

The Christian Entrepreneur: Worthy of His Calling?

Richard J. Goossen*

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A recent business bestseller states, “At some level we all hunger for meaning in our lives. We need to feel at our core that we matter, and that we are making a difference.”¹ Few would disagree. For Christians, the desire for meaning should be fulfilled through a clarification and pursuit of God’s calling for their lives. More specifically, Christians who are entrepreneurs should discern how their marketplace activities fit within the context of their life’s calling. However, my extensive interviews with Christian entrepreneurs over the past two years under the aegis of the “Christian Entrepreneur Research Program” (“CERP”)² reveal a widespread lack of integration of calling into their marketplace pursuits.³

¹ J. Canfield, M.V. Hanson & L. Hewitt, *Power of focus: how to hit your business, personal and financial targets with absolute certainty* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 2000).

² The “Christian Entrepreneur Research Project” (“CERP”) is an ongoing, multiyear undertaking initiated in 2005. Christian entrepreneurs are interviewed through a standardized “Entrepreneur Interview Questionnaire,” which is included as an Appendix in *The Christian Entrepreneur: Insights from the Marketplace* (Vol. I) (Langley, BC: TWU Press, 2005), 353-7). Thus far, fifty Christian entrepreneurs throughout North America have been interviewed, from small business operators to high-profile billionaires. The key objective is to gain further understanding of the impact of the faith in the marketplace activities of Christian entrepreneurs. An annual volume of interviews is published. Vol. I of *The Christian Entrepreneur* was published in September 2005, Vol. II was published in September 2006 and interviews for Vol. III have already begun.

³ I am acutely aware of the limitations of my assertions with respect to Christian entrepreneurs generally: only fifty entrepreneurs have been interviewed thus far; selection has been skewed as the entrepreneurs are generally known to me or student interviewers; they are predominantly Canadian; and they are generally evangelical Christians. Thus, my comments are intended to describe the CERP findings, rather than to generalize too broadly at this point.

In this article I will focus on four aspects of the call of the Christian entrepreneur. First, I will highlight the confusion with respect to a clear understanding among Christian entrepreneurs as to the notion of calling. Second, I describe the approaches of several Christian writers to calling – there are different emphases but similar threads that help us understand a “Christian Model” of calling. Third, I examine some of the benefits of an entrepreneur having a clear grasp of calling. Fourth, I focus on three practical outcomes of a clear sense of calling for a Christian entrepreneur. I conclude this article by stressing the heavenly significance of the earthly focus on calling for each Christian entrepreneur.

The Confusion of Calling

The notion of calling is not clear among the rank and file of Christians, let alone those pursuing entrepreneurship. In fact, the CERP reveals a diversity of understanding, and indeed confusion, by Christian entrepreneurs with respect to the notion of calling. In this section I will merely summarize some of the findings of the CERP, while the next section will provide a theological framework for understanding a “Christian Model of calling.” The CERP is based on an extensive “Entrepreneur Interview Questionnaire.”⁴ One of the 35 questions posed to Christian entrepreneurs was: “Do you feel that you were “called” to entrepreneurship? If so, what does that mean to you?”⁵

The responses varied and could be grouped into two categories between essentially “yes” and “no” answers. The first group, comprising 50% of the entrepreneurs interviewed,

⁴ See footnote 2.

⁵ Question #21. See footnote 2.

believed that they were called. For example, one entrepreneur answered, “Yes, I feel that I am called to what I do. I do not think that my calling is a mysterious thing that requires a vision, a dream, or an experience to discern. What talents has God given you? Put your hand to this plough. This is your calling.”⁶ Another entrepreneur stated unequivocally: “Yes, I definitely feel called by God to what I am doing...I believe that the marketplace is something that God calls men and women to, just like He does to a mission field. The market place becomes a mission field; it becomes an opportunity.”⁷ The above comments reflect the perspective of 50% of the Christian entrepreneurs who believed they were clearly—and to some extent, obviously—called.

At the same time, however, half of the Christian entrepreneurs interviewed did not integrate the notion of calling as part of their spiritual journey. There were many explanations. One entrepreneur reflected, “I don’t think I was called to entrepreneurship. It was my choice; I always wanted to be my own boss. But I felt I could serve the Lord in what I was doing. The Lord maybe did call me, but I never really looked at it that way.”⁸ Another Christian entrepreneur, who had achieved success in property investments and supported his church generously, answered, “No. I cannot claim any form of calling.”⁹ Another entrepreneur explained his spiritual journey as “sensing a direction, rather than a calling.”¹⁰ These entrepreneurs would claim God’s ongoing presence in their lives, but they would not relate this to the concept of calling.

⁶ Ken Ewert Interview in *The Christian Entrepreneur* (Vol. I) 102.

⁷ Keith Richardson Interview in *The Christian Entrepreneur* (Vol. I) 279.

⁸ Peter Redekop Interview in *The Christian Entrepreneur* (Vol. I) 252

⁹ Eric Penner Interview in *The Christian Entrepreneur* (Vol. I) 234.

¹⁰ Peter Niebuhr Interview in *The Christian Entrepreneur* (Vol. I) 215.

There were a variety of other reasons for interviewees not believing they were called to entrepreneurship. Some concluded that they were not called because they did not hear an audible voice; there is sometimes an assumption that those who are called to ministry have a clear audible call, like Paul on the road to Damascus. One entrepreneur's response reflected the underlying belief that he could not be called to entrepreneurship, as instead "a person gets called only to full-time ministry, which involves the saving of souls."¹¹ One entrepreneur in his 60s, indicating that he did not feel called, suggested that there may be different generational views of calling: "when we were young it wasn't fashionable to affirm or confirm."¹² For a number of interviewees, the basic need to have a livelihood, and in these cases as an entrepreneur, determined their career choices. One entrepreneur responded: "Called by whom? By a higher being? I can't claim that. I cannot claim a calling or 'inspirational' motivation,' except that I needed to earn a living."¹³ In short, there were a variety of reasons for not integrating the idea of calling into the life of a number of Christian entrepreneurs.

This question as to calling and entrepreneurship was challenging for many entrepreneurs to address clearly. In fact, this question on calling was the only one in the Entrepreneur Interview Questionnaire that generated negative feedback: the question makes no sense, the question is misleading, and some entrepreneurs refused to answer it! Another complication is that the question is related to various other theological concepts, such as gifting and finding God's will. For example, are a Christian's gifts a means of determining one's calling? Michael Novak, a Catholic theologian, points out that an

¹¹ Erik Schellenberg Interview in *The Christian Entrepreneur* (Vol. I) 295.

¹² Vern Toews Interview in *The Christian Entrepreneur* (Vol. I) 308.

¹³ Arthur Block Interview in *The Christian Entrepreneur* (Vol. I) 52.

individual's gifts are not usually easy to discover: "Experiments, painful setbacks, false hopes, discernment, prayer, and much patience are often required before the light goes on."¹⁴ One entrepreneur opined that he "was gifted and led, but it was not a calling."¹⁵ The very use of the term calling is occasionally perceived as too limiting; some entrepreneurs view their relationship with God in terms of a journey, whereas calling is perceived as an event. Another issue is that the sacred-secular dichotomy still exists in the minds of some entrepreneurs—in other words, full-time church workers are called, but those outside the ministry are not.¹⁶ Some shied away from the term "calling" as it implied that God was then going to make the business financially successful; thus a lack of entrepreneurial success could cause disillusionment. In short, there was not only confusion over the term calling, but a considerable degree of dissatisfaction with the term. Some entrepreneurs—remember that these are Christian entrepreneurs—went so far as to assert that calling was not a biblical concept.

An explanation as to why there is some confusion over the nature of calling lies in another question asked: "Who, if anyone, affirmed that calling?"¹⁷ The most startling finding was not who was cited—but rather who was not. In approximately 65% of the responses, the issue of whether the individual was called was resolved by the individual entirely on their own. In other words, this critical issue of calling in one's life was determined by oneself, and therefore by implication without any pastoral input. In 20%

¹⁴ Michael Novak, *Business as a calling: work and the examined life*. (New York: The Free Press, 1996) 35.

¹⁵ Rudy Loewen Interview in *The Christian Entrepreneur* (Vol. I) 186.

¹⁶ For an explanation of the "secular-sacred dichotomy" see Richard Higginson. *Questions of Business Life: Exploring Workplace Issues from a Christian Perspective* (Carlisle, UK: Spring Harvest, 2002) 307-9.

¹⁷ Question #22, Entrepreneur Interview Questionnaire.

of instances some degree of confirmation was received from family, particularly one's spouse. In only 15% of instances was any affirmation or clarification of calling received from the church. In 10% of cases an affirmation was received from friends. In short, many Christian entrepreneurs do not integrate the concept of calling into their lives and fewer still seek input from their Christian community.

The “Christian Model” of Calling

Does the Bible, in fact, address the concept of calling? Is there theological analysis of the concept of calling which could assist Christians in their understanding of the concept? I will review some biblical references in the context of the insights of four Christian authors on the concept of calling.

One theologian, Gordon T. Smith, states that there are three distinct meanings of calling that must be understood together: the general call which is the invitation to follow Jesus Christ; the specific call to a vocation that is unique to each person (an individual's mission in the world); and the immediate call that are the tasks or duties to which God calls each person at the present time.¹⁸ His response to a Christian's view of life and work is based on a theology of work, a theology of vocation and a theology of self. First, a Christian's desire for meaningful work must be framed in the context of that which is good, noble and excellent, that which enables us to bring pleasure to God, that we can do

¹⁸ Gordon T. Smith, *Courage & Calling: Embracing Your God-Given Potential* (InterVarsity Press, 1999) 10. See also “Calling / Vocation” by R. Paul Stevens in Stevens & Banks, *Complete Book of Everyday Christianity*. (InterVarsity Ministry in Daily Life. www.ivmdl.org/cbec.cfm?study=121. February 26, 2004).

with passion.¹⁹ Second, all vocations are sacred since “Each vocation reflects but one avenue by which God, through word and deed, is accomplishing the establishment of his kingdom.”²⁰ Third, the scriptures “unequivocally affirm the significance of the actions of each human person” and that our work and actions have significance for God.²¹ Smith clarifies the difference between “vocation” and “calling.” In his framework, “vocation” is the second of the three meanings of call – and this is only one part of what **it** means to be a Christian.²² As a result, “we must see our specific and unique vocation within the context of all that it means to be called a Christian.”²³

Another perspective is that of Paul Stevens, the distinguished Canadian theologian. He notes that, “In the Bible there is only one call of God that comes to God’s people, but there are three dimensions in the call: to belong, to be and to do.”²⁴ The three dimensions in the call are as follows: first, is the call to identify as members of God’s family; second, to live out our true identity in all aspects of life in the church and in the world; and thirdly, to do God’s work in both the church and the world.²⁵ A Christian view of calling deals with all aspects of life, of which entrepreneurship is a part, and it is the tableau upon which believers work out their faith. Participation in business, as an entrepreneur, can be a calling of a Christian – no less than a call to full-time ministry.²⁶ Business is rewarding and fulfilling – but not an end in and of itself for Christians.

¹⁹ Smith 22.

²⁰ Smith 25.

²¹ Smith 26.

²² Smith 11.

²³ Smith 11.

²⁴ Stevens.

²⁵ Stevens.

²⁶ This may not have traditionally been recognized as such, but is more commonly understood in today’s environment. See Higginson 320-2.

Another theological treatment is that of Bruce Waltke who analyzes the concept of calling within seeking an understanding of the will of God. Waltke defines the will of God as something that “can refer not only to His immutable decrees and to his pleasures but also for his general providence.”²⁷ Waltke provide a six-point program for guidance in finding God’s will. First, read your Bible. Do not simply remember the words of the Bible, but consider their meaning (Josh 1:8). Attempt not only to hear God’s word but to obey it.²⁸ Second, develop a Heart for God (Prov. 2:1-5). Waltke points out that, “God is not willing to offer us instant maturity.”²⁹ A Christian approach is that “Rather than asking for Him to ‘reveal His will,’ we ask Him to develop His character of wisdom in our lives.”³⁰ A third aspect is to seek wise counsel (Heb 10:25; Prov. 11:14). A Christian needs to ask, “What is the call of God?”³¹ Waltke explains that, “A call is an inner desire by the Holy Spirit, through the Word of God and confirmed by the community of Christ.”³² Further, “Wise counsel should be sought when the Bible and your inner desires are not clear, but the counsel of others should never negate what you hear the Lord say to you through Scriptures.”³³ As another writer explains, “Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.”³⁴ There must be a balance between receiving confirmation and input from others and at the same time not denying one’s deep personal conviction. A fifth aspect is to look for God’s Providence,

²⁷ Bruce Waltke, *Finding The Will of God*. (Gresham, OR: Vision House Publishing, 1995) 29.

²⁸ Waltke 95.

²⁹ Waltke 103.

³⁰ Waltke 113.

³¹ Waltke 128.

³² Waltke 128.

³³ Waltke 130.

³⁴ Parker J Palmer, *Let your life speak: listening for the voice of vocation*. (Jossey-Bass, 2000)

which is the benevolent guidance of God. Waltke explains that, “It is possible to have a definite purpose, feel called, have the affirmation of other Christians, yet have circumstances prevent you from carrying out your plan.”³⁵ In addition, “Always leave room for things not working out quite the way you planned them.”³⁶ The last element is to ask, does this make sense? Waltke states in a straightforward manner that, “God gave each of us a brain, and he expects us to put it to good use.”³⁷ Further, “A Christian cannot make sound judgment without relying on Scripture, a heart purified by God, the wise counsel of others, and the circumstances the Lord sends our way. Many believers try to make every decision on the basis of what seems expedient or logical, and that leaves God out of the process.”³⁸ He notes that, “Unbelievers make sound judgment their first priority in making decision. [sic] Believers rely on God’s Word. Obedience takes precedence over logic.”³⁹

Finally, Os Guinness, a widely read Christian author, has written on the Christian concept of calling. Guinness explains that the truth of our calling helps us to finish well with respect to three of life’s challenges. First, calling is the spur that keeps us journeying purposefully to the very end of our lives – we may retire from our jobs, but not from our individual callings.⁴⁰ Second, calling helps us from confusing the termination of our occupation with the termination of our vocations – the two are not the same.⁴¹ Third, calling encourages us to leave the entire outcome of our lives to God. We must

³⁵ Waltke 133.

³⁶ Waltke 134.

³⁷ Waltke 153.

³⁸ Waltke 155.

³⁹ Waltke 158.

⁴⁰ Guinness 241-2.

⁴¹ Guinness 242.

remember mystery at the heart of the calling: “God calls and, just as we hear him but don’t see him on this earth, so we grow to become what he calls, even though we don’t see until heaven what he is calling us to become.”⁴² The entire notion of calling is rooted in the meta-narrative of the Christian faith and subsumed by it.

These four theological perspectives on calling have a number of overlapping themes which together form what I refer to as the “Christian Model” of calling. A predominant theme is that the call to the marketplace, such as the pursuit of entrepreneurship, is understood within the much broader call to be a follower of Christ. For Christians, business is a calling, but clearly within the broader context of being a Christian. This Christian Model of calling, at the core of the perspective of the four writers cited, is a larger calling within which one job is pursued. A discernment of calling in the marketplace cannot be addressed until you sort out what your life is about.

Practical Benefits of Calling

What are the benefits of a clearer understanding of calling? I have found two key benefits among Christian entrepreneurs interviewed in the CERP: foundation and focus. A calling for an individual Christian entrepreneur may be expressed quite clearly in his company as an expression of his life calling. For example, one of the Christian entrepreneurs interviewed has the following mission statement on his Company’s web site: “Our Company exists to glorify God. We seek to do so by providing exceptional service to our customers, by creating wealth for those who labour in Remdal [Painting &

⁴² Guinness 245.

Restoration Ltd.] and by fostering growth and maturity in the lives of others.”⁴³ In addition to providing a foundation, a clear sense of calling can also provide a sharp focus to the underlying motivation of a Christian entrepreneur’s actions. For example, I interviewed Jim Pattison, a Canadian multibillionaire. He stated, ““I have had a lot of bad moments...There have been low days where I felt I had nowhere to turn. Absolutely, no question, the single most important thing in my life has been my faith.”⁴⁴ Despite entrepreneurial challenges, the Christian entrepreneur has a cornerstone of values. In short, a benefit to calling can be a tangible foundation and focus for a Christian entrepreneur.

Practical Outcome of Calling

Building upon the benefits of a calling, there are also some practical outcomes of a clear sense of calling by a Christian entrepreneur. The CERP revealed among Christian entrepreneurs that their sense of calling was reflected in their approach when weighing the following dilemmas: principle or profit? witness or weakness? reconciliation or retribution? With respect to the first issue, this is a perennial challenge for every Christian. One entrepreneur interviewee explained how the anchor of his calling provided direction in his daily decision-making: “There have been many cases where our lawyers have asked, ‘Why did you pay that person? They cannot legally force you to.’ I said because we have a moral obligation to pay them.”⁴⁵ In other words, the Christian entrepreneur viewed the issue in the context of a higher calling. With respect to “witness

⁴³ Ken Ewert Interview in *The Christian Entrepreneur* (Vol. I). See also www.remdal.com. Viewed July 18, 2006.

⁴⁴ Richard J. Goossen, Interview with Jim Pattison, Founder and CEO, The Jim Pattison Group, Vancouver, B.C., October 6, 2005.

⁴⁵ Rudy Loewen Interview in *The Christian Entrepreneur* (Vol. I) 188.

or weakness,” another entrepreneur interviewee took on the risk of witnessing in the marketplace. He stated, “I always provide a quotation from Jesus in our order catalog and on our website. We do get a lot of flak, but it gives me an opportunity to share with people.”⁴⁶ Not every Christian entrepreneur will take this approach, but it was an outgrowth of how this individual viewed an expression of their calling. Lastly, how will a sense of calling curtail a human desire for retribution? One Christian entrepreneur interviewed was Ray Loewen, formerly the 17th richest person in Canada and at one time worth approximately \$1 billion. His company, The Loewen Group, generated US\$2 billion in the “death care industry” at its peak. He then suffered a \$625 million setback in a Mississippi courtroom. Loewen lost his company and the bulk of his fortune. How does one not get bitter? Ray Loewen told me, “I have tried very hard to be a forgiving person. I have taken literally the Bible’s admonition that vengeance belongs to God. I have taken seriously that God is faithful in good times and has purpose in bad times.”⁴⁷ Needless to say, this is not an easy feat. In short, in the above three instances a strong sense of calling can be a foundation for sharpened and focused practice in the marketplace.

Worthy of His Calling?

To conclude, I first discussed the findings of the CERP which indicates that there is confusion among the Christian entrepreneurs surveyed with respect to the concept of calling. The most surprising finding is that 50% of entrepreneurs do not feel a sense of calling and 65% receive no pastoral input on discerning whether they feel called. Yet, as

⁴⁶ Keith Richardson Interview in *The Christian Entrepreneur* (Vol. I) 281.

⁴⁷ Goossen, Richard J. Interview with Ray Loewen, founder and former CEO, The Loewen Group, Burnaby, B.C. September 16, 2005.

I reviewed in the next section of this article, there is a strong theological basis for the concept of calling for Christians generally. I next outlined the practical benefits of a sense of calling. With a strong sense of calling, a Christian entrepreneur can bring a foundation and a focus to one's daily activities. Further, I described some of the practical outcomes of calling as a means of confronting entrepreneurial dilemmas within the framework of calling—in other words, each day and encounter is important as part of the larger calling on the entrepreneur's life.

Does the issue of calling matter? One interviewee provided a valuable summary as to his calling as a Christian entrepreneur:

I think calling relates to having a passion for something. It goes beyond just having a gift; it enters the area of passion. I think each person is uniquely called because people have different passions. I think God calls people equally across many different occupations. If you take a look at the Bible, David was a shepherd, Lydia was a retailer, Mary was a homemaker, Paul was a tent maker, Jesus was a carpenter, and all of them were called to be in their occupation. I think calling adds an extra dimension to your job and your occupation. It adds a spiritual component; it almost makes the job itself sacred. It becomes your mission field. I had the chance to influence 1,600 employees in a few years with the values statement that we shared with them. Opportunities like that are what make the job sacred. You are not in it just for the money, but you are in it for the good and the positive influence on others. I had this opportunity, and so for me it added a spiritual dimension. It adds meaning and a purpose beyond just a career.⁴⁸

This is an excellent summary of the importance of a sense of calling for Christian entrepreneurs—and written by a Christian entrepreneur. The biblical injunction is equally clear. The Apostle Paul wrote to the church of the Thessalonians, “With this in mind [God's final judgement and glory], we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose

⁴⁸ Allon Lefever Interview in *The Christian Entrepreneur* (Vol. II) 221-222.

of yours and every act prompted by your faith.” (2 Thessalonians 1:11) Are Christian entrepreneurs living a life worthy of His calling?

Richard J. Goossen has focused on entrepreneurial strategy, finance and growth for over 20 years as a serial new venture founder, a strategic advisor to high growth companies, a lawyer, a researcher, an author, an educator and as a professional public speaker. He is CEO of M & A Capital Corp. (www.MandACapital.com) and an Adjunct Professor of Entrepreneurship & Strategy at the School of Business, Trinity Western University (www.twu.ca/business). He can be reached at rjg@MandACapital.com or Rick.Goossen@twu.ca.