

Calling and the Military Profession (part 3 of 3)

By Lieutenant Colonel Scott Frickenstein, U.S. Air Force

I go anywhere in the world they tell me to go, any time they tell me to ... I move my family anywhere they tell me to move, on a day's notice, and live in whatever quarters they assign me. I work whenever they tell me to work ... I don't belong to a union and I don't strike if I don't like what they're doing to me. And I like it. Maybe that's the difference. —

James Webb,

A Country Such as This

At a time when, according to the polls, people's major preoccupations are work and family, there has never been a greater need to recover the Christian doctrine of vocation.

— Gene Veith,

God at Work

Prior to reading this series of articles, the reader (like most people) may have thought a calling was “something a priest has” or perhaps simply “something bigger than oneself.” Contrary to these notions, this series reveals calling as the means God uses to providentially direct and care for people. Understanding this concept will have profound implications on the reader's personal and professional life. This final article initially explores how an understanding of calling will give military professionals a renewed sense of validation and satisfaction in their service. Then the article examines how the all-encompassing concept of calling can enable the military professional to “manage expectations” and redefine “success.” Next, the article describes how calling transforms one's view of leadership. Finally, the article discusses key implications for the military professional's “next step,” including future assignments, separation, or retirement.

A Sense of Validation and Satisfaction

Military professionals can experience a renewed sense of validation and satisfaction when they view their service from the biblical perspective of calling. Members of the military may intellectually understand the legitimacy of their profession (from their knowledge of biblical passages including Romans chapter 13, the writings of Augustine, Luther, and others), but in today's strategic environment, most have little time to reflect on the real impact of their service. On a given day, they can be found fulfilling their demanding everyday duties, learning new skill sets for the ever-changing nature of warfare and increasingly technological weapons systems, preparing for or serving on yet another deployment—and always “doing more with less.”

Junior and mid-grade officers are prone to contemplate leaving the service if they perceive the lot of their contemporaries in other walks of life as more attractive than theirs (e.g., financially, in quality of life, etc.). Still others surmise that their service is less important compared to other professions, mulling over thoughts such as: “I'm wrestling with the decision to stay in or get out and attend seminary. Pastors are influencing their world—but here I am, dropping bombs on bad guys or pushing papers, doing stuff with no real impact.”¹ But when military professionals

grasp what was expressed in part 2 of this series—that God is enabling them to love and serve their fellows by providing for their security and freedom—they will realize they are indeed making an impact. Martin L. Cook, professor of ethics at the U.S. Army War College, affirms the broader extent of their contribution:

In the contemporary geopolitical circumstance, service in the American military is, on balance, a force for relative good. That good is grounded in a balance of power and coercion, a balance that Reinhold Niebuhr argued is the closest approximation to justice and peace achievable in this world.”²

In his comments to U.S. Central Command Airmen regarding their contributions in the war on terrorism and in the corresponding humanitarian operations, former USAF Chief of Staff General John Jumper agrees: “What you’re doing is huge. It’s going to make a difference for the whole world.... every person should recognize (he or she is) part of a bigger picture.”³

This sense of validation and satisfaction is not simply another “bonus” established only for military people—it is available to people in all legitimate callings. Writer and Patrick Henry College Provost Gene Edward Veith acknowledges that,

The promise of God’s word and the conviction that right now, where I am, I am in the station—the vocation—where God has placed me—those constitute the basis for confidence and certainty that God has assuredly placed me here and that He is faithful and that He, even though I cannot see Him, is at work in and through my life.”⁴

Veith summarizes comments Luther made about a servant girl:

If she can be made to realize the truth about vocation, she ‘would dance for joy and praise and thank God ... with her careful work, for which she receives sustenance and wages, she would obtain a treasure such as those who are regarded as the greatest saints do not have.’⁵

Realistic Expectations and Redefined “Success”

Viewing one’s military service from the perspective of calling can indeed result in a renewed

sense of validation and satisfaction; however, it does not logically follow that the way ahead will be trouble-free. From the standpoint of calling, difficulties are part of the equation—sometimes they are signposts, and other times they are not—but they are always under the sovereign control of God. Acknowledging the harsh realities of calling will give military professionals steadfastness during the inevitable ups and downs of serving their nation. Veith admits that the doctrine of vocation is “...utterly realistic. And a part of realism is to acknowledge the hardships, the frustrations, the failures that we also sometimes encounter ... [W]ork can be satisfying and fulfilling, but—sometimes at the same time—it can be arduous, boring, and futile.”⁶ For example, he says, “Wise statesmen find themselves voted out of office. Noble generals lose the war. Workers lose their jobs.”

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Gilbert Meilaender reviews the manifold tragedies experienced by Aeneas in Homer’s epic, the Iliad, and observes, “A vocation exacts a price, and not all can pay it. Even though it may seem to draw us, its point is not happiness. It is, as C. S. Lewis notes, the nature of vocation to appear simultaneously both as desire and as duty. ‘To follow the vocation does not mean happiness; but once it has been heard, there is no happiness for those who do not follow.’”

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Furthermore, in comments particularly relevant to military service, Meilaender says:

*Still more, there is sometimes backbreaking and dangerous labor, or tedious and boring work, that must be done if we or our loved ones are to live, but the language of vocation imbues such work with a kind of meaning and significance that may seem unbelievable to those who must actually do it.... Taken seriously, the sanctification of such laborious, [dangerous,] or tedious work with the language of vocation would suggest that we should struggle to find more time for it, not plot ways to escape it.*⁹

Thus, when military professionals experience difficulties, they have not necessarily missed their callings—trials are normal. Psychologist Dr. Abraham Maslow coined the term “Jonah Complex” to describe the “tendency within each of us to try to run away from our greatness, to not accept the challenge we hear calling us from within.”¹⁰ In the well-known biblical account, Jonah’s “deployment” experience, like many experienced by today’s military professionals, was far from comfortable. The apostle Paul’s missionary experiences also testify to the reality of trials in following one’s calling. Nonetheless, Veith cautions, some trials, such as getting fired for the inability to do a job proficiently, “may mean you are being called to something else.”

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Contemporary society measures success by the yardsticks of power, prestige, perks, and possessions, among others. The military, as a subset of society, has its own versions of these indicators. Military professionals tend to view those at the next rank as more successful than they are, and many measure their careers by their progression toward some ultimate rank or by their selection for an important position. But military professionals with a biblical understanding of calling realize that “success” is not dependent on a pay grade or position—success means

faithfulness in each of their God-given callings. The essence of this idea is found in an officer's oath: "... I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office upon which I am about to enter, so help me God."

Recall that each person has multiple callings. In addition to their calling to the workplace, Christian military professionals have callings in their families (e.g., spouse, parent, son-in-law, etc.), as citizens, and as members of a community of faith. From the standpoint of calling, success is measured by the degree to which a person is faithfully discharging the "duties" of these "offices." As such, "success" from the standpoint of calling requires a certain degree of balance. Thus, a full colonel, viewed by his contemporaries as a "success," can fail in his callings as husband and father if he does not love and serve the "neighbors" in his family—his wife and children. On the flip side, a "passed over" major, viewed by her contemporaries as unsuccessful in pursuit of the next rank, is a success from the standpoint of calling if she is "faithfully discharging" her duties as an officer, wife, mother, citizen, and church member.

Colonel (retired) Al Shine recounts an illustration of this: While serving as a major with the Army's 101st Airborne Division in the 1970s, Al and his wife were in Bible Study and close fellowship with "John," the lieutenant colonel commanding the Division's Signal Battalion. Though a conscientious and hard working Christian, John was evidently not getting the job done to the extent expected and was relieved of command. He accepted the relief without bitterness or complaint and went on to another assignment, probably the last of his Army career. His replacement, "Jack," was also in Bible study and a close friend of the Shine's. Jack was highly successful in command of the battalion and subsequently went on to earn three stars. Al's observation is that both men were serving "as unto the Lord" in how they did their duties, and both showed Christlikeness in how they accepted the judgment of others on their performance – one in "failure," the other in "success."

Transformed Leadership

Viewing one's military service from the biblical perspective of calling can also help military professionals develop into servant leaders. Recall that the purpose of each calling is to serve God and to love and serve one's neighbor, and that it is important to identify who the "neighbors" are for a given calling. The military professional loves and serves the "neighbors" whose security they ensure – the American people – and they love and serve various other people groups when they fight for their justice and freedom. Subordinates, superiors, and peers are also "neighbors." The centurion in Matthew chapter 8 exemplifies the heart of a servant leader—he cared so much for his ailing servant that he requested help from Jesus to heal him.¹

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Similarly, the prophet Daniel and the imprisoned Joseph both modeled servant leadership vis-à-vis their peers and superiors.

Military professionals can demonstrate a comparable attitude of service in many ways. Colonel (retired) Lloyd Matthews describes one way: Military professionals hold the lives and welfare of their subordinates in their hands, and their service to the nation requires that they must sometimes put the lives of these subordinates at great risk; but the leaders' concern and sense of responsibility for them demands that they only risk their lives "...to the minimum degree consistent with mission accomplishment."¹³ Ken Blanchard describes another way leaders serve: to "look beyond their own season of leadership and prepare the next generation of leaders."

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¹⁴ Zacharski (see part 2 of this series in the *JFW*) echoes Blanchard's

comment, emphasizing the deep need for today's officers to instill in their subordinates the true meaning of service.

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A further element of servant leadership is to be an encourager. Military professionals with an understanding of calling not only grasp the importance of their own contributions, but also appreciate the roles played by their subordinates. As such, they are prepared to affirm subordinates and help them understand their callings when doubts and discouragement check their stride. This brief survey of the impact of a calling-based perspective on one's leadership is by no means comprehensive—one should plumb the depths of servant leadership literature for truths that can be applied to his or her particular situation, and reflectively and prayerfully walk through the helpful series of questions proposed by Al Shine (refer to this endnote).

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Peace for the "Next Step"

Finally, viewing one's military service from the biblical perspective of calling will result in a deep sense of peace in the midst of many inevitable changes, including periodic re-assignments and eventual separation or retirement. In another article in this journal, Al Shine reflects on the lessons of applying his faith to the many changes of a 27-year Army career.¹⁷ Consider reassignment. For military professionals and their families, it's simply a fact of life—roughly every two or three years, if not more often, they are going to have to uproot from one location and plant themselves in another. Of all the issues on the panorama of a military family's life, no issue seems to bring more anxiety and uncertainty than this one—but an understanding of calling can allay many of the typical worries and fears.

Recall that calling is about how the "hidden" God is working out His plans in the lives of people. Thus, military professionals can confidently acknowledge God's work in leading them into the military and in directing their past, present, and future assignments. He has used supervisors and decision makers—acting in their roles on selection panels, assignment teams, and the like—to bring military professionals to their current assignment. Day-by-day, He continues to work through circumstances, known and unknown mentors, and many other means to accomplish His purposes through their current assignment. And He will continue to work through various means to place them exactly where He wants them for their development and

future contributions.

This does not mean military professionals are to abstain from planning. “We are to plan in the here and now,” says Veith, “but we can do so in the confidence that the Lord is acting in our lives and in our circumstances, calling us to His purpose.”¹⁸ In fact, he adds, while we indeed make choices (e.g., the “dream sheet”), “looking back, it becomes clear that our choices were themselves part of the overarching design of God.”

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Recall that God also works through a person’s desires to lead him into various callings. Thus, if a person is evaluating an opportunity and it is consistent with biblical guidance and his or her background, gifts, talents, desires, family situation, and mentor’s counsel, he or she can confidently pursue it, trusting that God will use senior leaders to make that particular possibility a reality or to direct him or her elsewhere. After all, “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.”

²⁰

In a related vein, there is no need to fret about the results of future promotion boards, for “No one from the east or the west ... can exalt a man. But it is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another.”²¹ In sum, military professionals with a firm grasp of calling can experience a liberating peace in the assignment process. In all of the “shifting sands” of their changing assignments, they can stand firm: “The outcome belongs completely to the Lord. The burden is shifted over to Him.”

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Retirement and separation from the military receive much more “attention” than periodic reassignment, as evidenced by the week-long “transition assistance programs” vis-à-vis the hour-long reassignment briefings. But the concepts discussed above are as applicable at the end of one’s military career as they are at the inception or along the way. From the standpoint of calling, God is sovereign, and He uses various means to accomplish His purposes in His timing. As He does with each reassignment, God will use internal and external means to lead a person into the next phase of his life. One of the internal means is desire; many separating or retiring military personnel admit that they are looking forward to finally being able to do more things they want to do as opposed to only things they must do. Note the tension between duty and desire—recall from above that there is an element of each in a calling.

The growth and experiences military personnel have enjoyed during their service years have many applications in other career fields. Thus, we can expect that God will work through the external means of other people to present opportunities to military personnel in transition, and similarly to interview and hire them. The key fact to realize is that after retiring and entering

civilian life, people still have multiple callings. While the location and type of their employment may change, they still bring their desires, backgrounds, and talents to bear in their family, community, church, and new workplace. Al Shine challenges retirees to realize they too are called to service, not self-gratification.²³

Summary

Viewing one's military service from the biblical perspective of calling—namely, that God is enabling the military officer to love and serve his or her fellow men by providing for their security and freedom—has profound personal and professional implications. These implications are even more profound when viewed against the backdrop of today's strategic landscape. When military personnel grasp the import of their service to various "neighbors," they will experience a renewed sense of validation and satisfaction. That said, calling does not guarantee a "rose garden." The lives of Joseph and Paul (recorded in the Old and New Testaments, respectively) attest to that. Furthermore, a definition of "success" based on one's faithfulness in many callings—including servant leadership of subordinates—stands in stark contrast to society's contemporary characterization of it. Finally, a deep sense of calling can help military professionals replace the typical frustrations of "gnashing of teeth" and "working the system" in their careers with a calm assurance in God's providential direction as they and their loved ones navigate the waters of various assignments en route to eventual retirement.

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Endnotes

1. This is not to say that God cannot call military professionals out of the service and into the pastorate. Some have even come "full circle:" Numerous chaplains (including the former USAF Chief of Chaplains, Major General Baldwin) served on active duty before "temporarily" separating to complete seminary and the pastoral requirements for chaplain candidacy.
2. Martin L. Cook, "Soldiering," *The Christian Century* 118, no. 20 (2001), 25.
3. SSgt Andrea Knudson, "General Jumper Commends CENTAF Airmen," Maxwell-Gunter Dispatch, March 11, 2005, 1A.
4. Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 152.
5. *Ibid.*, 142.

6. *Ibid.*, 143.
7. *Ibid.*, 146-147.
8. Gilbert Meilaender, "Divine Summons," *Christian Century* 117, no. 30 (2000), 1111.
9. *Ibid.*, 1116.
10. Elizabeth Jeffries, "Work as a Calling," in *Insights on Leadership*, ed. Larry C. Spears (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 36.
11. Veith, 147.
12. *Ibid.*, 71. See Matthew 8: 5-13.
13. Lloyd J. Matthews, "Is the Military Profession Legitimate?" *Army* 44, no. 1 (1994), 22.
14. Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges, *The Servant Leader* (Nashville, TN: J Countryman, 2003), 21.
15. Gregory J. Zacharski, "Why Do We Serve?" *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 129, no. 2 (2003), 2.
16. Al Shine proposed the following questions to attendees at Army War College Fellowship Breakfast in November 2010. How does being a Christian affect the following:
 - your attitude towards your career?
 - your courage in combat?
 - your moral courage (in particular as you exercise or advise leaders at the strategic level)?
 - how you balance the tug of competing callings?
 - how you do your job, whether leading a Brigade Combat Team (BCT) in Kandahar province, or preparing briefing slides for the umpteenth time in the bowels of the Pentagon?
 - how you deal with the fear, stress, and fatigue of multiple, seemingly endless deployments?
 - how you interact with your seniors, peers, and subordinates?
 - how you balance concern for individuals and responsibility to accomplish a mission?
 - your lifestyle and image? That is, is the officer people see in chapel or the small group Bible study the same person his wife sees at home, his peers see in the seminar room, or his soldiers see in the headquarters?
 - how you exercise and speak of your faith within the military society of a secular, pluralistic nation?
17. Al Shine, "Thinking Christianly About Career: A Personal Odyssey," *Journal of Faith and War* Winter 2010/2011
(online at www.faithandwar.org).
18. Veith, 54.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Proverbs 21:1, NIV.
21. Psalm 75: 6-7, NIV.
22. Veith, 151.
23. Al Shine, "Thinking Christianly About Career."