

IT'S WORTH A LIFE

Hearing and Responding to God's Call

Michael G. Cogdill

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Dedications

Dedicated to my family, especially to my grandchildren,
who I hope will always keep their hearts open to God's call,
and to all my students, past and present,
who have shared their call stories and journeys with me.
Thank you.

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Foreword

The topic of God's call is a powerful and timeless one. I am proud that my father is writing about this important subject, because he is up to the task. I write not to extol my father's virtues but to add words of affirmation about his knowledge, passion, and dedication to this subject.

In this book, you will read about the dimensions of God's call, including lessons and insights about what we know regarding how and when God calls. You will notice similarities to your own experience. You will likely discover differences in how God has called you relative to others, since God's call is personal to our individual lives. You will be challenged to consider that God's specific call for each of us, and our response to that call, affects not only individuals, but families and generations.

I can testify to the generational impact of calling, because God's call to my parents has had a substantial influence on my career, ministry, and family. It is no accident that the calling and passion of my father's vocational life became the teaching and encouraging of young ministers. It is my belief that God ordained that calling before my father was born. Not always do we, God's children, get our calling right, but I believe that my father has.

You will read in my father's words an account of his personal calling. He will share the story of how that call was revealed to him and what happened in response. What he did not know at the time, and what is clear only in retrospect, is that God's call for his life would include being a preacher, professor, and encourager for young men and women for decades to come. This book contains not only his story but old and new examples of God's calling, all of which are a reminder of how great our God is.

As a brief word of testimony, I have experienced the highs and lows of the struggle to find and follow God's call. My first struggle with call came as a 22-year-old first-year law student. After a time of internal conflict, I turned to Dad for help. He did not rebuke me, lecture me, or command me. Instead he

listened, encouraged, and loved me. That experience and process have led to nearly two decades of discussion between us about calling. Dad never pushed me to be a vocational minister. He never placed his own agenda or will on my life. Instead, God has used him as a constant source of support and affirmation, patiently observing as I have followed my own calling in law, ministry, and other areas. Today my call journey continues, and Dad continues to cheer for me and strengthen me, much like key people in your life and in the examples you will read in the pages ahead.

Thank you for reading this book. I hope that it will aid and inspire your own call journey as well as your role in assisting others. Above all, I pray that we all recommit to finding God's will in our lives and fulfilling the high calling of ministry in whatever form God intends for each of us.

Jason M. Cogdill
Winston-Salem, NC

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Finally, I wish to thank my family for their interest, encouragement, and support of this project. I am proud to share the dedication of this book with them.

Introduction

For more than three decades, I have taught courses in undergraduate and graduate theological education in a church-related university. Included in these years has been an active ministry of interim pastorates, preaching, and service to local churches. At numerous times, students and laypersons of all ages and backgrounds have brought to me questions about and thoughts related to God's call.

Frequently, the concerns were expressed in this manner: "I want to do God's will for my life. I think I am feeling a call from God to enter vocational ministry. But how can I be sure?" At other times, the questions were posed this way: "If you are feeling a call from God, where do you begin? Do you tell your pastor or change your major to religion?" And occasionally, I have heard this concern: "I know for sure that God called me to the work of missions when I was younger. I did not act on the call then, but the conviction of God's call has never left me. Do you think it is too late to answer this call now?"

Questions such as these have motivated me to write this book. It seeks to provide a lighted path for those wanting to understand the various features of God's call.

This book is designed to reach multiple audiences. First, I hope it will be a resource for beginning classes in formal theological education. For students interested in church ministry, I believe an appropriate starting point for theological studies is with a study of God's call. Such a study at the beginning of an undergraduate or graduate theological degree could serve to inspire students and increase their hunger for greater biblical and theological learning. Students tend to be full of questions regarding God's call at the beginning of formal theological education, whether undergraduate or graduate.

Second, I want to provide a written resource about God's call that may be helpful to lay readers as well as to those called to the ministry. In church life, many persons other than clergy feel called to some form of non-ordained

ministry or service. Many of the characteristics of God's call are similar for both groups.

Third, I want this book to be a ready resource for professors, pastors, ministers, and mentors to have available to give to persons seeking their wisdom and counsel relative to God's call. Many times I have wished I had such a volume at my fingertips to offer to inquiring persons. I hope this book will meet this need.

A theme of personal conviction will provide the foundation for this book. This conviction is that "it is worth a life" to answer God's call. This is true for persons called to vocational ministry and equally true for those called to ministries not requiring ordination. The call of God is not exclusive to clergy, as special as that call is. God's call can come to all, and it is worth a life to serve God, whether as an ordained servant or layperson.

Chapter One will seek to set forth many of the characteristics usually present in a call experience. There is no one uniform way God calls people into his service. People do, however, encounter similar experiences when God calls. This chapter will identify many of these features for readers to consider and reflect upon.

Chapter Two will present the call stories of five people in the Bible—Samuel, Jeremiah, Mary, Jesus, and Paul. As the readers know, so many more could be presented, and some others will be. Nevertheless, the call stories of these five persons present rich and strong lessons about God's call, lessons that persons seeking to understand God's call should not miss.

Chapter Three seeks to describe the various ways God calls. Recognizing them will give people a ready connection to understand their individual calling. In addition, few people come to an acceptance of God's call via a straight path. More times than not, crooked and winding paths are present along the journey. Great lessons can be learned from valuing the bends and turns of life's experiences that often result in answering a call from God.

Chapter Four will address two practical matters of living into a call from God. The first topic will be to show the connection between obeying a call from God and the surprising places God may lead one to serve. The second topic will focus on answering the most frequently asked question about God's call: "How can I be sure this calling is from God?"

Chapter Five will explore the important question of the relationship between call and ordination. Answering a call from God and offering oneself for ordination are two different matters. This chapter will offer helpful guidance relative to whether ordination should be pursued.

The journey of hearing and responding to God's call usually develops over time. To be sure, direct and dramatic calls from God occur spectacularly and suddenly. But for most, the call of God is an evolving process.

A helpful image for this journey is the idea of "lantern theology." This image suggests that the journey to find one's calling often occurs in "lighted steps" along the way. This book will help readers discover and follow these lighted steps. So grab your lantern and let the journey begin. Remember, it is worth a life to answer God's call!