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Mastering Calling Comprehension:
Answer God's Call with Clarity and Confidence

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Abstract

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Analogous to the process leading to marriage, calling comprehension is the act of moving from engagement to consummation. It is the movement from saying yes to the proposal to living out the vow to be or do what God proposes. Honoring one's vow to God requires clarity about the calling of God. God's calling can be categorized in two ways: general and particular. General calling refers to God's salvific desire for all people. Whereas particular calling is a task or purpose that God ordains an individual to complete. Calling comprehension is the ability to understand one's particular calling and move according to its accompanying instructions. The concept of calling comprehension is complicated when a person cannot articulate their particular call. This difficulty is a result of an inability to communicate what one heard from God which leads to objections, doubts, and fears about answering the call. The call narrative of Mary giving birth to Jesus, in Luke 1, provides the Biblical precedent for how one should answer God's call and an illustration of how to work through the frustrating uncertainties that often accompany God's summons. Following Mary's example, calling comprehension requires a courageous yes, radical obedience, and an audacious zeal to act on the word of God. Ultimately, mastering calling comprehension necessitates that one hear the word of God, believe it, and do it!

EMORY UNIVERSITY

MASTERING CALLING COMPREHENSION:
ANSWER GOD'S CALL WITH CLARITY AND CONFIDENCE

A FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF CANDLER SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
IN CANDIDACY FOR DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
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ATLANTA, GEORGIA

APRIL 2018

A *USA Today* poll revealed that if people could ask God one question, most would like to know: “what is my purpose in life?” Periodically, we find ourselves questioning who we really are and what we are supposed to do in life. These questions reveal an ultimate longing to find one’s calling. These longings and thoughts may nudge us gently, or they may launch a season of upheaval in our lives.¹ Trying to discern one’s calling can be rather ambiguous. Google noted more than 3,530,000 searches from people seeking information on career centers throughout the country. Clearly, people are seeking outlets to reveal what they are supposed to do with their lives. This search reveals a crucial concern that looms in the minds of most people but that seldom gets discussed: “*how do I discern my calling?*”²

The definition of calling varies widely among scholars. Frederick Buechner defines calling as “as an individual’s deep desire to meet the world’s great need.”³ John P. Neafsey suggests that “the call gives rise to inclinations to be a particular kind of person and to do particular things and is accompanied by an invitation to follow or obey by living one’s life in accordance to what the inner voice is desiring.”⁴ Doug Koskela suggests that there are two categories of calling: General and Particular. “General calling refers to what God desires for all people and Particular calling is a task or purpose that God desires of an individual.”⁵

¹ Kay Marie and Kevin Brennfleck, *Live Your Calling: A Practical Guide to Finding and Fulfilling Your Mission in Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 3.

² Steve G. W. Moore, “Career and Calling” in *Living Life on Purpose: The Joy of Discovering and Following God’s Call*, ed. Maxie D. Dunnam and Steve G. W. Moore (Franklin, Tenn.: Providence House Publishers, 2005), 21.

³ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 19.

⁴ John p. Neafsey, “Psychological Dimensions of the Discernment of Vocation,” in *Revisiting the Idea of Vocation: Theological Explorations*, ed. John C. Haughey, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 167.

These aforementioned definitions and ideals about calling are an extension of the work of William Perkins, a student and teacher at Cambridge University during the 16th century and leading Puritan Theologian. In *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*, Perkins provides the foundational thought for how I will develop the concept of Calling Comprehension.⁶

Perkins defines a calling as a certain kind of life, ordained and imposed on man by God for the common good. Using Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 7:17, "As God has called every person, let him walk," Perkins believes every person is to live as they are called of God. Perkins likens a person's call to instructions given by a General to his soldiers: "The General appoints to every man his place and standing: one place for the horseman and another for the footman, and to every particular soldier likewise his office and standing, in which he is to abide against the enemy, and therein to live and die. God is the General appointing to every man his particular calling, and as it were his standing, and in that calling he assigns unto him his particular office, in performance whereof he is to live and die. And as in a camp, no soldier can depart his standing without the leave of the general no more may any man leave his calling, except he receives liberty from God."⁷

In terms of how a person is called, Perkins is clear that the author and initiator of every call is God. He elaborates that God orchestrates one's calling in a two-fold process: God ordains and he imposes the call. Perkins suggests, first, God ordains a calling by prescribing a set of

⁵ Doug Koskela, *Calling & Clarity: Discovering What God Wants for Your Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), xiv.

⁶ William Perkins, "A Treatise of the Vocations" in *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*, ed. William C. Placher (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 2005),

⁷ Perkins, *Callings*, 263.

instructions that informs a certain kind of life. Secondly, God imposes a calling by himself without the help of any creature or by man or angel. Ultimately, he notes that the final cause or end of every calling is for the common good – for the benefit and good estate of mankind.

Lastly, Perkins secures the foundation in which this calling comprehension project builds upon by delineating two sorts of calling: General and Particular Calling. The general calling is a call to become a member of the body of Christ and heir to the kingdom of Heaven. Ultimately, it is a call to submit to God and accept the graceful provision God has made for one's salvation. The particular call is a personal call to a particular office, action, and mission.

Calling comprehension, therefore, is the ability to understand what God has ordained in one's life, as well as, the ability to move according to God's ordaining instructions. With that understanding of calling comprehension, this project is concerned with helping a person answer and walk in their particular calling. Many books that seek to help people discern their calling, begin with activities on how to understand one's gifts, talents, and passions.⁸ While these methods can help one gain clarity about what they may be able to accomplish, there has to be a more concrete way to help people comprehend what they have been called to do.

This calling comprehension project is based on the calling comprehension class entitled: *I Said "Yes,?!" Now What?* The varying punctuations following the "yes," in the class's title, are representative of the confusion that many people face when seeking to answer the call. In his book, *Listen! God is Calling,* D. Michael Bennethum writes, "still today, many who are baptized struggle ... They may spend hours in church, worshipping and serving, and still leave

⁸ The Brennfleck's book *Live Your Calling: A Practical Guide to Finding and Fulfilling Your Mission in Life* has about 10 tests that one can work through to understand gifting, personality, etc.

feeling empty, because they don't know how their Christian activities intersect with other activities that place a large claim on their lives."⁹

The following four-part exploration of calling comprehension begins with three ideals that can help improve calling comprehension, followed by an overview of the class curriculum and results. The third part provides a biblical precedent for a penultimate answer to God's call by considering the call narrative of Mary giving birth to Jesus. Her exemplary resolve and consummate response to God's call provide a premier illustration of the mastery of calling comprehension. The last segment of this calling comprehension exploration will conclude with a treatment for how to discern and walk in one's particular calling.

Critical Exploration: Three Ideals for Improving Calling Comprehension

Listening Comprehension

It is hard for people to comprehend something they have never heard or experienced before. Research on listening comprehension reveals that, as a child learns his native language, he comes to expect certain patterns of sound and not others. Furthermore, the child is thrown off by the sound sequences of a foreign language until she has sufficient experience with that particular language to build a frame for expectations.¹⁰ Similarly, people may find themselves confused by the sound sequence of God's call. This confusion most certainly will linger until the person has had sufficient experience with distinguishing the voice of God. When people hear, feel or experience God calling them, it is generally described as a voice or feeling they had never

⁹ Bennethum, *Listen! God is Calling!* 67.

¹⁰ Wilga M. Rivers, "Listening Comprehension," *The Modern Language Journal* Vol. 50, No. 4 (April 1966), 197. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/322015> (accessed February 15, 2018)

heard or felt before. When this uncertainty about what they are receiving is coupled with a spiritually undisciplined life (i.e. a life void of reading and studying God's word, public and private worship, prayer, or a devotional life), deciphering God's word and his call is difficult.

There is much to consider when one hears an unexpected or unfamiliar word from God. When trying to hear what God is asking or calling a person to do, the confusion may stem from how a person chooses to hear what God is saying. The word "information" in communication theory relates not so much to what you say but more so what you *could* say. Therefore, a person has a measure of freedom to choose how they will receive a message.¹¹ How people choose to hear God's call, is the major problem in calling comprehension. While people hear what God said, they fear what the call could mean and entail for their future.

When thinking about how to make sense of the information one has received via God's call, research suggests that every language has a built-in mechanism for comprehension, in order to manage and proportion the amount of information in any one sound sequence. Each language has developed a certain amount of redundancy. It is this redundancy in language which helps us to piece together the information we hear.¹²

God's word includes redundancy that is designed to help one comprehend his word. When trying to understand one's call, there are at least 20 call narratives in the Bible to help a person ascertain what a call sounds like, its patterns, and associated elements. These call narratives also exemplify how one could respond to a call and the consequences for an inappropriate response. Therefore, for one to appropriately comprehend what God is calling them to do, they must develop some level of fluency in God talk to answer their call.

¹¹ Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1959) p. 10.

¹² Rivers, "Listening Comprehension," 197.

Introspection

The articulation of calling, which begins with something that is heard or felt by an individual in a private, inward way, requires introspection. Introspection is a term used by philosophers to refer to a special method or means by which one comes to know their individual mental state, specifically, their current consciousness. Introspection is derived from the Latin word *spicere*, meaning to look, and *intra*, meaning within; therefore, it is the process of looking inward.¹³ The ability to look inward allows an individual being called to explore the motivational force behind their thoughts, objections, and perceived obstacles.

Despite many qualms about the usefulness or reliability of introspection, it is one of the only ways one can explore her calling. “How do people know they had a certain experience? How do you know that you have a pain in your foot? The answer is not, I feel it, but rather, I notice it. Having a pain is one thing; noticing it is another. By noticing our experiences, we come to know that we have them. Most of our experiences come and go without ever being noticed. But once noticed, an experience has entered the grip of cognition.”¹⁴ When trying to comprehend one's calling, there is a need to extract what they noticed when they were being called.

¹³ Cynthia Macdonald, “Introspection and Authoritative Self-Knowledge,” *Erkenntnis* (1975-), Vol. 67, No. 2, Mental Causation, Externalism and Self-Knowledge (September 2007): 356, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.emory.edu/stable/pdf/27667935.pdf?refreqid=search%3A883a7d2300a281d55fca34a89814d854> (accessed February 15, 2018)

¹⁴ Frank Hofmann, “Introspective Self-Knowledge of Experience and Evidence,” *Erkenntnis* (1975-), Vol. 71, No. 1, First Person Authority (July 2009): 19, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.emory.edu/stable/pdf/40272701.pdf?refreqid=search%3A883a7d2300a281d55fca34a89814d854> (accessed February 18, 2018).

When Samuel noticed that someone was calling, he was able to articulate that he noticed someone was calling him.¹⁵ From this articulation, Eli was able to help Samuel answer the call of God. The idea of introspection in calling comprehension mirrors what Eli was able to do for Samuel. People who are called must look inwardly to recall all that they noticed when they heard what God said so that they may be led in the right direction.

Taking Risks

When trying to answer the call, there is always a level of attendant uncertainty. Eventually, the called person will have to take a risk and trust God where information and definitive answers are unavailable. Risk-taking is the willingness to venture into the unknown. It is an eagerness to try something new and different without putting the primary focus on success or failure.”¹⁶

“May I have two volunteers?” I frequently asked this question of the children in my classroom. Each time almost every child was willing to volunteer. This question was also asked of the parents at the first parent meeting of the year. The results were always the same never did a parent volunteer. Only after a few questions such as what will I be expected to do? What do you have in mind, then someone agreed to volunteer. The parents actually wanted answers to such questions as can I be successful?’ Will I look foolish?’ and will I embarrass myself?

Now on the other hand the children were eager to take a risk with no questions asked. The few parents who eventually agreed to volunteer needed guarantees that their self-esteem and integrity would not be threatened. The message of this activity is worrisome; because somewhere between kindergarten and adulthood, we lose that eagerness and willingness to take simple risks for the sake of learning something new. This loss creates adults who lead safe, low-risk lives and, in addition, contributes to the large number of adults who no longer actively pursue learning.¹⁷

¹⁵ 1 Samuel 3

¹⁶ Robert D. Young, “Risk Taking in Learning K-3,” in NEA Early Childhood Education Series (September 1991): 7, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED336207.pdf> (Accessed February 20, 2018).

¹⁷ Young, “Risk Taking in Learning K-3,” 7.

In his research on risk-taking behavior, Robert Young highlights five levels of risk-taking behavior. “It should be noted that these levels are not stages through which all individuals progress. Risk-taking behavior is not a developmental process in which an individual begins at the lowest level and proceeds through subsequent levels until the highest level is reached. The levels are not assigned an age-appropriate range; rather, the levels indicate the varying degrees of risk-taking behavior. It is possible that a young child will display the highest level of such behavior and continue in this way all through his/her life. However, it is more probable that the young child with a high level of risk-taking behavior gradually will regress to a lower level”¹⁸

The uninhibited risk-taker who displays the highest level of risk-taking behavior is the most eager and willing to experience new learning and views it as its own reward. The second highest level of risk-taking behavior is analytical risk-taking. The analytical risk-taker is eager and willing to experience new learning and sees this as its own reward, but is more calculating than the uninhibited risk-taker. The analytical risk-taker is more inclined to study the situation by analyzing important factors before engaging in the task. The third level of risk-taking behavior is cautious risk-taking. The cautious risk-taker, though still interested and eager, is less willing to take risks but is willing to watch others. This student overemphasizes the importance of success and failure and is overly concerned with how others will perceive his/her performance. The cautious risk-taker secretly wants to be more uninhibited in learning. The fourth level of risk-taking behavior is inhibited risk-taking. The inhibited risk-taker wants guarantees and assurances of what is expected and of what effect it will have. There is a great concern for doing everything right and oftentimes this student participates in a new learning experience only after much encouragement is given and even then, entering the activity will be done with much hesitancy.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Once an individual enters this level of risk-taking behavior, it is very difficult to achieve higher levels. The lowest level of risk-taking behavior is no risk-taking. At this level, new learning experiences are avoided and often there is a, “you can't make me” attitude toward these new learning experiences. Only routine learning tasks that have pre-established steps and expectations will be attempted. Like the inhibited risk-taker, this student's learning behavior is very difficult to change.¹⁹

The description of these five risk-taking behaviors and the probable regression to a lower level during a person's lifespan, speaks to the urgency I possess to help people answer the call as early as possible in their lives. While oftentimes our goal is to aspire to the highest level, the second level of risk taking, analytical risk-taking, is more appropriate for those seeking to answer their call. There should be an eagerness and willingness to experience what God wants to do in one's life. Also one should analyze for clarity what God is calling them to do. Answering one's call is a direct correlation to this risk-taking study, because it is an act of learning what God can and will do as they take risks to trust him.

The Class: I Said “Yes,?!” Now What?

In *Calling & Clarity: Discovering What God Wants for Your Life*, Doug Koskela suggests that there are two questions or dilemmas that people ask or wish to resolve if they are seeking to answer the call of God. The first question considers: what is God calling me to do and how might I live that calling out in particular situations? Meanwhile, the second question asks:

¹⁹ Robert D. Young, “Risk Taking in Learning K-3,” 8-10.

will I be obedient to that call?²⁰ With those questions in mind, a course of study was created to help people with calling comprehension. The calling class started out as an endeavor to help the ministerial staff and other people at St. Stephens African Methodist Episcopal Church in Essex, Maryland to explore their calling with passion and certainty.

The class was organized into a five-week course that explored calling through scripture, group discussions, journaling, and reading assignments. The class met at St. Stephens A. M. E. Church in Essex, Maryland on Mondays from 6:30-8:30pm. The class commenced in late October and concluded in late November of 2017. An announcement was made for three consecutive Sundays during the worship experience for participants to join the class. The class was developed with three types of people in mind: 1) ordained clergy struggling to find purpose and fulfillment in ministry; 2) people who recently answered (submitted to God's instruction) their particular call; 3) people who felt called but could not articulate their particular call with clarity or understanding.

At the beginning of the class there were twelve students, but by the conclusion of week five, seventeen students had completed four out of the five classes and those students ranged in age from 21 to 67. The population was mixed in gender, and the educational backgrounds included high school dropouts as well as those with multiple master's degrees. The ministerial experiences of the group ranged from one new member to the faith to one who had been in ordained ministry for 25 years.

To get an overview of the participants' knowledge of calling, an initial assessment was completed in week one that asked them to chart themselves in specific areas. This assessment tool was also used to track participants' growth and progress by the completion of the course.

²⁰ Koskela, *Calling & Clarity*, xiv.

The assessment was three parts. Part one asked participants to articulate what God had called them to do and explain how or if that call had been confirmed.

The second part of the assessment explored how obedient the participants had been to the instructions God had given them. They were asked to chart themselves on a line between two opposites for three different questions. The first question was: Up to this point in my life I have either “Barely said “Yes” or “Completed my call.” The second question was two-part. The first part of question asked participants to chart themselves between the opposites of birth and death based on the average human lifespan of 75 years. The second part of the question asked the participants to read Matthew 24:36; 42-44. These scriptures suggest that we should be ready since we don’t know the day or hour when the Lord is coming back. Reflecting upon Matthew 24, participants were asked to chart themselves in regards to the urgency between the opposites of "I have time" and "I should have started yesterday."

The third part of the assessment asked participants to consider how they identified best with a group of four calling scenarios:

- a. “I hear the call, but I need further clarification – why me?”
- b. “I’m going to answer the call, but in my own time.”
- c. “I answered the call, so what am I supposed to be doing now?”
- d. “I am walking in my call, but how can I be more effective – I don’t feel fulfilled or successful.”

Calling Comprehension Class Overview

Week one's exercises addressed the questions: what does it mean to be called and how do you answer the call? When looking up the definition of calling in the dictionary, an interesting definition appeared: "the characteristic cry of a female cat in heat; also the period of heat."²¹ The correlation between a cat being in heat and a person being called by God provided the means for an important observation: The calling on your life ought to create an unquenchable desire in you to go through whatever process may be required to birth something great that will bless you and generations to come.

As we explored other definitions of calling, *Live, Your Calling: A Practical Guide to Finding and Fulfilling Your Mission in Life*, provided an extended version of Buechner's claim:

*"Vocation comes from the Latin vocare (to call) and means the work a person is called to by God. There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of society, say, or the superego, or self-interest. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need to do and (b) that the world needs to have done. If you find your work rewarding, you have presumably met requirement (a), but if your work does not benefit others, the chances are you have missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work does benefit others, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you are unhappy with it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a) but probably aren't helping your customers much either. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."*²²

Additionally, participants pondered A.J. Droge's very thought-provoking statement in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*: "unless the response to Jesus' call is immediate and unconditional it is invalid"²³ ... in order for a call to succeed, the initiative must come from Jesus himself and the recipient or perspective disciple must respond immediately and unconditionally. And when

²¹ "Calling." Merriam-Webster.com. Accessed October 19, 2017. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/calling>.

²² Brennfleck, *Live Your Calling*, 15.

²³ A. J. Droge, "Call Stories," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 192.

either of these components is missing the story inevitably ends in failure.”²⁴ Droge also mentions that “Jesus’ response to persons seeking to answer the call presents a picture of discipleship characterized by lack of family, homelessness, poverty, and vulnerability.”²⁵ In response to his work, students were asked to consider the bleakness that seems to accompany answering the call to follow Jesus: “why would you say yes?”

Week one concluded with homework that instructed the class to explore Biblical call narratives that resembled their calling experience. The hope was that they might gain some insight into how they may need to proceed in answering their call.

Week two examined the faith one may need to answer the call. Hebrews 11:32-34 suggests at least six persons along with unnamed prophets who conquered kingdoms, administered justice, gained what was promised, and did things beyond their strength as they operated through faith. As part of an opening exercise for week two, participants were asked, when you think about the people in the Bible who did great things, how does your faith compare? Additionally, a creative, self-reflective question was asked: consider what three road signs do you think God would place on your spiritual journey in the next month to a year to help you answer and walk in your calling, such as proceed with caution, under construction, no parking, yield, stop, no exit, detour, etc.? Students were asked to reflect on the road signs they chose and why. Additionally, they were asked, what do those roads signs say about your progress thus far and what do they signify will be required on your journey moving forward?

Week three addressed objections to calling, specifically how and why a person must work through them. The exercises for week three began with an exploration of God’s direction to

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

characters on the yellow brick road. Students were asked to identify with one of the characters in the *Wizard of Oz*: Dorothy a person in need of hope. The Scarecrow who doesn't know who he is. A lion who lacks courage and a Tin man who thinks he has no heart. Once they made a connection, students were asked to articulate what their correlation with a specific character meant and what that correlation suggested needed to happen in order to move forward.

The examination of objections to the call of God, in week three, led to an exploration of the difference between a miracle story and a call narrative. The comparison was made by looking at Rudolf Bultmann's presentation of the pattern for a miracle story and Dr. N. Habel's presentation of the primary literary features of the call narrative.²⁶ The only difference between a miracle occurring in one's life and the call narrative is the objections the called person makes.

Given the objections that people may have or make to the call of God, participants were asked to examine the role of Ananias in the conversion experience of Paul, Acts 9:10-17. This exercise prompted the students to imagine themselves as Ananias in the Scripture. While Paul is, in one form or fashion, responsible for almost twenty percent of the content in the Bible and the sharing of the Gospel to the Gentiles, students were asked to ponder what if Ananias was stifled in his obedience, because of his objections? Students were asked to conclude week three's study by identifying the obstacles and distractions that were keeping them from moving forward with what they heard God instructing. As they made those identifications, they were to write out prayers for strength and guidance to get beyond any fears that were holding them back.

²⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, rev. ed. trans. John Marsh from *Die Geschichte der Synoptischen Tradition*, 5th ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 219-230.

N. Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 77, no. 3 (2009): 297-323, from doi:10.1515/zatw.1965.77.3.297 (Accessed April 30, 2017).

In weeks four and five, the students read excerpts from two books on vocation and calling during the class time. At any point that a person had an aha moment, revelation, or question, they were permitted to stop and share their thoughts or start a dialogue about a particular subject. The following are some revelations and discussions from the readings. Students read Chapter 2 of *Live Your Calling: A Practical Guide to Finding and Fulfilling Your Mission in Life* by Kay Marie and Kevin Brennfleck. The first discussion that the students had was in response to the following statement: “Sometimes the problem in finding our vocational calling is not that we are unclear about God’s calling to us, but rather that we are unwilling to do what he is asking. For many of us, financial concerns get in the way of our following where God is leading.”²⁷ The class stopped in response to this excerpt because four persons began to suggest the financial burdens they assumed would be attached with moving forward in the pursuit of their calling. They were concerned with the financial burden of paying for seminary or the inability to work certain hours and days.

In response to these concerns and objections, the chapter suggests that for one to be able to answer “Yes” to the call despite fears and reservations, one must keep their focus on the Lord. Brennfleck points out, “Keeping our focus on the Lord also reminds us that our ultimate accountability for what we do with our lives is not to our parents, spouse, boss, neighbors, society, or ourselves. We are called to live our lives playing to an audience of one and that being, God.”²⁸ This statement raised further conversation about how some objections that people had were born out of their allegiances to other people and things without regard for God, his ultimate authority, and ability. It was a convicting and repentant moment.

²⁷ Brennfleck, *Live Your Calling*, 14.

²⁸ Ibid.

The last discussion was in response to what the authors called the five levels of vocational fit.

The lowest level of vocational fit is when a person sees his or her work as *just a job* – something to provide a paycheck but little sense of enjoyment or satisfaction. Level two is, ok *work* that is work of some interest. At level three people find themselves doing *enjoyable work* that may be satisfying for many years. Level four is *meaningful work*, in which people feel they are contributing to a significant purpose or giving something back. Level five is *vocational integration* where a person's work is an expression of who he or she is. Their unique design is clearly visible in what they do, because their individual identity is merged with their work identity. They feel that they are doing the type of work they were meant to do.²⁹

Week four's class concluded with the students discussing their vocational fit and the risks they may have to take to go to a higher level. Students were asked to journal about the most meaningful parts of the chapter and what those parts encouraged them to do.

In the last week of the calling class, the class read excerpts from Parker Palmer's book *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. This reading included the first two chapters of Parker Palmer's book, minus the story of his great depression which students were encouraged to read at their leisure. There were many aha moments in this fifth class as persons nervously approached this culminating class. The first discussion began as Parker Palmer describes one's proper pursuit of vocation:

... if the self seeks not pathology but wholeness, as I believe it does, then the willful pursuit of vocation is an act of violence toward ourselves – violence in the name of a vision that however lofty is forced on the self from without rather than grown from within. True self when violated, will always resist us, sometimes at great cost, holding our lives in check until we honor its truth. Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about – or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions.³⁰

²⁹ *ibid.*, 18-19.

³⁰ Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, 4.

As we paused for discussion, one student suggested, "this brings us back to the first class – ‘what has God said?’ I don't think I have spent enough time listening to God's instruction and certainly, I haven't put enough effort into doing what I have heard. I keep looking for another voice to confirm what I have heard and felt in my spirit."

Palmer's writing immediately responded to the conviction and affirmation of that student, confirming: "vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I must live – but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life."³¹ As this created a noticeable impact on the students, I stopped the reading and asked what the facial expressions and stares meant. The overall response was, "we are yearning for something more, but we have to listen and it's hard to listen, let alone listen to ourselves whom we have grown not to trust."

The next reflection came in response to Palmer's view of a poem by May Sarton. Palmer suggests: "What a long time it can take to become the person one has always been! How often in the process we mask ourselves in faces that are not our own? How much dissolving and shaking of ego we must endure before we discover our deep identity."³² Admittedly and transparently, I shared the struggles of being a young, ambitious pastor. I had worn many different faces in order to meet the needs and expectations of the people. The group was amused at the fact that we have to go through so many endeavors, pains, and sufferings to come back to the person we were meant to be. Palmer expounds on his earlier statement by explaining the process in which, "we

³¹ Ibid.

³² *ibid.*, 9.

are disabused of original giftedness in the first half our lives. Then if we are awake, aware, and able to admit our loss we spend the second half trying to recover and reclaim the gift we once possessed.”³³

The final discussion of the Parker Palmer excerpts referenced the “Rosa Parks Decision.” Palmer asks: “Where do people find the courage to live divided no more when they know they will be punished for it? The answer I have seen in the lives of people like Rosa Parks is simple: these people have transformed the notion of punishment itself. They have come to understand that no punishment anyone might inflict on them could possibly be worse than the punishment they inflict on themselves by conspiring in their own diminishment.”³⁴

The class concluded with a final homework assignment to write two letters. The first letter was to be addressed to their future selves who is fully operating in their calling. They were to tell their future self what they envisioned them doing, the impact it would have on the kingdom of God, and how proud they were of them for working to get to that point; the class was encouraged to articulate and describe what they felt that scope of work would be. The second letter was to be addressed to a person who will one day seek to answer and walk in her calling. The instructions for the letter requested them to tell future called persons what they wished they would had known while trying to answer their call and the things they learned on their journey.

Calling Comprehension Class Results

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 34.

The original motivation for the class was to help people think critically about what God had instructed them to do and to offer suggestions on how to respond. The course was organized to be very introspective. The hope was that the introspection would lead to a commitment to a plan for obedience to answer a call. It was also designed to help them move past their “yes” and into meaningful action in accordance to the instructions they had heard.

As a result of the class, six people discerned and answered the call to preach. Two of those persons did their trial sermon on December 10, 2017. Three preached their trial sermons on January 14, 2018, and one on February 11, 2018. For those who had already answered a call to preach, they professed greater clarity on what God had called them to do. They were eager to explore the specific word of God for their lives in a more aggressive manner. Three people expressed a call to teach, and three others discerned a call to evangelize.

In response to what could have made the class better, one student wrote, "the only thing I wish would have happened is that we had this class sooner. It may have eliminated some earlier mistakes, and I may have been a better asset to the kingdom of God. By not understanding or being willing to work on my calling sooner, I have delayed some of my spiritual progress and others around me." Every student's exit interview questionnaire suggested that they had grown spiritually. In essence, my goal to help people walk in their calling was accomplished.

A Biblical Precedent for Calling Comprehension

As the class concluded at the commencement of the Advent season, many themes from the class were addressed and gained new meaning in light of the call narrative of Mary. Dr.

Norm Habel has proposed a widely accepted model of the call narrative in the Bible as a genre.³⁵ He believes that there are six elements shared by the call narratives that are readily discernible in the calling of Moses,³⁶ Gideon,³⁷ and Isaiah.³⁸ The call narrative pattern consists of six elements; the divine confrontation; the introductory word; the commission; the objection; the reassurance; and the sign. Following the call narrative pattern in the call of Mary, a called person may glean where she is in her own call narrative, but more importantly, how to answer the call of God. Mary's call narrative becomes a foundational focus of this project based on her courageous yes, radical obedience, and audacious zeal to act on the word of God.

As people inquired about the calling class at St. Stephens, they wanted to know more about calling, what their calling was, and what they were supposed to do when they had finally gained some clarity. This Biblical example can help those inquiring about their call and remind those working in their call of God's desire, by providing a map to arrive at the "yes" God desires. Ultimately, as Chester A. Pennington concludes: "Hopefully at some point, each of us will be able to say *yes*, and as we do, we will find in this act of 'self-surrender' a meaningful goal for our lives."³⁹

In Luke 1:26, we are introduced to two concepts of God's calling. The reader is told that in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to invite Mary to participate in a divine plan. The mention of Elizabeth's pregnancy as an inaugural part of God's

³⁵ N. Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives."

³⁶ Exodus 3:1-12

³⁷ Judges 6:11-17

³⁸ Isaiah 6:1-13

³⁹ Pennington, *The Thunder and the Still Voice*, 14.

call in Mary's life signifies to anyone who may doubt the feasibility of God's call in their life, that God has already done the impossible. Primarily, God puts the called on notice that the impossible or unimaginable is not an extraordinary or infeasible act: it is a consistent act of God in the lives of those he chooses to use for his purpose. Secondly, Luke 1 introduces its readers to Mary but provides no backstory or lineage to connect her to anything divine or scripturally relevant. The fact that God chooses a person whom no one has heard of before suggests that there is no pedigree needed to be called by God. God can choose and use anybody to participate in his divine plans.

Often the divine confrontation, the first element in Habel's call narrative formula, is terrific news but extremely disturbing to one's life and plans. Fred Guyette asserts: "God's call comes as a disruptive experience, with little or no previous preparation."⁴⁰ Even though the call of God may be disruptive and catch one off guard, the confrontation is divine and God is seeking to do something immaculate. As one considers their divine confrontation, take Gabriel's words to heart: "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!"⁴¹

As Mary prepares herself for the second element of the call narrative, the introductory word, Brent Strawn highlights a possible reason for the response Mary has to her divine confrontation: "It is to this unlikely girl in this unlikely situation that God sends Gabriel, who greets her and names her: 'Favored One.' No wonder Mary wondered what sort of greeting this might be!"⁴² Mary was greatly troubled in response to the words of Gabriel and confused about

⁴⁰ Fred Guyette, "The genre of the call narrative: beyond Habel's model" in *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (January 2015): 54

⁴¹ Luke 1:28

⁴² Brent Strawn, "Luke 1:26-38," in *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The Third Readings: The Gospels*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 287.

what they meant. No matter how great the calling of God sounds, it can be troubling for many people. Strong's definition of *diatarássō*, the Greek word used for troubled, suggests it means to disturb wholly.⁴³ As Mary wonders what kind of greeting Gabriel is giving her, Strawn expounds on the possibilities: "The angel also tells Mary that 'that the Lord is with you.' Such words are said to mighty warriors like Gideon, Judges 6:12, 16, and to godly prophets like Moses in Exodus 3:12 and Jeremiah 1:8. Could Mary be called to a similar, divinely ordained, perhaps even prophetic task?"⁴⁴

The uncertainty of what God is asking one to do leads to a considerable amount of questions. Is there going to be a battle like the mighty warriors of the Old Testament? Often there is no answer to this question or questions. The lack of a reply to this question leaves the called person trying to piece together a puzzle with many missing pieces. "The introductory word, the direct commission of the one called is prefaced by a word or some type of personal communication that also serves as a preparatory word, such as 'the Lord is with you.'"⁴⁵ Despite what a person desires to hear, see, or feel as they contemplate the introductory word of God, they must learn to trust that the Lord is with them even in his perceived silence and invisibility. If one is patient, the call narrative pattern suggests a moment of reassurance is on the way.

Element three, the commission, is the description of the specific task, mission or instruction that the Lord needs one to complete and follow. Mary's commission is that she is to conceive, give birth to a child, and name him Jesus. Mary's life is wholly disturbed by God's

⁴³ Blue Letter Bible, "Lexicon :: Strong's G1298 – diatarassō," Strong's Definition, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongsg=G1298&t=KJV> (Accessed December 15, 2017).

⁴⁴ Strawn, "Luke 1:26-38," 288.

⁴⁵ Guyette, "The genre of the call narrative," 54.

commission. As a virgin, engaged and not married yet, she has many reasons to be afraid.

Likewise, when people hear the call from God, there may be many reasons to be frightened. The response to Mary's troubled spirit is, "don't be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God."⁴⁶

Many persons entered into the class initially being troubled by the call. The call of God, no matter how great it may be, could potentially rearrange their lives, change their children's lives, and perhaps cause them to change or leave a profession that they loved or in which they found great security and comfort. Nevertheless, the constant push in the class was to help students remain engaged with what had been said and revealed. Students were reminded continuously to stick with what had been heard, the commission, rather than what had not been expressed. In order to resolve the initial fear of being called and what that means for one's life, one must value what God has said.

For Mary, despite her fears, confusion, and worries, the word she needed to focus on was, "do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."⁴⁷ Stick to the commission!

Element four of a call narrative is the objection. During this phase of a call narrative, the chosen individual does not believe in their ability to carry out the task or the possibility that the feat can be accomplished. In response to her commission, Mary has a question: "How will this be, since...?"⁴⁸ This question was articulated by students of the class in the following ways:

⁴⁶ Luke 1:30 (NIV)

⁴⁷ Luke 1:30-33.

⁴⁸ Luke 1:34

"how can this be when I was or am a prostitute, drug addict, 65 years old and ready to retire and have no formal education?" In response to their commission, people in the class wanted to know how God would bring their call to fruition given their current condition or past. Other questions asked by students were, "can I wait to answer the call until I finish school?" "How can I entirely devote myself to ministry when I am trying to focus on my career, raise a child, and go back to school?" "For Schaberg, it is clear that Mary has a good reason for asking the question in 1:34. Mary assumes that the pregnancy will occur immediately, but she knows that she will not begin to have intercourse with her husband for quite some time. Therefore, she assumes that the angel is speaking of some other man and asks, "How will this be since I do not have sexual relations with my husband?"⁴⁹

Following Schaberg's argument, when a person questions God about their calling, their questions may have more to do with the ethic morality of God and less to do with the content of the call. At the core of this question, one may hear: Is God doing something wrong or hurting me by what he is asking me to do?

Strawn presents the fact that objections that follow the commission in call narratives "serve as a means by which the called tries to get out of the calling. It is quite possible that Mary's question functions similarly – this is an unnatural task, after all, and will no doubt complicate matters, especially with Joseph (cf. Matt. 1:18-35)."⁵⁰ Pennington says: "If we are to be faithful to God's summons, we must be able to sort out his calls from the manipulative influences of our society. We are called to let God shape our lifestyle and establish our values.

⁴⁹ David T. Landry, "Narrative Logic in the Annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:26-38)" in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114, no. 1 (Spr. 1995), 69.

⁵⁰ Strawn, "Luke 1:26-38," 289.

And they will prove their validity as we respond to his leading."⁵¹ When questioning or objecting, it is helpful for one to consider that God is not trying to hurt or wrong the called, but wants to do the seemingly impossible in her life.

The fifth element, reassurance, in a call narrative is the response of the Lord as an oath of assurance to the called person's objections, fears, and concerns. God seeks to reassure Mary, despite her troubled understanding of how she would give birth to Jesus, that "the, Holy Spirit, will come on you, and the power of the most high will overshadow you, for no word from God will ever fail."⁵² Strawn also reassures the called that, "the task may be confusing and complicated, maybe even objectionable, but God will see to it."⁵³

How does one find assurance in the Lord's reassurance when it is objectionable? Listening to the word of God allows one to act on the word of God. Ultimately, listening prepares our response. In their letters to future recipients of a call from God, at least five students found it imperative to tell future recipients of God's call to listen to the exact words of God. One student wrote: "listening to God is so critical in this walk. After you hear instruction from God, I advise you to go and write it down before you have time to convince yourself it wasn't real. When faced with discouragement from people you love, from your enemies, or just how things look at the present, having what God has told you in writing will provide you with some reassurance."⁵⁴

⁵¹ Pennington, *The Thunder and the Still Voice*, 29.

⁵² Luke 1:35-37

⁵³ Strawn, "Luke 1:26-38," 289.

⁵⁴ Homework assignment from a student in the calling class: Letter to a person trying to answer their call, November 28, 2017.

Pennington wonders: "Why do we have such a hard time giving the summons our honest attention? Maybe we suspect that if we really listen, God might say something we'd rather not hear. So we almost instinctively shy away from that risk. And this does not help our capacity to hear."⁵⁵ People who are contemplating a call from God, need to spend as much time with the word of God as possible. As Mary listened to the word of God, her ability to receive and understand his instructions grew with each word, which is indicative of the sixth element, the sign. Strawn surmises the sign of Mary's call narrative appropriately, highlighting, ultimately, the desired response to one's call:

Gabriel seems to give Mary a sign by directing her attention to Elizabeth and revealing that she is pregnant. If old, barren Elizabeth is already in her second trimester, then certainly God can work with the opposite problem a young girl who happens to be a virgin. The giving of a sign signals the end of the call form, but Luke is not yet done, and neither is Mary. Amazingly, she has the last word; this is unparalleled in any of the examples of calling in the Old Testament. And what a last word it is! "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."⁵⁶

Once people's behavior is governed by the call and word of God for their life, their yes is complete. "Mary depicts herself as one who is ready and willing to do God's bidding. Mary's response is, in sum, one of the best statements of human response in the Bible. Mary, after learning the details of her calling, despite an objection and questions, responds with radical obedience. She hears the word of God, believes it, and does it and is blessed."⁵⁷

These six elements of a call narrative apply to the formal call narrative when God directly confronts and specifically commissions an individual. However, the Lord can call us in many ways. For example, "Abraham hears God's call, not as a confrontation but as a promise and an

⁵⁵ Pennington, *The Thunder and the Still Voice*, 76.

⁵⁶ Strawn, "Luke 1:26-38," 289. Also see Luke 1: 38

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 290.

invitation to a journey. Furthermore, there are examples of other narratives in the Bible which seem to break from Habel's model as part of a different version of a call narrative."⁵⁸

Nevertheless, the goal of one working through their call narrative is to conclude it like Mary – to excitedly say yes and act according to God's word.

If a person has comprehended their call, they understand what they have been summoned and commissioned to do, and their speech and actions align appropriately. Accordingly, the called should say yes to God's call as Mary does: "Yes, I see it all now: I'm the Lord's maid, ready to serve. Let it be with me just as you say."⁵⁹ Moreover, their actions undergird their yes and commission like Elisha who sacrificed his resources and former life to follow Elijah, ultimately, his prophetic calling to become Elijah's successor.⁶⁰

The Ultimate goal for calling comprehension is a threefold result. First the called person should be able describe what they noticed when they experienced God's divine confrontation or introductory word. This description should lead to a clear understanding of their commission from God. Then with clarity on their commission, the called should willingly say yes, understanding that God is not trying to hurt them but meet a need in a divine way. Lastly, the called should be able to do what God has instructed with confidence and endurance despite obstacles and objections.

Therefore, the process of calling comprehension starts with helping the called person articulate what they have heard or noticed when God invited them to follow a particular instruction. This step will require listening comprehension strategies that call for intentional

⁵⁸ Guyette, "The genre of the call narrative," 55.

⁵⁹ Luke 1:38 (MSG)

⁶⁰ 1 Kings 19:19-21

interaction with the voice of God to gain sufficient experience with the intent of God's words. The called person needs to habitually engage in the spiritual disciplines of reading, studying, and meditating on God's word. Furthermore, to help people discover their calling in life, Marlis McCollum, argues that they have to deepen their spiritual life.⁶¹ The initial step of calling comprehension should conclude with the called person being able to cite a scriptural reference or story as confirmation for their calling.

Once a person can articulate the call of God for their life with clarity, understanding, and scriptural confirmation, the next step is to help the person formulate a strategy to overcome obstacles and objections to that call. To say yes to God and subsequently follow the instructions one has received, the called must engage in honest, self-reflective introspection to decipher what is hindering their acceptance of God's invitation. Reflecting on Mary's response to the call to give birth to Jesus, the most prominent concern one must overcome is their belief about the moral motivation with which God operates. This dilemma can be solved by investigating other call narratives. While studying those narratives, the called will see that the motives of God are motivated and supported by "plans to take care of you, not to abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for."⁶² When one introspectively reflects on why they are hesitant to answer the call, one may find that their objection is more personal than an unethical motive of God. The second step of calling comprehension should conclude with the called person developing a plan to move forward in their call. This plan and its steps forward can find scriptural support as the called identifies with a call narrative in the Bible that resembles the way they are being called or the circumstances surrounding their call. The called person's steps forward may directly

⁶¹ Marlis McCollum, "A profound sense of mission: one man's call to work in the world." *Congregations* 32, no. 2 (2006 2006): 19-21. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 27, 2016).

⁶² Jeremiah 29:11 (MSG)

resemble the call narrative with which they associate or deviate depending on the called person's response to their commission.

The last step of helping one with calling comprehension is to help the person act on what they now comprehend or to assist them with walking in their calling. This step may prove to be the hardest given where the person has settled or currently resides in their risk-taking behavior. Despite having a plan to move forward in one's call, the called will have to take a risk. Things may not go according to the plan nor is there complete assurance that no problems will arise. Polya recommends that problem-solvers follow these four steps: develop an understanding of the problem then devise a plan of implementation and evaluate the solution, modifying the plan if necessary.⁶³

Whatever is keeping the person from accepting the call and moving forward is the problem. As a result, calling comprehension should help people understand their call, devise a plan to overcome any obstacles to the call, and move confidently in the instructions of God enlisting the Holy Spirit as their helper. Ultimately, the goal of calling comprehension is to help the called realize that God is able to do the impossible. Therefore, the called must be open and flexible to how God will work out the details of their commission in moments of stagnation, confusion, or dead ends. As Gabriel seeks to encourage Mary to trust God and walk in her calling, the called must also take that same encouragement to heart: "You have nothing to fear – do not be afraid, you have found favor with God and nothing is impossible with God – – for no word from God will ever fail."⁶⁴

⁶³ Robert D. Young, "Risk Taking in Learning K-3," 12.

⁶⁴ Luke 1:30; 37

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