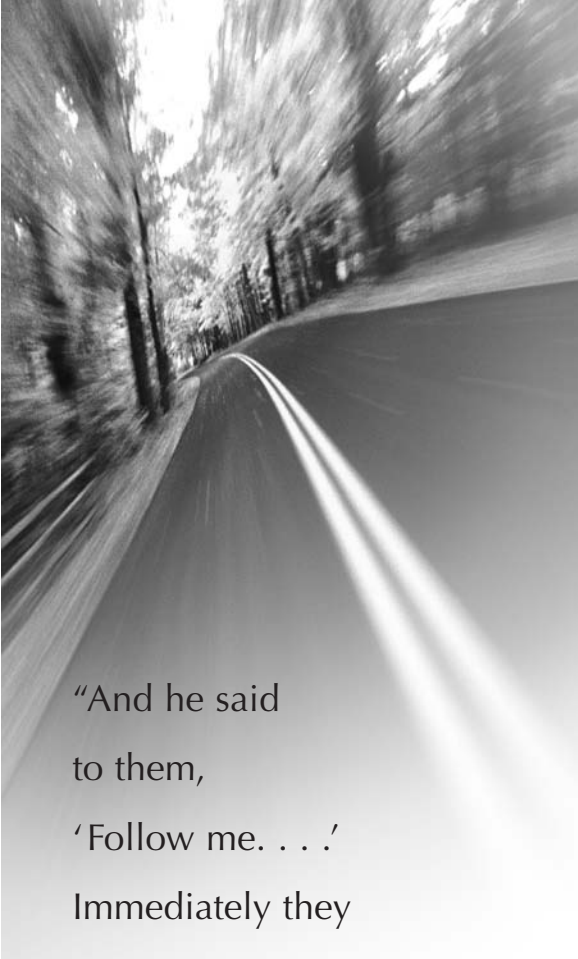


Discerning Your Vocation

A Study for Continuous Reflection

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“And he said
to them,
‘Follow me. . . .’
Immediately they
left the boat and
their father,
and followed him.”

— Matthew 4:19, 22

*A*s Matthew tells the story of the calling of the first disciples, Peter, Andrew, James, and John did not hesitate to leave all they had and follow Jesus. Without an apparent thought about the fishing businesses they had worked so hard to establish or the families that depended on them, they left everything behind and followed Jesus on down the shore. With each step they moved farther and farther away from the people they had been and came closer and closer to becoming the people God had created them to be. As they discovered, to live with Jesus meant by definition that they would change. True discipleship, as Bonhoeffer pointed out, means that the disciple will be at odds with former beliefs and old lifestyles.

As you examine the various elements of theological education and its role in discerning vocation, particularly your possible experiences here at Princeton Seminary, I encourage you to reflect on the meanings of some important words like call, vocation, and discernment. As a Christian, you are also invited to seek insight into the role your church community—the body of Christ—has played (and will play) in the formation of your future.

Call

In the New Testament, a “call” is a summons by God to a person for a specific task. God’s choosing is not because of any special goodness or special attainment in those receiving a call. All Christians are called to ministry (loving service), but there are those who are called to specific church leadership vocations. Such a calling is no more “Christian” than any other. We must remember that all Christians are called, by nature of their baptism, “to walk in love, walk in light, walk in wisdom.” (Ephesians 5:2, 8–10, 15) Regardless of where this journey takes you and what occupation you choose, all people of God are engaged in ministry—we believe in the priesthood of all believers. Yet, in particular forms of ministry, there are specific functions or vocations that demand qualities, gifts, and motivations that are both privately acknowledged and publicly affirmed by the church.

As we begin this journey, I believe that many of us have asked ourselves, through prayer, meditation, or quiet time, or have asked a minister, a colleague, a parent, or a friend, “What is God calling me to do?” And I ask you, “What do you imagine yourself doing a few years from now? Whom do you imagine yourself being at the end of your life?”

Through the abilities and personality God has given you, through the things you have already learned to enjoy or accomplish, and through the people whom you admire or find

fascinating, God is calling you to your own life’s work in the Lord’s vineyard. Your energies, gifts, and creativity are needed as a part of God’s work of transforming the world. You are called to play what may be a small but incredibly important role in something much bigger than all of us.

Discovering a call rarely happens overnight. Rather, most people experience the process as a journey. Doubts may surface that intrude and cause delay. “Is what I feel God’s call, or is it an ego trip? Do I have what it takes to be a good minister,

Christian educator, professor, or social outreach worker? I have so many faults, how can I be the one that God has chosen for this call?”

These anxiety-provoking questions may go through your mind as you choose a theological seminary. These questions continue when you are at seminary, and even after you leave seminary! Yet, this is part of the journey experience. While many students expect to leave seminary with more knowledge than they had when they arrived, many also resist the kind of soul-searching and wrestling that is part of theological education. But as the journey continues, in prayerful contemplation, with guidance from the Spirit of God and with counsel from many sources, you will gain insight into God’s will for you, and will become aware of or reaffirm your particular gifts, skills, and interests.

The number of people God requires for special leadership in the church is never as

What are my
strengths & weaknesses?

important as the quality of the people enlisted. Besides the “gifts” a person has, a crucial element of a call is what the Reformers called the “weight” of the Word upon the person. That is, he or she who is summoned feels the awe, the expectancy, and the excitement of the “Word made flesh” and the revolutionary impact of Jesus Christ upon all human life.

Vocation

Ministry is the active response to God’s call. Christian ministry is more than simply doing good. Rather, it is something that Christ does in and through us and that we do in and through Christ. We act not on our own, but on the authority of God who calls us. Jesus said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last...” (John 15:16)

The word “ministry” comes from the same root as the word “minus,” which means “less.” Jesus asked, “For who is greater: the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.” (Luke 22:27) All Christians are called to minister both to one another and to those around them by participating in God’s work in the world. Ministry occurs in innumerable forms, some of which require ordination. Genuine ministry involves both giving and receiving; reciprocity is essential. Ministry “to” is patronizing, for it fails to acknowledge our own need, nor does it recognize the mutual nurturing experienced when we are brought to Christ through the people we serve.

The word “vocation” comes from the Latin word *vocare*, which means “to call.” “Vocation” can be understood in different ways. For

instance, it can signify the work you do from a strong, inner conviction over a long period of time. A Christian vocation is a response to God’s call, acting out your conviction. Webster defines it thus:

A call, summons, or impulsion to perform a certain function or enter a certain career, especially a religious one...

Biblical figures receive their summonses in a variety of ways, depending on their unique personalities and contexts: some through dreams and visions, some by contact with significant people, some through tumultuous inner experiences. Some are receptive to the summons, and others very resistant. To understand the flavor of the differences among them, read the commissioning of Moses (Exodus 3:1–4:17), of Gideon (Judges 6:11–24), of Samuel (I Samuel 3:1–21), of Deborah (Judges 4:4–10), and of Ruth (Ruth 1:16–18). All of them and many more became convinced that speaking and living God’s Word was the most important journey they could take, though some doubted their ability.

God gave me the privilege of being the pastor of a multilingual, multicultural congregation in the East Brooklyn area of New York City for ten years. There I witnessed a variety of challenges in parish ministry, and was embraced by marvelous relationships. I believe that God still calls people to particular functions for particular moments in history. For all the joys and inspirations of a full-time, professional ministry, there are also plenty of headaches and setbacks. Professional ministers and church workers, however, serve in some of the most dynamic, world-changing, and globally minded settings found anywhere in the

world. Can you picture yourself teaching in Zimbabwe? Visiting the elderly in Cleveland? Interviewing bishops in Europe for a church newspaper? Cultivating “shalom zones” in a riot-torn area of Los Angeles or Chicago? Bringing laughter to children in an Alabama orphanage in their very first vacation church school?

As you reflect on the abilities and interests that God has given you and wrestle with issues of the day, and as you consider vocational opportunities, realize that your years at seminary are an opportunity for you to test your call. Testing a call means reviewing your life as a whole before God. Ask yourself questions like, Where have I come from? Who am I? Where am I going? What are my strengths and weaknesses? How do my relationships with other people, at work and at home, reveal my personality and character? Toward what destination is my life headed at the moment? How can my gifts and my limitations be best used in the service of Christ and humanity?

After serving ten years in a parish setting, I can tell you that not all these questions are easy to answer. For we are on a great adventure, a journey of exploration. As a former student here at Princeton, and as an alumnus, I can say that seminary is not a place with many definitive answers to specific or even universal questions, and that it is not possible to prepare people to face every situation in life and ministry. This view of seminary is flawed in both its anthropology and its theology. To view humanity as static and civilization as unchanging is unrealistic; we can only expect to be prepared for all situations if things never change and if tomorrow is predictably like yes-

terday. This flawed anthropology says that we are not influenced by the world around us in new ways every

day and that there is nothing new under the sun. It is also flawed theologically; it forgets the lesson that God alone is omniscient.

Theological education is part of the journey. The metaphor of a journey is a beloved one in the Judeo-Christian heritage because it is so representative of the truth about our lives and our relationship with God. To be alive is to be always changing, developing, and growing; to be spiritually alive is to be continually deepening one’s relationship with the Transcendent and with God’s good creation, and at the same time to be shaped by these relationships. Princeton provides an opportunity for serious theological reflection, corporate worship, spiritual reflection, community-building, and partnership development, in order to facilitate the journey.

I urge you to understand yourself as being on a journey with God in which you will discover who you are and where God is leading you. Know that with God’s help you will gain clarity about the nature of the ministry to which you are being called, whether ordained or lay. Allow yourself to lean on God and your community and receive from both the encouragement and insight that you will need to make decisions about your life.

“...to walk in love,
walk in light,
walk in wisdom.”

—Ephesians 5:2, 8–10, 15

Discernment

The word “discernment” comes from the Latin word *discernere*, which means “to separate,” “to distinguish,” “to determine,” or “to sort out.” In classical spirituality, discernment means identifying what spirit is at work in a situation, the Spirit of God or some other spirit, “sifting through” our interior and exterior experiences to determine their origin. Discernment helps a person understand the source of a call, to whom it is directed, its content, and what response is appropriate. Discernment also involves learning if one is dodging a call, is deaf to a call, or is rejecting a call. Discernment is a gift from God. But it also includes an intentional attempt on our part to hear God’s call in our life. It takes work; it is also a matter of grace. It involves our full humanity as well as communion with God.

The discernment process requires the following disciplines: trust, listening, prayer, knowledge of Scripture, humility, perseverance, patience, a sense of urgency, and perspective. Keep in mind that the purpose of discernment is not so much to get an answer as it is to walk with the Lord while living the question.

Many voices call us: voices of culture, career, upbringing, worldview, peer pressure, ego, self-interest. These voices may be good in and of themselves and yet may drown out the voice of God. How can we distinguish between God’s call and other calls? How can we evaluate whether a call springs from a desire for security or comfort or success, and how can we verify that a call comes from God?

The ability to discern comes from living the life of the Spirit, a process of growth involving an ever-greater integration of desires,

feelings, reactions, and choices with a continuing commitment to abide in Christ. Indeed, through integrating our actions and relationships into our identity with Christ we come to sense whether various impulses move us toward or away from the Spirit. The ability to discern develops in a relationship with God, as we become rooted and grounded in the heart of God. Thus, people who abide in God are more likely to be able to hear and distinguish calls. Discernment does not imply fully comprehending God’s will, but rather raising the question, What is the next step God wants me to take?

Discernment may be understood as “apprehending” rather than “comprehending.” Ultimately, discernment requires our willingness to act in faith on our sense of what God wants us to do. We need to risk making mistakes. We can dare to make mistakes because we know that God has forgiven us when we are wrong. We need to be attentive and alert in order to hear and understand God’s call and then to act, knowing that God blesses even our mistakes. What is important is that we act on what we have discerned. In obedience to discernment, more discernment will come.



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Some Exercises in Discernment

1. What is the world like for you? Does your world make room for a God who knows you and wishes to communicate with you?
2. Describe your current idea of what a call from God would be like in your life.
3. Make a list of five Christian individuals you know who exemplify the Spirit of Christ. Which of them seem to be living with a sense of calling? If you identified their call by the life they live, what would you guess their call to be?
4. Write a simple prayer asking for guidance and help with understanding God's call in your life.
5. Visit some of the calls found in Scripture and think about what God was doing in those experiences. Record your thoughts in a journal.

Questions to Consider in the Discernment Process

- Is this something you have thought about doing for a long time? Is now the time? How do you know?
- Are you feeling rushed to make a decision? Do you feel in a hurry to get on with it?
- Who has influenced your thinking on this matter?
- What are your impulses? Instincts? Inclinations? What are their sources?
- Do you feel obligated to do this? Do you feel that it is your duty? Is this expected of you?
- Will you resent doing this?
- Does your kindness and affability make you vulnerable to manipulation by people?
- Is a desire to be loved influencing you? Is a desire for approval influencing you?
- How concerned are you about your reputation?
- Is money a factor in your decision?
- What colors would you select to express your feelings at this moment?
- What are the needs of the community? What do those needs suggest to you?
- Are you trying to be obedient to God? What if God says no?
- Are any stories from your life related to this issue? What are they?
- As you think about your situation, is there a person in the Bible with whom you identify?
- Does any theme or passage from Scripture occur as you wrestle with this?
- Are you being affirmed by your local congregation? Pastor? Family?
- How are you perceived by others?
- Do you think of yourself as a “servant”?
- To what extent does your sense of call come through your faith community? How strong is your sense of the church and community?