

“Calling” and the Military Profession (part 2 of 3)

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by Scott G. Frickenstein, Ph.D., Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Air Force

*It is the first of all problems for a man to find out what kind of work he is to do in this universe.
Thomas Carlyle, Scottish philosopher, 1795-1881)*

The war criminal, the aggressor, the practitioner of genocide and the terrorist are not fading from the scene. In such a world, only the presence of effective military forces makes possible the maintenance of relative peace and security in international politics. Voluntary service in support of that relative peace is a self-sacrificial Christian calling. (Martin L. Cook)

Adults frequently ask children, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Grownups ask this question, someone quipped, because they are looking for good ideas! The service of many military professionals was conceived in a conversation that went something like this: “Why don’t you consider the military, son? It’s more than a job—it’s an honorable profession that will help you develop discipline, get educated, and also involve you in something bigger than yourself—serving your country—like your grandfather and I did.” Writer Cliff Fadiman bemoans, “For most men life is a search for the proper manila envelope in which to get themselves filed.”¹ Mid-career military officers or those nearing retirement often express similar sentiments: “someday, I’ll figure out what I want to be when I grow up!”

This second article in the series builds on the theoretical foundation laid in Part 1 (published in the Spring 2010 edition of the *Journal of Faith & War*), showing first that the biblical approach to this quandary is quite distinct from the secular approach. This article also describes how internal clues and external influences can help Christians discern their secondary calling in the workplace, and exemplifies how callings are confirmed in everyday experience. Finally, the article affirms that for many persons the military profession is a calling indeed—a noble one unlike any other.

Choosing, or Calling?

The secular and biblical worldviews address man’s quest for purpose in very different ways. As discussed in Part 1 of this series, the former encourages people to select a self-fulfilling career; the latter challenges them to discern and embrace their God-given callings. Though people typically consider salary, hours, perks, and benefits in choosing a career, writer Jo McGowan cautions that these practical factors do not “... guarantee job satisfaction. It is one of those strange ironies of life that the more carefully we look out for our own interests, the less likely it is

that our interests will be served.”² Dr. Gene Veith observes that “despite what our culture leads us to believe ... we do not choose our vocations. We are called to them. There is a big difference.”

³ A person can choose to be a pro athlete or an aeronautical engineer—but if he does not have the ability, and no one drafts or hires him, his choice makes no difference.

⁴ As such, one must consider other influences when attempting to discern a calling.

Internal Clues to Calling

There are many internal clues that help reveal one’s callings. Dr. Douglas Schuurman admits that while the New Testament does not give a formula for discerning God’s callings, assessing one’s gifts and abilities is a critical component of the process.⁵ Veith agrees, noting that in part, calling is related to “finding your God-given talents (what you can do),” but it is also important to consider “your God-given personality (what fits the person you are).”

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Consider two college students who choose to major in nursing. One cannot handle the biology courses; the other sails through the coursework and is hired by a major hospital after passing her board exams, but absolutely hates the work. Since nursing does not match the talents of the first nor the personality of the second, nursing is not their calling. By considering the calling of Saul the Pharisee, Schuurman explains that a Christian’s assessment of his or her spiritual gifts is important, but “an individual’s natural gifts and existing relations” (e.g., Saul’s intelligence, passion, grasp of the Hebrew Scriptures, standing as a Pharisee, etc.) also informs one’s calling in society and the Church.

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The desires of a person’s heart can also help reveal God’s call. Author and speaker John Eldredge advises people to ask, “What is written in your heart?” and “What makes you come alive?” because “a man’s calling is written on his true heart, and he discovers it when he enters the frontier of his deep desires.”⁸ Veith admits that while vocation is partially a function of one’s makeup, “we cannot know our vocation purely by looking inside ourselves.”

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Thus, external factors must also be considered.

External Influences on Calling

Numerous external elements influence our callings. In response to the popular misconception that God only summons people to specific callings in extraordinary ways, Schuurman cautions, “God rarely speaks directly to a human being from the heavenly throne or a burning bush ... particular callings are mediated.”¹⁰ For example, God used the apostles to call the seven deacons (Acts 6) and used the church at Antioch in calling Saul and Barnabas to make a missionary journey (Acts 13).

¹¹ Veith concurs: “Since God works through means, He often extends His call through other people, by means of their vocations.”

¹² In the military context, God uses a host of individuals including selection board members, medical and administrative personnel, and military leaders—each acting in their particular vocation—to call other people into military service.

Elizabeth Jeffries, professional speaker and author of *The Heart of Leadership*, explains that in

addition to communicating through other people, God “speaks to us ... through prayer, through writing, through meditation, and through simply hearing the right thing at the right moment.”¹³ Jeffries also encourages openness to ideas, noting that reading a Herman Hesse novel paved the way for Robert Greenleaf’s calling to inspire the servant-leadership movement.

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Perceiving needs is also part of the process, says Schuurman; when one recognizes a need and “has the abilities for attending to it, that need becomes a spark of God’s calling to him.”

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Veith discusses other external factors, such as “doors opening and slamming” (i.e., opportunities and circumstances beyond one’s control) and hiring authorities, noting one’s callings are “literally, in the hands of others.”

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Additionally Paul Keim, academic dean at Goshen College, affirms the importance of mentors in discerning our calling, citing the biblical examples of Eli helping Samuel discern God’s call, and Philip similarly guiding Nathanael.

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Evidences of Calling

Just as callings are revealed by internal and external means, callings are also confirmed internally and externally. Regarding the former William Frame, president of Augsburg College, affirms that “the most immediately distinguishing aspect of vocation is that of being drawn to an undertaking with a deep sense that ‘this is the right work for me!’”¹⁸ Jo McGowan describes the confirmation of her calling to run a school for mentally handicapped children by saying “There is nothing I would rather be doing. I believe that I have discovered the purpose of my existence on earth and I can’t imagine a more satisfying situation.”

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Callings are also confirmed “from the outside.” When Elizabeth Jeffries met an elderly clock repairman after one of her speaking engagements, his calling was evident to her because of his enthusiasm for his work and his “peaceful and centered” demeanor.²⁰ Even non-believers can confirm God’s calling in the lives of His people—Potiphar, the head jailer, and Pharaoh each attested to God’s hand in Joseph’s work. But is the military profession really a calling?

The Military Profession: Just Another Job?

In recent decades, experts contended that the profession of arms was in the process of slipping from its status as a calling down to the ranks of occupations. In the late 1970s, for example, military sociologist Dr. Charles Moskos noted that actual and potential members of the military, like those in unionized jobs, seemed to be more concerned about extrinsic motivators than service.²¹ Then Air Force Chief of Staff General David C. Jones admitted,

*The military way of life and a military career traditionally have been regarded by our society as a calling. The calling was buttressed by the value embodied in “duty, honor, country” and a life style where the institution, with the support of society, took care of its own. Yet we are seeing a fundamental shift in the motivational bases of the military system away from a calling toward an occupation—“just another job”—where the first priority readily could become self-interest rather than the organization and the job to be done.*²²

Nevertheless, Jones argued that military service is “much more than just another occupational choice in the job market. It is a way of life.”²³ He challenged recruiters to base their appeals not on monetary incentives, but on a higher sense of values demonstrated by devotion and professionalism.

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During the same era, an Air Command and Staff College research paper examined this question: “Is the military profession a calling in the traditional sense, or is it becoming just an occupation?” By “calling in the traditional sense,” the author used Moskos’ definition of a calling as a profession that “transcends self-interest and is associated with the ideals of self-sacrifice and dedication.”²⁵ The study concluded that “while occupational trends are evident, these trends are limited due to the nature of the military mission and do not change the distinctive nature of military life substantially.”²⁶ This study did not emphasize the spiritual basis for the concept of calling.

Evidences of a “professional to occupational slip” also appeared in the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century. In 1994, retired Canadian Forces chaplain Arthur Gans claimed, “the idea of service has disappeared as the occupational model has taken over” and suggested a key reason for this shift was the “what’s in it for me” mentality.²⁷ In 2003 Lieutenant Commander Gregory Zacharski—a naval surface warfare officer (SWO)—stated, “judging by the way the naval profession is marketed, material benefits seem to be the primary motivators. The Navy should put far more emphasis on the less tangible, more intrinsic motivators.”

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Another SWO suggests retention is impaired when junior officers concentrate more on “technical and functional expertise at the expense of the more intangible concepts of what it means to be a professional.”

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In other words, junior officers tend to lose sight of the forest for the trees; the real reason for their service gets overshadowed by bureaucratic procedures and the myriad technical details required in mastering their weapon systems. The project directors of the landmark anthology *The Future of the Army Profession* (2002) made similar observations regarding the pre-9/11 Army: “The Army’s bureaucratic nature outweighs and compromises its professional nature ... in practice [and] in the minds of the officer corps.”

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The Military Profession as a Calling

While these observations of apparent drift from profession toward occupation (or bureaucracy) are troublesome, there is ample evidence that military service remains a calling. Prominent military historians use the language of calling in defining a profession. One of Samuel Huntington’s criteria for a profession is “a sense of responsibility to something greater than the individual.”³¹ Prominent scholar Allan Millett describes a profession as “a lifelong calling by the practitioners, who identified themselves personally with their vocational subculture.”

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Regarding Millett’s description, Lloyd Matthews (Colonel, U.S. Army, Retired) says, “The key word here is ‘calling.’ On entering the Army, true professionals don’t simply ‘take a job.’ Instead, they ‘profess to a sacred calling,’ one that totally immerses them, along with their band of professional brethren, in a career dedicated to a single transcendent cause.”

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Matthews says that if a military professional were asked what difference it made if his service was perceived as “a mere occupation,” he would reply:

The defense of this country is too important to be left in the hands of occupational timeservers. If the nation's defenders are not members of a true higher calling and if that calling is not accorded the reverence of taxpayers and political leaders alike, then ... the soldier's advice will come to be depreciated, the fighting forces and their leadership will be depleted of numbers and quality, and the security of this nation will fall into jeopardy. ³⁴

Matthews describes the military profession as a “bona fide calling, ranking shoulder to shoulder with the long-venerated fields of medicine, law, divinity and pedagogy.”³⁵ Matthews goes even further based on his analysis of history: “A fully legitimated military profession—skilled in the art of war so that our nation's citizens may practice the art of peace—is a necessary precondition for the flowering of all other professions.”

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Thus, the military profession meshes with the secular understanding of a calling as a profession that has an air of transcendence—“something bigger than oneself.” But an even stronger conclusion can be reached: When the military profession is evaluated in light of the biblical concept of calling, it comes forth as truly “a cut above the rest.”

A Calling Unlike Any Other

Military professionals have a unique calling because of the depth of their commitment to service. Reformers taught that the purpose of each calling is “to love and serve one's neighbor.”

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It is therefore important to ask the question, Veith says, “that the teacher of the Law asked Jesus: ‘Who is my neighbor?’ ‘Who, in this relationship, am I called to love and serve?’”

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From the biblical perspective of calling, U.S. military professionals are demonstrating love for their neighbors—the American people—by enabling them to live in peace. Millett typifies professions as having “a service orientation in which loyalty to standards of competence and loyalty to clients' needs are paramount.”³⁹ Matthews asserts that the military professional's ultimate clients are the American people: “Lacking military expertise themselves, they have collectively placed their solemn trust in his professional judgment, he being the guarantor of their freedom and security and the sworn upholder of the Constitution.”

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Matthews amplifies this thought by noting that “altruistic service to clients is nowhere stronger and more in evidence than in the military, where the incentive of a day's hardtack and the chance to be of use stand in stark contrast to the opportunities for enrichment offered by some of the other professions.”

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The willingness to pay the ultimate price in serving their neighbors sets the military professionals' calling in a class by itself. Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”⁴² General Sir John Hackett described this notion as the

“unlimited liability contract.” Chaplain Gans explains that when selfish people ask “what’s in it for me?” and receive the answer “possibly death, maiming, or imprisonment,” they find it hard to respond to “a call for sacrifice.... It is at this point that the difference between a job and a vocation becomes most apparent.”

⁴³ Since members of the military profession “can be sent to die [in] ‘God awful’ places—that is, because of their unlimited liability contract—they have “a sense of commitment deeper than that required...in any other kind of work required in the civilian community.”

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One week before he and 27 of his men died in the Battle of Bull Run, Major Sullivan Ballou of the Second Rhode Island Volunteers wrote a love letter to his wife, using the language of calling to demonstrate the depth of his commitment:

I have sought most closely and diligently ... for a wrong motive in thus hazarding the happiness of those I loved and I could not find one. A pure love of my country and of the principles I have often advocated before the people and “the name of honor that I love more than I fear death” have called upon me, and I have obeyed.... Our movement may be one of a few days duration and full of pleasure – and it may be one of severe conflict and death to me. Not my will, but thine O God, be done. If it is necessary that I should fall on the battlefield for my country, I am ready. I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in, the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter. I know how strongly American Civilization now leans upon the triumph of the Government, and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and suffering of the Revolution. And I am willing—perfectly willing—to lay down all my joys in this life, to help maintain this Government, and to pay that debt. ⁴⁵

Summary

The secular worldview champions career choice and the needs and desires of the one making that choice, but the biblical perspective acknowledges a Caller who invites individuals to play their part in His “larger story.” Internal clues—including special abilities and personality—can help discern one’s calling. Circumstances and decisions made by people in positions of authority exemplify external influences on calling. Callings are also confirmed from within and without—in a nutshell, “You’ll know it, and others will too!”

Military service is not merely an occupation, because it demands an ultimate depth of commitment to serve one’s neighbor, even unto death—wherever, whenever, however that may come. Our service protects and defends the ideals and values for which Major Ballou was “perfectly willing” to lay down his life. For these and other reasons discussed above, military professionals in our society have a unique and noble calling.

The final article in this series will examine several personal and professional implications, concluding that calling is even more than “being involved in something bigger than yourself”—it is an all-encompassing perspective that can have profound, enriching effects on all aspects of a military professional’s life and the lives of those with whom he associates.

Scott Frickenstein is currently serving as a branch chief in the J-8 directorate of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. He previously served as commander of the 15th Services Squadron, Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii, and has deployed as a squadron commander in support of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. Lieutenant Colonel Frickenstein has also held several academic and analytical leadership roles. He holds a Ph.D. in Operations Research from the Naval Postgraduate School and master's degrees from the National War College, Air Command and Staff College, and Florida State University, and he is a 1990 graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy.

Notes

1. Available from www.borntomotivate.com/Vocation.html.
2. Jo McGowan, "Job, Career, Vocation: What Works for You?" U. S. Catholic 61, no. 9 (1996), 20.
3. Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 50.
4. *Ibid.*, 52.
5. Douglas J. Schuurman, *Vocation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 38. It is beyond the scope of this article to summarize the various means available for such 'self-assessment.' The author has found "motivating verbs" tests (closely related to "passion word" exercises) helpful in clarifying his personal callings.
6. Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, 52-53.
7. Schuurman, *Vocation*, 39.
8. John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 206. Scripture is fraught with warnings about the human heart. It is important to note that in this quote, Eldredge is talking about the redeemed heart, animated by the Holy Spirit and filled with desires that honor God.
9. Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, 54.
10. Schuurman, *Vocation*, 37.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, 55.
13. Elizabeth Jeffries, "Work as a Calling," in *Insights on Leadership*, ed. Larry C. Spears (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 33.
14. *Ibid.*, 32.
15. Schuurman, *Vocation*, 39.
16. Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, 54-58.
17. Paul Keim, "Call Me," *The Christian Century* 120, no. 1 (2003), 16.
18. William V. Frame, "A President Looks Back 500 Years and Finds His Calling," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 49, no. 2 (2002), B11.
19. McGowan, "Job, Career, Vocation: What Works for You?", 20.
20. Jeffries, "Work as a Calling," 29-30.
21. Charles C. Moskos, "The All-Volunteer Military: Calling, Profession, or Occupation?" *Parameters, Journal of the US Army War College* 7, no. 1 (1977).
22. David C. Jones, "The Air Force Is a Way of Life," *Air Force Magazine* 60, no. 5 (1977), 49.
23. *Ibid.*, 51.

24. Ibid.
25. Gary R. Hinkle and Air University (U.S.). Air Command and Staff College., *The Military Profession: Calling or Occupation?* (Maxwell AFB, AL: 1978), 9-10.
26. Ibid., ii.
27. Arthur E. Gans, "Vocation or Job: A Warrior's Place in a Rights-Driven Society," *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1994), 10-12.
28. Gregory J. Zacharski, "Why Do We Serve?" *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 129, no. 2 (2003), 2.
29. Thomas R. Williams, II, "It's More Than a Trade," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 126, no. 5 (2000), 38. This essay won the Navy's second Arleigh Burke essay contest.
30. Don M. Snider and Watkins, Gayle L., "Project Conclusions," in *The Future of the Army Profession*, ed. Lloyd J. Matthews (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 537.
31. Williams, "It's More Than a Trade," 39.
32. Allan R. Millett, "Military Professionalism and Officership in America," *Mershon Center Briefing Paper Number Two* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State Univ, 1977), 2.
33. Lloyd J. Matthews, "Is the Military Profession Legitimate?" *Army* 44, no. 1 (1994), 21.
34. Ibid., 17.
35. Ibid., 15.
36. Ibid., 23.
37. Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, 39-40.
38. Ibid., 44.
39. Matthews, "Is the Military Profession Legitimate?", 22.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. John 15: 13, NIV.
43. Gans, "Vocation or Job: A Warrior's Place in a Rights-Driven Society," 12.
44. Ibid., 11.
45. Available from <http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/democrac/23.htm>.