

First and Second Order Calling

by Tom Ashbrook and Bill O'Byrne
August, 2010

The Confusion about Discipleship and Callings

As *Imago Christi* works with Christian leaders around the world, we often find that they have a nagging sense that their activities feel empty, that there's more to following the call of Jesus than being part of a serving machine. Many confide that, after years of ministry, they find that following Jesus feels more like a treadmill than the exciting adventure they imagined. We have come to believe that many of us have inadvertently misunderstood the nature of our calling and have inadvertently gotten the cart before the horse, as disciples of Jesus.

Typical discipleship books and programs describe a plethora of activities and responsibilities that are required to follow Christ. In our early discipleship years we learned good lifestyle habits such as church attendance, verbal prayer, Bible reading and study, giving, and serving with our gifts. We worked to adhere to a biblical moral code that follows the Ten Commandments. Eventually, we discovered that the possibilities for behavior modification and service are endless. While using one's gifts for the glory of God, often defined by the needs of our church programming, can feel fulfilling for some years, most of us at some point begin to say, if only to ourselves, "Isn't there more to following the call of Jesus than this?" The endless agenda of to-dos has begun to feel empty. Trying to figure out "what would Jesus do" seems hopeless.

There are a variety of reasons why our activities can begin to feel like going through the motions. While we can always learn more or become more proficient, or try a new ministry, at some point most of us find that our work for God fails to challenge us or connect with our daily lives in a meaningful way. Maybe the excitement that was there in the beginning has been lost or we feel that the zeal and passion described in Scripture still eludes us. Whatever our personal story, many of us come to the place of questioning our calling and begin to wonder where we got off track.

Jesus may have addressed our problem when He dictated His letter to the hard working church at Ephesus. "I know your deeds.... You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first" (Rev 2:2-4). They had part of their calling right, but had neglected the most important part – their love relationship with God. Like the Ephesians, many of us have gotten our priorities mixed up. We have become so busy working for God, we have neglected our relationship with Him. The Bible calls us first and foremost to love God, and then to obey and serve Him. Mixing up these priorities leaves us without the necessary intimacy to know Him, the knowledge of His specific leading, and the power to carry it out.

The value of accomplishment over relationship in our culture has caused us to skew our understanding of discipleship. Men and women of God are prone to evaluate the quality or faithfulness of their relationship with God by the size and scope of their ministry. While most Christians say that they love God, they look to their deeds as evidence of that love's depth. As a result, Christian disciples can feel they need to work harder and harder, but often feel that they accomplish less and less. The declining membership of the church, the embarrassing morality of its leaders and members, conflict among members, and burnout of our elders, betray something out of balance in our understanding of discipleship. If this balance is to be restored, we must understand the relationship between the primary and the secondary invitation from Jesus to be His disciple.

Following the Callings of Jesus: The New Discipleship of Spiritual Formation

Within *Imago Christi*, we've realized that there are two levels to our calling from Jesus. We call them **First Order Calling** and **Second Order Calling**. The first and greatest commandment is to love God; to love and serve our neighbor is the second. The depth and growth of our First Order Calling directly determines our ability to be faithful in the Second. Like everyone else, we feel the constant temptation to put work for God ahead of our relationship with Him. The following quote from *Mansions of the Heart* describes this distinction between these two levels of God's calling to follow Jesus and the emphasis our culture puts on the second priority.

I've found it helpful to distinguish two levels of God's call to relationship with him, that relates the being and doing, the loving and serving aspects of our relationship with Jesus.

First Order Calling: We are first called by Jesus into a personal relationship of love with God. We invited into a relationship that will enable us to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt 22:37).

Second Order Calling: Then Jesus calls us to "follow me" (cf. Matt 4:19). Our ability to follow and serve Jesus is dependent on the depth of our relationship with Him.

Unfortunately, because our culture values doing over being, we often give more attention to our Second Order Calling than to the First. We assume our love for Jesus and that the focus of our ministry is on serving Him. It almost becomes a norm for our church culture. In my role as a pastor, I have often had people come up and ask me how I was doing. What we both knew they meant was, "How's

your ministry doing?” Seldom are we asked about our love relationship with Jesus.¹

Jesus said in His letter to the church in Ephesus that they had done all things well, yet He had something against them: they had lost their first love. Without this love relationship, their ministry would ultimately fail. Like us, the Ephesians were creators and builders and valued accomplishment and progress. Likewise our culture, world, and even our churches are prone to honor and reward service over love for God. We assume one another's love for God and therefore give little or no attention to our need for growth in our First Order Calling. Ultimately we find ourselves flagging in our Second Order Calling, as well. To regain the vitality of our life with God, we need to get first things first. Second Order Calling emerges out of First Order Calling. God's love for us and our love for Him empower and motivate our service.

The Priority of Relationship: First Order Calling, First Things First

God's basic call to each one of us is an invitation to live in loving relationship with Him. God created us for this relationship. Since the fall God has been calling us back into relationship with Himself. He has created us with a longing to know Him, receive His love and to love Him in return. Jesus' call to those who are weary is first a call to rest in relationship with Him (Mt 11:28). We are called to become "children" of God (John 1:12). Through the forgiveness and reconciliation accomplished on the cross, God invites to enter a very familial and intimate relationship. Further, we are called to be the "bride of Christ," the most intimate of all relationships (2Cor 11:2). Jesus said that the most important thing we can do is to love God and believe in Him, our First Order Calling. In this relationship we receive the gift of forgiveness, eternal life and the filling of the Holy Spirit, and ultimately the new heaven and earth. Everything related to serving God and becoming Christ-like comes out of this relationship of love with the Father, the relationship Jesus called "abiding" (John 15:4, 9). A disciple, follower, and apprentice of Jesus is one who abides in the love of God.

The Priority of Callings: Discipleship Flows out of Intimacy

In the context of our First Order Calling, we can now discuss what it means to serve Jesus as disciples. Our Second Order Calling is a response to our love for God. We love others in service, because God first loved us and gave Himself for us. Intimacy with God transforms us, as the Holy Spirit fills us with the power of His indwelling and the fruits of Christ's character. The transforming love of God heals our selfish hearts and sets us free to love our neighbor.

¹ R. Thomas Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart: Exploring the Seven Stages of Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2009), 30-31.

Yet this service is never separated from the roots of Love, which motivate and sustain it. Service flows most effectively and enduringly out of our knowledge of and intimacy with God, as fruit is produced through branches that abide in the vine. In the depth of our First Order Calling we are able to hear the specific nature of God's call to follow Him in service. The authority, power, and content of our ministry emerge from the transformation and deepening intimacy, which we experience. Without this depth of loving intimacy we are left as victims of our wounded personalities and as orphans trying to figure out "what would Jesus do" on our own.

The Journey into our Callings

We grow as disciples of Jesus as we respond intentionally to His callings. Our response to God's First Order Calling to know and love Him involves us in increasing times of listening to God in prayer, in solitude, and in daily life. We allow the Holy Spirit to speak to us and mold us as we meditate on Scripture. Building on its objective meaning we reflect on God's Word for us, allowing God to make it His personal Word in us. We seek spiritual community where we can share our journeys with God and find mutual support. Formal worship becomes an opportunity to let our hearts commune in love and adoration. God transforms our hearts so that we can know, love, and follow Him more fully in and through all aspects of life and service.

In the same way, our service is a means of spiritual formation, to see, know, worship, and love God, deepening our intimacy with Him. The challenges of serving God inspire a deeper pursuit of knowing God, which in turn informs our service. We respond to God's Second Order Calling as we listen to His still small voice within us and watch for His leading to love others in specific ways. We discover the ways the Holy Spirit has gifted us and watch for the ways He invites us to join with others in to spread the Gospel in word and action for others. In our devotion and service we live out our relationship of love, learn from Jesus, and discover our real selves.

When our First and Second Order callings are integrally intertwined, the expression of God's will and His heart *through* our daily life and service results in still deeper spiritual formation. We are changed through our service, when it become the means for a greater experience of God Himself, a greater participation in Christ, and a greater knowledge of His will and heart *for* us. At the same time we become able to attend and minister to the First Order longings in others no matter what the task or ministry context. We are therefore more attentive to ministering to the concerns of God's First Order calling in the individuals with whom we serve. As we work with others in various forms of ministry we intentionally form community in which we can encourage and support our mutual journey of deepening intimacy with our Lord. Ultimately, discovery of the nature of God's two-level call on our lives leads us on a journey into an ever deeper experience of His love and understanding His will in serving others. Loving God and serving God and neighbor become one as we experience deepening intimacy with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The New Discipleship of Spiritual Formation

The understanding of the interdependence of First and Second Order Callings makes it clear that our spiritual formation happens in both dimensions. In addition to the ongoing practice of spiritual disciplines, we also need to affirm the spiritual aspects and transforming influences of our vocational experiences as integral parts of our discipleship. Our paradigm of spiritual formation and discipleship requires an intentional, positive, disciplined response to God's personal call in ways that balance what can otherwise be a reactive, event-oriented, activist spirituality that leaves us dry and impotent.

The recent barrage of infidelities and improprieties of Christian leadership, in the context of outwardly successful, driven, activist evangelical ministry, raises the central question of whether or not the church is experiencing authentic spiritual formation. So we must discover how spiritual transformation occurs and how we can actively engage in spiritual pursuits in ways that are less likely to play into our spiritual blindness, destroy our families, make us disillusioned with God, or derail our ministries.

Authentic spiritual formation can happen consistently in the church. Healthy and balanced attention to the priority of our First Order Calling will result in a life and ministry that expresses love for God and gives Him glory, ministry that has greater integrity, longevity and ultimate Kingdom significance. The content of our ministry is not limited to what we understand God may be saying to us or telling us what to do. What we really have to offer people is what God is doing inside us, as the God who is love remakes us in the image of Christ, to the glory of God and the coming of His Kingdom.