



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Called Through Relationship
(*Vocation*, pp. 20-28)

Suggested Article:

📖 Not the Righteous, But Sinners
(*Vocation*, pp. 44-46)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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Called Through Relationship

The fullness of our calling is discovered in a way of life nourished by Christian practices. Our vocation is about listening to and with others for the guidance of God's Spirit, about growing to understand our true need for communion with Christ's Body.

Prayer

O God, so often we have insisted upon our own way out of fear and insecurity. Teach us to listen to others and to your Spirit as we go about our duties. Amen.

Scripture Reading: 1 Peter 2:9-10

Responsive Reading (Ephesians 4:1b-8)

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit,

... just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people."

Reflection

Rather than something we choose or decide, our vocation—like our unique creation—is an incredible gift from God. In calling us, God has graced us "according to the measure of Christ's gift," (Ephesians 4:7) and not, as we would expect, by the measure of *our* gifts. And Christ's gift cannot be measured, Paul writes, for we are "blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing" and share in "the riches of [God's] glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the *immeasurable* greatness of his power for us who believe" (1:3; 18-19).

"The abundance of God's grace available to us in Christ is inexhaustible and endlessly generative," Newman observes. "If we root our understanding of vocation in God's own abundance, then we see what a mistake it is to think about vocation simply as finding our talents and figuring out what to do with them. Rather and more fully, it is discovering and living out of the infinite and gratuitous abundance of God."

God calls us to be members of "one body and one Spirit" (4:4). This suggests "our primary calling is to *be* a people who live in communion with our triune God," Newman writes. "Only in community with God and others do we begin to discover, occasionally like a flash of lightning, but more often haltingly and by fits and starts, what we are called to *do* in our lives." These practices prepare us to listen with others in this faithful community for the guidance of God's Spirit:

- ▶ *hospitality*, the practice of welcoming other persons—even a stranger—into our lives, shapes us and our guests to be open to



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the surprising ways God works in the world. "It enables us to resist the idea that the way things are is the way they have to be, or that our futures are easily controlled."

- ▶ *meditating on God's word* and *spiritual direction* form us to receive guidance from others. These practices help us resist the "assumption that we discover our identity and vocation by breaking free from the past and pursuing a solitary quest to 'find ourselves,' rather than in and through communion."
- ▶ *fasting* and *feasting* in the Church year provide a rhythm of penitence and rejoicing that sustains us over the long haul. We remember that "our hope does not lie in human effort or potential, but in the reality of God's presence and promises."
- ▶ *Sabbath-keeping*, the practice of resting from work and depending on God, tells us that *what we do* in our daily work does not ultimately define *who we are*.
- ▶ *prayer*, which is a rich waiting before God, trains us "to be patient with ourselves, others, and even God.... [and] to trust that God will provide what we need, both as a people and as individuals, to live lives of faithfulness to God."

Study Questions

1. Of the Christian practices in this study, which are most significant in your discipleship, and which are neglected? Does your congregation encourage you in each practice?
2. How is each of these Christian practices countercultural?
3. "Our calling both *comes through* community and *is oriented toward* community," Newman says (p. 23). What are the dangers of letting a community guide our decision making? Which community, according to Newman, should we trust?
4. Which of the Christian practices in this study are suggested by the hymn "Be Thou My Vision"? Which ones are missing?
5. Read about Jesus' call of Matthew (Matthew 9:9-13). What themes in this story does Caravaggio highlight in his painting, *Calling of St. Matthew* (pp. 44-46).

Departing Hymn: "Be Thou My Vision" (verses 1, 2, and 5)

Be thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art;
thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my Wisdom, and thou my true Word;
I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord;
thou and thou only, first in my heart,
High King of heaven, my Treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, my victory won,
may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's Sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
still be my Vision, O Ruler of all.

Irish hymn (8th century)

Tune: SLANE

Called Through Relationship

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching goals

1. To recognize that our primary vocation is a gift from God that comes through and is oriented toward the community of faith.
2. To understand how Christian practices prepare us to listen with others for the guidance of God in our lives.
3. To consider why the church that extends beyond our denomination and this present era is the faith community to guide our decision making.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Vocation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the hymn “Be Thou My Vision,” locate the tune, SLANE, in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

“The story of Moses’ call to confront Pharaoh reminds us that calling may not match up with our talents.... Moses tells God, ‘I have no talent for getting up in front of people and talking!’ Though God promises, ‘I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak,’ Moses still objects, ‘Oh, my Lord, please send someone else’ (4:13). God grows angry, but nonetheless allows Moses the freedom to resist. In the end, they reach a solution: God sends Aaron to be Moses’ spokesman. But Moses, we might notice, is not off the hook; he accepts God’s call to lead the people of Israel, despite his own perception that he does not have the necessary talent to do this....

“Listening for God’s call begins with seeing our lives as gifts. Like Moses, most of us cannot initially do this. At first Moses finds his calling to be as terrifying as the burning bush and even more intimidating in its demands, yet at the *end* of his life, he can say of God, ‘The Rock, his work is perfect; and all his ways are just’ (Deuteronomy 32:4). As Moses looks out over the land that the Lord has sworn to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he recognizes that the promises of the Lord are being fulfilled in his own life and in the world. He ends his days singing not about his own talents, but about a God who is ever faithful, even when God’s own people are not” (*Vocation*, pp. 21-22).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Peter 2:9-10 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

This lesson makes two related points: (1) God's call comes through and is oriented toward the community which is the church, and (2) to faithfully attend to our vocation, it is more important how we live together as Christians rather than what we individually *think*.

The scripture reading from 1 Peter 2:9-10 stresses the corporate nature of God's call. The title "chosen race" emphasizes that we respond to a summons; "royal priesthood" stresses that we are a body of disciples, members together of "a royal house" that serves God; by God's grace we have been made into "a people." Ephesians 4:4 puts it this way: our gifts are received in and employed in service of the "one body and one Spirit."

"We cannot simply *think* our way into living out our calling more fully," Newman writes. "Rather, the fullness of our calling is discovered in a way of life sustained and nourished by Christian practices such as prayer, Sabbath-keeping, meditating on God's Word, fasting, hospitality, and spiritual direction." These activities sustain the Christian way of life and "strengthen us to resist ways of thinking and living that would diminish our sense of vocation" (p. 24). Use the explanations and quotations in Newman's article to help members consider how each practice forms us to listen with others for God's guidance.

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to discuss each practice in relation to the congregations in which they have been members. Though they may stress varying practices, congregations usually employ some form of all seven of these activities.
2. Our culture stresses that as *individuals* we *choose* our vocation. Members may discuss how each practice puts the emphasis on *receiving* our vocation as God's gift (or, on *waiting* on God), and on *relying on the church community* for guidance in listening for God's call.
Our culture encourages us to use our gifts to advance our individual goals, but these Christian practices shape us to love God and to serve others.
3. Newman discusses the example of St. Francis, whose family opposed his calling to poverty and ministry. "Christians believe that the community called 'church' takes precedence over our natural family (see, for example, Mark 3:32-35)." Members may be familiar with individual congregations that, like some human families, are abusive, dictatorial, or spiritually blind. She stresses that the church is not only "a particular local congregation, but also the whole communion of saints, those who have gone before us and those outside the walls of our particular denomination." Francis discovered his calling "through the Body of Christ, broadly understood: he absorbed in a new and creative way the gospel that he had been given by those who lived before him" (p. 24).
4. The hymn suggests *meditating on God's word* and *prayer*, allowing God to guide the way we see and think about the world. Members may note that the communal aspects of discerning God's call, as in the practices of *spiritual direction* and *Sabbath-keeping*, are not mentioned directly (though the hymn, of course, is a form of spiritual direction for the one who reads or sings it). The hymn stresses how following God shapes the individual, but neglects to mention how this formation occurs through communal practices.
5. Caravaggio stresses that Matthew is a sinner who is unworthy of and unprepared for God's call. Jesus surprises Matthew during his wanton leisure in a tavern, not in his place of work. By depicting Matthew and his friends in contemporary garb, the artist helps his viewers identify with them. Notice the prominence of Peter, who represents the other disciples and the church. Members should reflect on Gerhard Lohfink's observation that Jesus' disciples "were not made the center of Israel because they were holier or more perfect than the others; they were not a bit better than anyone else. The issue was never them as special individuals, but always and only the whole people of God, to whom they were sent" (quoted on p. 23).

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.