
Understanding God's Call

SCOTT HOEZEE

What in the world does God want me to do? Does he have a specific job or career in mind for me? And if I fail to discover that and do some other job, am I disobeying God? Will he withhold his blessing from me as a result? If I am asked to do something at church is that God calling me or just the pastor, or both? When I learn of a service need in my community, and I have the time and ability to meet it, is God asking: Who will go for me? Well, as Christians we have lots of questions about our calling or what is called *vocation*, especially when we are younger; but they don't go away as we get older either. So, let's explore them today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we are now on program number two of a four-part *Groundwork* series on when God calls, thinking about the idea of our calling in life—what does God want us to be and to do—our vocation as it is often called, from the Latin *voc?re*: to be called; and so, we are going to think about it. We have been thinking about how do we know when it is really God? How do we learn to hear God's voice? How do we learn to figure out what God is saying and through whom and how? So, those are some of the things that we have been exploring and are going to continue to explore.

DAVE BAST

Right; and today we are especially pleased to have a special guest join us in the studio for this program. He is Professor Andrew McCoy from Hope College in Holland, Michigan, and he has his doctorate from St. Andrews University in Scotland, actually in the area of worship; but at Hope, he does a lot of work with students who are struggling to discern their sense of call, or their vocation in the world; and he directs something called the Center for Ministry Studies at Hope, and a ministry program there. So, Andy, welcome. We are thrilled that you are joining us, and we think you will have a lot to offer us on this topic.

ANDREW MCCOY

Thanks, Dave. I am delighted to be here with you today.

DAVE BAST

I know you deal with students probably almost every day who are struggling to figure out what does God want me to do.

ANDREW MCCOY

Yes. In our culture, you know, college students are expected to confront, by virtue of being in college, the very question of what are they going to do with their lives. So, it absolutely is an everyday kind of thing if you happen to teach and work with college students; that's right.

DAVE BAST

How did you first get into this area; because it wasn't really what you primarily did your research in in graduate school, in theology; yet, it is your everyday sort of work now.

ANDREW MCCOY

Yes; well, just like many of us in our vocations...

DAVE BAST

Maybe I should say...How were you called to this?

ANDREW MCCOY

Right. We end up by virtue of circumstances and by virtue of what is needed of us at a moment in time to have to step into new things; and one of those is if you teach and work with college students you are going to hear a lot of questions in your office; kind of like: I don't know what it is God wants me to do. I know I want to be faithful to him. I know I want to follow him in my life and in my whole life, but I am just not sure. I think I might want to major in accounting, or perhaps in premed because my folks want me to be a doctor, but I don't even really know if that is what God is calling me to do. A lot of them will say: Honestly, I don't even know how I can know.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Obviously we think about college as a time when we are figuring it out, and a lot of it sort of comes down to what is going to be my major and so forth; but when a student says: How will I even know how God is talking to me? Are there a few top things you say to them are things to watch through which to discern where God is leading?

ANDREW MCCOY

Well, one of the things that I do that I think is really important is I reframe that question of how will I hear from God, and the way that I reframe it is by talking about the fact that where am I and *when* am I are just as important vocational questions as how will I hear from God. God speaks to us in the space and time of creation because we are part of creation; and for a lot of students—in fact, for a lot of Christians in general—just thinking about that simple fact is sometimes revelational. It is sometimes a fact that is so simple or elemental to our lives but it hasn't been thought about deeply; and when you do that it gives college students a chance to step back and go: Oh, wait a minute; perhaps part of why I am feeling so much vocational pressure right now is because I am actually in a place right now in which this type of reflection is pretty important.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I wonder sometimes, too, in terms of when you work with younger people, though, it is not going to change, as we said in the opening, it doesn't really change when you get older as we continue to discern God's call, but do you sometimes encounter students who think they know what they *should* do, or maybe what their parents told them to do even though their own enthusiasm level is not quite there? I mean, what excites you? What enthuses you in this moment; and if it is not what you think you should do, maybe that is a part of God saying something to you.

ANDREW MCCOY

I absolutely agree. It is really important to ask college students why as well that they want to pursue something that they believe they are supposed to pursue. Some will absolutely come in and tell me in the first semester of their freshman year, for example, that they absolutely know that they are supposed to be in ministry, and that they are not really that worried about this college thing. They are just trying to get through it because they know they are supposed to; and a really important thing that I always want to tell them at that time is that their greatest vocational call in the particular time and space that they are in is actually to be a college student. They are making a tremendous investment in their education; and in the case that I happen to

teach at a Christian college, they are making a spiritual investment in their development and in their education over time; and so, I want to encourage them to think about actually being a student as a vocational call for the particular time they are in. Again, many of them have never thought of it as that before. They are thinking so much about the future that they are losing sight of their present.

DAVE BAST

I think that is a great insight that can be applied to us in any stage of life, really. Guard against the mistake of thinking that God's call is something in the future that I have to kind of wait for or prepare myself before I can engage in it or fulfill it. God could be calling me to do something right here and now, and I could actually miss what that is by focusing too much on what I want to do later on, after I retire, say, or some distant point.

ANDREW MCCOY

Well, I think that is really true, and it is kind of funny; I see it related to what I hear from my own friends and colleagues who are in their 30s and 40s and even 50s, raising children, working in their careers, and they have been in their career from some time now; and because I am a theologian and I teach about ministry, I will have friends of mine outside of the ministry come and say to me: Well Andy, I wish sometimes that I was doing something like you where I was thinking about God all day, where I was thinking about the scriptures all day, where I was teaching students about this, where I was doing ministry. I am not sure I am supposed to be doing what I am doing, working in the tech world, I am not sure that I am doing what I am supposed to be doing in business; and for many of them I think the question is one simply of: Did I make the wrong choice in the past, and am I now stuck in a future that is the wrong vocational future for me? Again, I think it is so important to know that God speaks to us in those places where we are and when we are; that God will speak to us at those times, and in some cases he may encourage...he has encouraged friends of mine to go into a different area of work, and he has encouraged them to make a career change; but in many cases it is a reaffirmation of the very work that they are doing; and I have seen that happen whether it is other professors or whether it is friends of mine in some kind of business in the business world. I have seen them discover kind of anew that God's call in their lives and the work that they are doing hasn't completely changed...

DAVE BAST

Right.

ANDREW MCCOY

It is just growing and changing over time.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is just a great transition to a scripture passage that we want to dig into in the next segment that reframes what we do, and we are going to dig into that passage in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and today we are joined by Andy McCoy, who is a theologian and professor at Hope College in Holland, Michigan, and we are talking about the idea of calling, and specifically we have touched on calling to ministry, which for some people that may be the only kind of call they think of; but Jesus, in one of his parables, greatly broadened our concept of what ministry really means as he thinks of it and what he is calling *all* of us to, not just a handful or a few. So we want to listen to that parable now. It is from Matthew 25.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Jesus is speaking here: ³¹When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³He will put the sheep on his right and the goats

on his left. ³⁴Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you invited me in; ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me; I was sick and you looked after me; I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

DAVE BAST

³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you; or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸When did we see you a stranger and invite you in or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹When did we see you sick or in prison and go visit you?” ⁴⁰The king will reply, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

DAVE BAST

So, there is ministry!

ANDREW MCCOY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I was thinking, Andy, in that context what you were saying in the previous segment, just before we got to this passage, sometimes people come and say: Boy, I wish I could do ministry and be like you, who just thinks about God all day. Now, I am kind of a theologian too, but I don't think about God all day, even though I work in a seminary; but...

ANDREW MCCOY

Amen.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But you have said sometimes, yes, people do change careers because they just cannot see what they are doing as ministry, but maybe expand on that in the light of this passage. You say that more often than not it is a matter of sort of viewing from a new angle what they are already doing and where ministry happens in the tech world or in the business world or in the medical profession they happen to be in; so, maybe talk a little bit more about that in light of Matthew 25.

ANDREW MCCOY

You bet; well, in light of Matthew 25, I think we begin to see that the idea of vocation and calling begins with the very fact that our faith begins with God's calling us. In many senses, any thought that we have about how God works in any part of our life is shaped by the fact that God calls us to faith—all of us to faith—to begin with. In that sense, all Christians have a general calling to follow God and be disciples of Jesus Christ; and you see that in this passage so well. You see that we are all to be about the peace, the justice, the love, the righteousness and the holiness of Jesus. That is something that all of us are supposed to do no matter what we are doing in our lives. Just as in Jesus' time, there were many people doing many different types of things, so there are now in our time; but we are all to follow God in that general sense of discipleship. Of course then, the question that we all want to know is, what am I supposed to do and how does that work? That is that sense that in addition to a general idea or a general calling of vocation, we all do have specific and individual callings; and I think for a lot of students, like I talked about just a little bit earlier, and a lot of people in general, we think ministry is going to be a prized calling or primary calling in a sense far beyond anything that I might do in the world otherwise, say as a teacher or in some other profession—being a lawyer; but we need people to do things like law and accounting, don't we, so that our culture can thrive; and when you think about something like Matthew 25, you have both the idea that we are all, no matter what we are called to do, called to discipleship, but it also opens the door for many possibilities and many ways to engage that to speak to the least of these to be embraced.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, and what I really have always been intrigued by...well, I don't know if I have *always* been intrigued by it, but I noticed it a while back when I was going to preach on this passage. The sheep and the goats have one thing in common: Neither had a clue as to what they were really doing, right? You know, the sheep say in the passage we just read: Whoa, whoa...

DAVE BAST

When did we do that?

SCOTT HOEZEE

When was that? What day was that, you know? And the goats will say: When didn't we see you? But the point being, it is unconscious, and the sheep did the right thing because in the context of whatever it was they were doing, and let's assume that at the end of history, you know, when this happens, God is going to be talking to bankers and lawyers and shopkeepers and auto mechanics, and he is going to say: You treated people right in what you did; in the course of your everyday job, it was me who was on the other side of the desk. It was Jesus' car you were repairing. It was... And they are going to say: Well, I didn't have any idea. So that, Andy, goes along nicely with what you were saying that engaging in ministry doesn't have to mean quitting your job and starting something all new, it just means doing it as a disciple faithfully; and guess what? Along the way, in creating a new software program, you were doing some of the stuff Jesus is talking about.

DAVE BAST

I think there is another thing we could draw out of this, and that is that a lot of these actions are simple acts of compassion or kindness that don't necessarily require a professional to do.

ANDREW MCCOY

Right.

DAVE BAST

It is not necessarily about your job. In fact, I even think about as I was reading through the list again, these are things that retired people have more time to do.

ANDREW MCCOY

Absolutely.

DAVE BAST

So many of us are so busy, when could we go visit somebody who is sick, or when could we give a meal or prepare...you know. Wow, when so many retirees think, and now probably many of them can expect...many of *us* I should say...let me amend that. Many of us can expect some years ahead of us of reasonable health. It is not just to play golf with, you know, all that time. There are things to do to help people.

ANDREW MCCOY

Yes, last year in the summer I did research with an economist on different areas of vocation and career that were not being explored well by the Church, and one of those areas that we noted most highly was how do we think about our calling in career after we are done with our primary calling in career? And this is especially important given the fact that the largest generation of retirees ever, the baby-boomers, are in the middle of entering into that retirement phase, which is a very important question for our culture. With college students, it is what is God calling me to do, and in some ways it is, is God still calling me after I have left the primary career or vocational work I have been doing for years? How is God calling me, and will God call me to new things or even to do the things I have been doing but in newly different ways?

SCOTT HOEZEE

So there is that sense in which that bigger calling underneath which our individual, specific callings, fit...you don't retire out of that. You don't age out of serving God's kingdom; and I think that is a great reminder that...and we made this point also in the first program of this series...we all have that calling, each and every one of us; but of course, the Church corporately has a calling and identity, and as we close out this program we will dig into that next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, along with our guest today from Hope College, Andy McCoy, and we have been talking about calling; and again, we often frame that up as an individual calling: What am I called to do? And that is really what we have been talking about, but maybe also in this final part of this second episode of our four-part series on when God calls, we think about it corporately. What are *we* called to do as the Church?

DAVE BAST

Right; and here is just a brief passage from I Peter Chapter 2 that reminds us who we are.

⁹But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession. (And here is the call) That you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

So, we tried to say call can be for everyone, not just for ministers; it can be your job, your career, your vocation. It can even go beyond that—it can transcend that. We just talked at the end of the last segment about call in retirement, call after you have finished your main work, there is still plenty to do; and now we want to think about doing that together as the body of Christ.

ANDREW MCCOY

Yes, Dave; I think that calling actually begins here. It begins in the fact that when God's Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit of the risen Jesus works in our lives to call us to him, he is never calling just you, he is never calling just me; he is calling a people to himself; and that becomes, actually, my identity and your identity, and really and truly, our primary identity. Now, this is quite a countercultural thing in our world. We function in such an individual culture that when my students come into Hope College, and they come into my early theology and ministry classes, one of the things that I stress and talk about with them is the fact that they're called to a new identity in which that communal aspect becomes just as important, and in some senses more important than the individual aspect; and it shapes how we think about our own individual calling as well, and it does so, I think, in this important way. It makes it much easier to think about whom we are going to be and what we are called to do if we are doing that in conjunction with other people. If God is working through the lives of others who may have other input, who may have other wisdom, and through the power of his Spirit that is working in our lives so that we might hear what God is calling us to do, I think the body of Christ cannot be underestimated as an important factor in our own understanding of our call.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is so important...I mean, you know, anybody who has studied scripture knows that God's love affair with the human race has always been a family affair in a sense, right?

ANDREW MCCOY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is a covenantal God. We are a covenant people. That was big in the Old Testament, but Jesus has a new covenant in his blood. That language carries through; and so what we sometimes forget, especially in our more individualistic culture where we all focus on: My calling; I am called to do this—what we forget is that all of our callings put together are supposed to add up to something bigger than any one of us, and that is, as you read a minute ago, Dave, that together we are declaring the praises of him who has called you out of darkness and into his light. You were *no* people...you were nobodies before, and now you are *the* people of God...so that we need to see ourselves inside of that collective; that what I do as my individual calling, whether it is a banker or a plumber or a stay-at-home dad or whatever it may be, that is just one little piece in the larger mix that adds up to the corporate calling of the Church to glorify God and preach the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

It is the whole body of Christ that is to be light, and as Jesus said, salt in the world; and in that way to bring glory to the Father.

ANDREW MCCOY

Right. When we think about the body of Christ working together as, you know, we have read here in I Peter 2 today, or you think of how Paul talks about it in I Corinthians Chapter 12 with the different parts of the body and how they work together, and actually uses the physical body as an analogy for how the Church works. You are absolutely right; it is not just simply that each one of us are points that shine individually and bring light into the world, but that we function somehow together; and I think we function together in a very important way when it comes to actually discerning our calling. I think that is really true when you're a young person and when you're in college. It is very important that students have mentors and good people pouring into their lives, and it is one of the reasons that we actually make sure that every student that goes through our academic ministry program at Hope has their own mentor for most of their time at Hope College irrespective of everything else they do. It is not a graded component of our course work. It is just because we believe it is so important that they have somebody who is older to walk with them in wisdom in what they do. I don't think that goes away either when you are, say, in your forties, like me; and you need to have people in the body of Christ involved in thinking about what your gifts are and how you use them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, it reminds me, too, as we were in Peter a minute ago, but Paul's words also to the Corinthians near the end of his first letter, where Paul says: Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord. Knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. That is kind of what we have been saying. Those things that we do as unto the Lord glorify God, not just individually, but as the entire Church collectively works together, that labor will never be in vain because that is something that already has the blessing of God.

DAVE BAST

So, I guess the upshot of it is, let's work together and counsel each other and encourage one another to do something beautiful for Jesus today, to use Mother Teresa's phrase.

Well, we want to especially thank Andy McCoy for being our guest today in this conversation about calling and vocation; and thank you for listening and digging deeper into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we learn from scripture how to believe God's call when we encounter it. Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to let us know what scripture passages or topics you would like to hear discussed on *Groundwork*.

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