to go to the biggest, scariest city there was and preach against it. This list could go on and on, but God confirmed His words and the people He gave them, too.

when they obeyed, God confirmed them as His true prophets as their words came to pass.⁴³

When Jesus first sent out His followers to do the work of the ministry, He gave them a serious challenge. Take nothing with you, preach the kingdom, heal the sick, and drive out demons. Though they had seen Him do it, they must have thought, “There is NO way we can do this ourselves.” When they went, however, God removed the “no” and made the way. He confirmed their obedience with the demonstration of His power. They came back to Jesus and gave the glowing report of many breakthroughs: “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name.”⁴⁴ Jesus’ authority was extended and replicated through them serving as strong confirmation.

Just a few years later, the church was worshipping and praying in Antioch when the Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”⁴⁵ How the Spirit spoke this, we do not know. What we *do* know is that this was a major confirmation for a missionary team to be set apart to reach all of Europe with the gospel. God is still confirming callings today.

He did it for me whenever I obeyed in my weakness. Each time, He met me with His strength. As I mustered up the faith and courage to step out in preaching the Bible, often to my surprise, people responded. Lives were transformed and men and women came into supernatural, loving relationships with God through the person of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Has God called you? Do you have the desire to obey God in this call? Has He given the gifts that you need to do what you believe you are called to do? Have you and others around you seen His power confirming you as you have obeyed and responded to the call?

If you are answering yes to all of, or even some of, these questions, then, in all likelihood, you are wrestling through the process of a call of God to full-time service. Using these questions as a checklist is incredibly important

⁴³ Samuel’s confirmation in 1 Samuel 3:20 is a great example.

⁴⁴ You will find this quote in Luke 10:17, and the full story in Luke 10:1-24.

⁴⁵ Acts 13:2

in the process of working through your potential call to full-time ministry. Take some time now to stop and pray through them. Seek proven, godly counsel. *Please do not attempt this without qualified council and input.* When you are ready, come back to read on.