

Christian Body Life as Grads

FOUNDATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN SCHOLARS | WEEK FIVE

IN THIS WEEK'S STUDY

1. Discussion Guide
2. "The Call to Do What You Are"

CHRISTIAN BODY LIFE AS GRADS

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1. **1 Cor 12:14–31** talks about the various parts of the body. How does it compare to **Eph 4:1–16**?
2. What does it look like for us to bring our gifts and talents to the graduate student study? How does this differ from how we serve at Church?
3. How can we be the best stewards of our gifts as Christians in the academy? What are some ways that we might squander the opportunity to use our gifts well?
4. How do Worship, Community, and Practice help us to identify our spiritual gifts?
5. How will we serve the local church and one another in the days ahead?

APPLICATION

All Christians are part of the church and ought to utilize their gifts in a local church body. However, as grad students we are also called to encourage one another, to evaluate the Christian worldview within our disciplines, to integrate our faith and discipline, and to reach out to our peers. The best way to do that is to participate in a community of believing grad students.

As we embrace our calling in academia together, and come to understand the unique challenges we face, we have the opportunity to make the most of our time NOW as followers of Christ. While TIME is a critical limited resource during graduate school, participating in a community of Christian graduate students will renew our strength and equip us to face the challenges before us.

TO CALL TO DO WHAT YOU ARE

Yehudi Menuhin, the renowned maestro and violinist, has held audiences all over the world spellbound with his conducting and virtuoso playing. Like many great musicians, his gifts were precocious. He made his violin debut in San Francisco at the age of seven and launched his worldwide career at the age of twelve with a historic concert at Carnegie Hall. In his memoirs, *Unfinished journey*, Menuhin tells the story of how he began his long love affair with the violin.

From the time he was three years old, Menuhin's parents frequently took him to concerts in New York where he heard the concertmaster and first violinist Louis Persinger. When Persinger broke into solo passages, little Yehudi, sitting with his parents up in the gallery, was enchanted.

"During one such performance," Menuhin wrote, "I asked my parents if I might have a violin for my fourth birthday and Louis Persinger to teach me to play it."

Apparently his wish was granted. A family friend gave the little boy a violin, but it was a toy one, made of metal with metal strings. Yehudi Menuhin was only four. He could hardly have had the arms and fingers to do justice to a full-sized violin, but he was furious.

"I burst into sobs, threw it on the ground and would have nothing to do with it." Reflecting years later, Menuhin said he realized he wanted nothing less than the real thing because "I did know instinctively that to play was to be."

Stories like that are common in the lives of creative artists. Artie Shaw, a famous clarinetist in the old Big Band days, shared his heart with an interviewer. "Maybe twice in my life I reached what I wanted to. Once we were playing 'These Foolish Things' and at the end the band stops and I play a little cadenza. That cadenza—*no one* can do it better. Let's say it's five bars. That's a very good thing to have done in a lifetime. An artist should be judged by his best, just as an athlete. Pick out my one or two best things and say, 'That's what we did: all the rest was rehearsal.'"

John Coltrane, the saxophonist who played for Dizzie Gillespie and Miles Davis, said something very similar. In the early 1950s "Trane" nearly died of a drug overdose in San Francisco, and when he recovered he quit drugs and drinking and came to put his faith in God. Some of his best jazz came after that, including "A Love Supreme," an ardent thirty-two minute outpouring to thank God for his blessing and offer him Coltrane's very soul.

After one utterly extraordinary rendition of "A Love Supreme," Coltrane stepped off the stage, put down his saxophone, and said simply, "*Nunc dimittis*." (These are the opening Latin words for the ancient prayer of Simeon, sung traditionally at evening prayers: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.") Coltrane felt he could never play the piece more perfectly. If his whole life had been lived for that passionate thirty-two-minute jazz prayer, it would have been worth it. He was ready to go.

WHAT DO YOU HAVE THAT WAS NOT GIVEN YOU?

"To play was to be," said Yehudi Menuhin. "All the rest was rehearsal," said Artie Shaw. "Nunc dimittis," said John Coltrane. Somehow we human beings are never happier than when we are expressing the deepest gifts that are truly us. And often we get a revealing glimpse of these gifts early in life. Graham Greene wrote in *The Power and the Glory*, "There is always one moment

in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in." Countless examples could be added to these stories, but they all point to another crucial aspect of calling—God normally calls us along the line of our giftedness, but the purpose of giftedness is stewardship and service, not selfishness.

Giftedness does not stand alone in helping us discern our callings. It lines up in response to God's call alongside other factors, such as family heritage, our own life opportunities, God's guidance, and our unquestioning readiness to do what he shows. But to focus on giftedness as a central way to discern calling reverses the way most people think. Usually when we meet someone for the first time, it isn't long before we ask, "What do you do?" And the answer comes, "I'm a lawyer," "I'm a truck driver," "I'm a teacher," or whatever.

Far more than a name or a place of birth, a job helps us place a person on the map in our minds. After all, work, for most of us, determines a great part of our opportunity for significance and the amount of good we are able to produce in a lifetime. Besides, work takes up so many of our waking hours that our jobs come to define us and give us our identities. We become what we do.

Calling reverses such thinking. A sense of calling should precede a choice of job and career, and the main way to discover calling is along the line of what we are each created and gifted to be. Instead of, "You are what you do," calling says: "Do what you are." As the great Christian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote in his poem about kingfishers and dragonflies, "What I do is me: for that I came." Albert Einstein, even as a teenager, had theoretical physics and mathematics in his sights. He wrote in a homework essay in Aarau, Switzerland, "That is quite natural; one always likes to do the things for which one has ability."

There is, to be fair, a growing trend toward fitting jobs to people. "Suit yourself—the secret of career satisfaction" one book promises. But many of these approaches are inadequate compared to calling. First, the more secular approaches tend to use very general "personality types" in their testing. So the results are too broad to be specific for individuals, and they are more about general personality traits than about the specific gifts of individuals.

Second, even the more clearly Christian approaches often suffer from weaknesses. Some use testing that concentrates on spiritual gifts and ignores natural gifts. This allows the testers, usually large churches, to use the results to direct people to employ their discovered gifts in their churches—thus diverting them from their callings in secular life and deepening the Catholic distortion further.

Others broaden the testing to discover both spiritual and natural gifts, but they divorce the discovery of giftedness from the worship and listening that is essential to calling—thus deepening the Protestant distortion further. The result is a heightened awareness of giftedness, but the emphasis on giftedness leads toward selfishness rather than stewardship. Archbishop William Temple underscored this danger sternly. To make the choice of career or profession on selfish grounds, without a true sense of calling, is "probably the greatest single sin any young person can commit, for it is the deliberate withdrawal from allegiance to God of the greatest part of time and strength."

In the biblical understanding of giftedness, gifts are never really ours or for ourselves. We have nothing that was not given us. Our gifts are ultimately God's, and we are only "stewards"—

responsible for the prudent management of property that is not our own. This is why our gifts are always "ours for others," whether in the community of Christ or the broader society outside, especially the neighbor in need.

This is also why it is wrong to treat God as a grand employment agency, a celestial executive searcher to find perfect fits for our perfect gifts. The truth is not that God is finding us a place for our gifts but that God has created us and our gifts for a place of his choosing—and we will only be ourselves when we are finally there. This theme of the wider purpose of gifts is unambiguous to the Puritans. John Cotton, for example, was an eminent seventeenth-century minister and the architect of New England congregationalism. Educated at Trinity and Emmanuel Colleges, Cambridge, he preached the famous farewell sermon "God's Promise to His Plantation" at the sailing of the *Arbella* in 1630. Three years later, he came to the New World himself. His sermon "Christian Calling" is a stirring seven-point exposition on the subject.

Cotton gives three criteria for choosing a job. The top criterion is that "it be a warrantable calling, wherein we may not only aim at our own, but at the public good." The other criteria are that we are gifted for the job and guided toward it by God—criteria that would surely supersede Cotton's first one on most people's list today. All who seek to follow Christ and to answer his call should pursue the key link between their giftedness and their calling, and use the best Christian books and tests on the subject. There is joy in fulfilling a calling that fits who we are and, like the pillar of cloud and fire, goes ahead of our lives to lead us.

But who are we? And what is our destiny? Calling insists that the answer lies in God's knowledge of what he has created us to be and where he is calling us to go. Our gifts and destiny do not lie expressly in our parents' wishes, our boss's plans, our peer group's pressures, our generation's prospects, or our society's demands. Rather, we each need to know our own unique design, which is God's design for us.

OURS FOR OTHERS

Not surprisingly, the focus on giftedness can be dangerous as well as wonderful. The encouragement to "do what we are" can be taken as a blank check for self-indulgence. But the strongest temptations always come along the line of the noblest truths, and that is the case here: The principle is tempting because it is true.

God does call us to "be ourselves" and "do what we are." But we are only truly "ourselves" and can only truly "do what we are" when we follow God's call. Giftedness that is "ours for others" is therefore not selfishness but service that is perfect freedom.

The danger, however, remains. So it is worth noting some distinctions made throughout history regarding calling, which help us balance giftedness and stewardship. In each case the temptation is to remember only the giftedness and forget the stewardship. But by keeping both in mind, we can steer surely by the principles of calling and avoid the pitfalls.

In all the discussion, the terms *calling* and *vocation* should be synonymous. One word simply comes from an Anglo-Saxon root and the other from a Latin root. Beware of those who make "vocation" different from "calling." If "vocation" is ever distinguished from "calling" and used to refer to the clergy, it is a sure sign of the Catholic distortion; if "vocation" is distinguished from "calling" and used to refer to employment and occupation, it betrays the presence of the

Protestant distortion.

First, we must remember the distinction between the individual (or particular) calling and the corporate (or general) calling. Selfishness prefers the first, but stewardship respects both. The individual calling is that part of our life-response to God that we make as unique individuals. As we have seen, our individual callings are unique simply because each of us is unique. The corporate calling, on the other hand, is that part of our life-response to God that we undertake in common with all other followers of Christ. For example, all followers of Christ are called to be holy and to be peacemakers—simply by virtue of being followers of Christ.

Our corporate calling, which will be examined in a later chapter, is vital because it prevents calling from developing into an excessive individualism. Individual callings should complement, not contradict, the corporate calling. If there is any disagreement, the corporate calling as set out in Scripture should take precedence. Anyone citing his or her individual calling as grounds for rejecting the church's corporate calling is self-deluded.

Characteristically, the Puritans thought about corporate calling as much as individual calling. William Perkins, the dean of Puritan writers on vocation, counseled that "every calling must be fitted to the man and every man fitted to his calling." Both halves of the rule are necessary, he said, "for when men are out of their proper callings in any society it is as much as if a joint were out of place in the body."

Second, we must remember the distinction between a later, special calling and our original, ordinary calling. Again, selfishness prefers the first, but stewardship respects both. A special calling refers to those tasks and missions laid on individuals through a direct, specific, supernatural communication from God. Ordinary calling, on the other hand, is the believer's sense of life-purpose and life-task in response to God's primary call, "follow me," even when there is no direct, specific, supernatural communication from God about a secondary calling. In other words, ordinary calling can be seen in our responsibility to exercise a high degree of "capitalist-style" enterprise about how we live our lives. For example, the servants in Jesus' parable of the talents and pounds were assessed according to how they "got on with it" when the master was away. In this sense no follower of Christ is without a calling, for we all have an original calling even if we do not all have a later, special calling. And, of course, some people have both.

This distinction has practical consequences. Many Christians make the mistake of elevating a special calling or of talking as if everyone needed a special call for every task. ("Were you called to this job?") Some use the word *calling* piously regarding all their decisions, thinking it is the word to use, when in fact they have not had any special call. To the surprise of both groups, there is not a single instance in the New Testament of God's special call to anyone into a paid occupation or into the role of a religious professional. Others feel that, without a special call, they have had no call at all. So they wait around for guidance and become passive, excusing themselves by saying they have had "no call." But all they are doing is confusing the two types of call and burying their real talent in the napkin in the ground.

Needless to say, the very notion of a special call by God often betrays the fact that something is awry in understanding the original call. This tension is sharpest in the prophet—the prophet is specially called to critique and challenge the people of God when they have forgotten or betrayed their original calling.

Thus Moses confronted the people of God over the golden calf, Elijah over the prophets of Baal, Jesus over legalism and hypocrisy, Martin Luther over the distortion of faith, and Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer over the idolatry of nationalism. Such prophetic critiques were often delivered with outrage, but they were not denials of the chosenness of those attacked. On the contrary, the purpose of prophetic critique is restoration, not dismissal. The prophets were specially called and their prophetic messages were special calls to bring God's people back to the original calling from which they had fallen away.

Third, we must remember the distinction between something being *central* to our calling and something being peripheral. Again selfishness prefers the first, but stewardship regards both. Many people use the word *calling* only for the core of our giftedness. They speak as if we should all be able to specify our callings as a single task expressed in a single sentence. But both people and life are richer than that, and calling is comprehensive, not partial. We need to remember that calling has multiple dimensions and includes our relationships. Martin Luther, for example, was among other things husband to his wife, father to his daughter, pastor to his congregation, professor to his students, and subject to his prince.

This distinction is important because it is easy to become spoiled if we concentrate on the core of our giftedness—as if the universe existed only to fulfill our gifts. But it is also easy to become discouraged by making the same mistake. We live in a fallen world, and that core of our gifts may not be fulfilled in our lives on earth. If there had been no Fall, all our work would have naturally and fully expressed who we are and exercised the gifts we have been given. But after the Fall this is not so. Work is now partly creative and partly cursed.

Thus to find work now that perfectly fits our callings is not a right but a blessing. Those in modern societies who are middle class or higher can probably find such a fulfilling match between calling and work. But for many others today, and probably for most people in most societies, there is no happy match between work and calling. Work is a necessity for survival. Even the almost universally recognized artistic genius like Michelangelo once complained: "having seen, as I said, that the times are contrary to my art, I do not know if I have any hope of further salary."

This tension created by the Fall lies behind the notion of "tent-making." Needless to say, there was no advertised job that was perfect for Paul's calling: "Apostle to the Gentiles: \$50,000 per annum." So Paul, not wishing to depend on wealthy Corinthian patrons, earned money by making tents. Doubtless he made his tents well because they too were made to the glory of God. But tentmaking was never the *heart* of Paul's calling, it was only a *part*, as all of life is. As a part of our calling such "tentmaking" at worst is work that frustrates us because it takes time we wish to spend on things more central. But at best it is work that fees us to get to that which is central. By contrast, whatever is the heart of our calling is work that *fulfills* us because it employs our deepest gifts.

The difference is impossible to mistake. George Foreman, flamboyant heavyweight champion of the world and a Baptist preacher says, "Preaching is my calling. Boxing for me is only moonlighting in the same way Paul made tents."

Fourth, we must remember the distinction between the *clarity* of calling and the *mystery* of calling. Again selfishness prefers the first, but stewardship regards both. To the extent that

through worship, listening to God, and discovering our giftedness we grasp what God is calling us to be and do, there will be a proper clarity in our sense of calling. But to the extent that we blithely rush to be explicit, we betray our modern arrogance and forget the place of mystery in God's dealing with us. Oswald Chambers even said, writing of a special call:

If you can tell where you got the call of God and all about it, I question whether you have ever had a call. The call of God does not come like that, it is much more supernatural. The realization of it in a man's life may come with a sudden thunder-clap or with a gradual dawning, but in whatever way it comes it comes with the undercurrent of the supernatural, something that cannot be put into words.

Can you state your identity in a single sentence? No more should you necessarily be able to state your calling in a single sentence. At best you can only specify a part of it. And even that clarity may have to be qualified. In many cases a clear sense of calling comes only through a time of searching, including trial and error. And what may be clear in us in our twenties may be far more mysterious in our fifties because God's complete designs for us are never fully understood, let alone fulfilled, in this life.

William Wilberforce's 1787 journal entry, setting down his "two great objects," is perhaps the simplest and most stunning personal mission statement in history. But it would be wrong to hold it up as a model for all. Wilberforce was young, his sense of calling was dear, and he pursued that calling for the rest of his life almost as if he were running in a straight line.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a living legend in the twentieth century as a one-man resistance movement to totalitarianism, represents a very different way. When he was fifty-five and near the climax of his titanic struggle with the Soviets, with twenty more years of his writing projects still to be achieved, his sense of calling was passionate.

The one worrying thing was that I might not be given time to carry out the whole scheme, I felt as though I was about to fill a space in the world that was meant for me and had long awaited me, a mold, as it were, made for me alone, but discerned by me only this very moment. I was a molten substance, impatient, unendurably impatient, to pour into my mold, to fill it full, without air bubbles or cracks, before I cooled and stiffened.

But Solzhenitsyn's sense of calling had not always been so clear and passionate. Originally it had not been there at all because he did not know his Caller and barely knew his gift. "I drifted into literature unthinkingly," he said, "... and hate to think what sort of writer I would have become." But his sense of calling grew in his experiences of the Gulag, his deadly struggle to write, the miracle of his cure from cancer, his conversion through a Jewish follower of Jesus, and his deepening burden to put "the dying wish of the millions" on record.

Solzhenitsyn therefore exemplifies Søren Kierkegaard's observation that life is lived forward but understood backward. "Later," he wrote in *The Oak and the Calf*, "the true significance of what happened would inevitably become clear to me, and I would be numb with surprise. I have done many things in my life that conflicted with the great aims I had set myself—and

something has always set me
on the true path again."

Solzhenitsyn's conclusion, quoting another Russian writer, is a bracing reminder to all who yearn for calling to be always simple and clear. "Many lives have a mystical sense, but not everyone reads it aright. More often than not it is given to us in cryptic form, and when we fail to decipher it, we despair because our lives seem meaningless. The secret of a great life is often a man's success in deciphering the mysterious symbols vouchsafed to him, understanding them and so learning to walk in the true path."

*Do you want the best and most wonderful gifts God has given you to decay, spent on your own self? Or do you want them to be set free to come into their own as you link your profoundest abilities with your neighbor's need and the glory of God?
Listen to Jesus of Nazareth; answer his call.*

A TIME TO STAND

There are times when our hearts stir before heroism like fine crystal resonating to the sound of a violin. So it was for me when, only twelve, I first heard my headmaster and classics teacher tell the story of one of the most courageous stands in human history: Thermopylae. Years later I can see him still. Tall and powerful, with strong expressive hands, he was a sporting hero for England. But he became most animated when he summoned up the glories of ancient Greece and Rome. In lesson after lesson the twentieth century faded into unreality as he reawakened the past.

The year was 480 B.C. The East was on the move against the West. A colossal and terrible army, the greatest the world had ever seen, had poured across the Hellespont from Asia into Europe. Led by the all-powerful Persian King Xerxes, the vast host included fish-scale armored Persians, camel-riding Arabs, chariot-driving Libyans, turbaned Cissians, balloon-trousered Scythians, high-heel booted Sarangians, and scores of other tribes and nationalities. Eighty thousand men rode on horseback or in chariots; around them marched foot soldiers and archers beyond counting.

When this Grand Army marched, it was said, the ground trembled. When they ate, it was as if locusts had devoured everything in their path. When they drank, it seemed that whole pools were dried up and entire rivers reduced to a trickle. The imperial Persian war machine was like nothing anyone had seen before. Simply to pass by the king in review took a full week.

The Persian mission was revenge. Xerxes, the thirty-eight-year-old