Disability, Calling and "A Kind of Life Imposed on Man"

By Dr. Rick Langer

Introduction

Disability is commonly seen as an impediment to one's calling, imposed by outside circumstances or uncontrollable events, limiting our ability to "become who we really are." Such limitations on self-realization are obviously problematic, and some have responded by attempting to change our views of disabilities, denying that they are imposition and emphasizing the goods that they bring. Though goods can certainly come from disabilities, I would argue that to attempt to re-frame our understanding of disabilities is to mistake the problem. The real problem lies not with our understanding of disabilities (however problematic that might be) but rather with our understanding of callings. Callings just are impositions—and therefore even if disabilities are in some sense an imposition, that does not make them incompatible with one's calling. Quite the contrary; it is quite natural to see one's disability as compatible, contributing, and at times even constitutive of one's calling.

In order to make this argument, I will first consider the writings of the 16th century Puritan theologian William Perkins. His discussion of calling was one of the most influential of a host of Puritan writings on calling. Perkins' analysis will lay a foundation for assessing the contribution of both abilities and disabilities to an individual's calling. Finally, a similar application of the notion of calling will be made to churches rather than individuals. In both cases, it will be argued that we are called to take up our disabilities and include them as constitutive parts of our divine calling.

Calling in Theological Perspective

Christian conceptions of calling underwent a dramatic change during the Protestant reformation. A notion that for centuries was applied only to those in vocational ministry was suddenly applied to all Christians alike.[1] Both the Lutheran and Reformed branches of the Reformation shared this understanding. It found its fullest expression among the English Puritans, and particularly in *A Treatise of the Vocations* by William Perkins.

Perkins begins by offering a definition: "a vocation or calling is a certain kind of life, ordained and imposed on man by God for the common good."[2] Notice that the origin and purpose of a calling are both external to oneself. Calling *originates* in God, and its *purpose* is the common good. Why does Perkins believe this? His reasoning is well-explained in his text:

> The author of every calling is God himself… every man is to live as he is called of God. For look as in the camp, the General appoints to every man his place and standing… and therein [he is] to live and die. Even so it is in human societies: God is the General appointing to every man his particular

> calling, . . . in performance whereof he is to live and die . . . Again, in a clock, . . . there be many wheels, . . . some turn this way, some that way, some go slowly, some apace: and they are all ordered by the motion of the watch. Behold here a notable resemblance of God's special providence over mankind, which is the watch of the great world, allotting to every man his motion and calling . . . Therefore it is true that I say, that God himself is the author and beginning of callings . . .[3]

Clearly, a general is concerned for the battle as a whole, not the happiness of an individual soldier. Indeed, it is assumed that a soldier has enlisted because of a cause higher than his or her own happiness. Likewise, the wheels of a clock move in a way that only makes sense when viewed as a whole. In both cases, these ultimate and external purposes are far more fundamental than the individual purposes of a particular part. And just as the purpose of the call lies external to the person who receives it, likewise the origin of the call is not from within but from without. Callings originate with the general or the watchmaker and come as a command rather than a choice. It is, in Perkins' words, an imposition.

This definition is strongly at variance with contemporary notions of calling. Most contemporary discourse on calling centers on self-discovery and personal satisfaction. One seeks a calling, one does not receive a command. One's calling is an expression of one's "true self," and when such a calling is found, one finds true happiness and fulfillment. Calling will coincide with our personality and talents, and serve as a means of true self-expression which will ultimately bless both ourselves and the world.[4]

It is clear that disabilities are an impediment to calling in this second sense. They are dis-abilities, not abilities. They are impediments, not talents. They are an imposition, not a gift. Contemporary notions of calling are ill-equipped to make sense of a disability. And it is precisely at this point that Perkins' definition of calling becomes so relevant. It is a definition of calling that can make sense of imposition and find meaning apart from personal happiness. Consider some of the essential elements of a theology of calling that emerge from Perkins' perspective:

1. Callings are not chosen. Callings are imposed on people as a matter of logical and theological necessity. Calling, by the meaning of the word, is always from one person to another. Therefore, as a matter of logical necessity, they originate externally to the person who receives the call. Therefore it is strange to speak of "seeking" a calling, or "finding" a calling, or "discovering" a calling. Calls are not sought, or found or discovered; they are answered. Though they may be mediated in many ways, the originator is always God. As Perkins puts it, "the author of every calling is God himself."
2. Calling is often unintelligible at an individual level. First, since calling requires a "caller" as a matter of logical necessity, a full account of a call cannot be given simply by considering a single individual. A call sends one outside of oneself and is only intelligible from an external standpoint. Perkins illustrates this by his appeal to the motions of the gears in a watch that individually have confused and unintelligible motions, but in aggregate the gears produce the clock's steady and consistent motion infallibly marking the times and the seasons.
3. Callings serve the good of others. Notice that Perkins' analogy to the gears of the watch does not imply that our calling makes no sense. Rather, it implies that in order to make sense of our calling we will have to appeal to a larger whole—and for Perkins this larger whole is the "common good." That callings focus on the good of other people us not surprising. God is the origin of all calls, but God himself has no need of us. He lacks nothing we can offer; he has no weakness that we can strengthen; he has no illness that we can heal. Therefore, a call will always involve a third party—some other human being or institution that requires our service. Our individual actions become intelligible in light of the common good of humanity, or the particular purposes of a church, or of the needs of those God has placed around us. Christian callings are a call to service.

This theological account of calling raises certain practical questions. Most obviously, if a calling is "a kind of life imposed on man," how is it imposed? Surely in a fallen world there are many impositions made upon a person. How can one tell if an imposition is from God? Furthermore, it seems counterintuitive to assume that our desires and abilities are irrelevant to our calling. Surely performing a calling well has some correlation to one's native abilities and desires. And it also seems natural to ask if one's calling is determined by general principles and personal application of wisdom, or if it is supposed to come directly from God in some supernatural fashion. Perkins is not insensible to these questions and makes some attempt to answer them.

Though Perkins defines calling as a kind of life imposed on man, he later talks about "choosing" one's calling.[5] This apparent contradiction is resolved when one considers Perkins' guidelines for "choosing" a calling. He encourages a person to consult his or her "affections [desires] and abilities." His assumption seems to be that the passions of our heart and the abilities we possess are providential gifts of God. Those whom God calls, he also equips with "competent and convenient gifts, as knowledge, understanding, dexterity to this or that and such like and thereby makes them able for the performance of the duties of their calling."[6] So one's gifts and abilities serve as pointers to one's calling. The God who calls is also the God who creates; we have every reason to assume that our calling and our individual design were crafted by the will of one and the same God. Therefore, though the origin of the call is clearly in God, one of the better guides for discerning our calling is indeed to look within. However, even in this point Perkins is cautious and comments that "many men are partial in judging of their inclinations and gifts, the best way for them is to use the advice and help of others that are able to give direction herein, and to discern better than themselves." So though one of the first indicators of the true calling of God is our giftedness and inclinations, these are not best discerned by an inner quest but by the input of others who know you well.

Perkins also adds that callings are often distributed by human authorities. Again, the assumption here is that all authority is ultimately from God, but the way it is mediated is often through other human beings who are placed in authority over us. So in virtue of our situation in life and our location within certain political jurisdictions, we are subject to particular human authorities who may very well become channels of divine calling.

So to summarize, though the origin of our calling is in God, it is commonly mediated through human agency. This agency includes our giftedness particularly as seen through the eyes of our peers, our providential circumstances, and our divinely appointed authority structure. One would expect to identify one's calling by a convergence of these providentially controlled human channels.

Calling, Ability and Disability

Disability connects to this discussion of calling partly because of several interesting parallels between our abilities and our disabilities:

1. Abilities and disabilities are equally effective in revealing God's providential design and therefore point equally well to our calling. Perkins states ". . . they that enter into any calling, being utterly unable to perform the duties thereof, were never called of God." In the same way an ability contributes to confirming a call, an inability (or presumably a disability) contributes to the disconfirmation of a call. In both cases, one is attempting to discern God's call by the fit between call and aptitude.
2. In Scripture it is clear that not only gifts and abilities come by divine appointment, but also our weaknesses and disabilities. Moses was concerned about his ability to speak, Gideon was concerned about his age, Paul was concerned about his ability to see. But in all of these cases, it is clear that the impediment in question was there by divine intention. They were apportioned to these men by the divine will. And in each of these cases, what might have been a disqualifying

disability was actually ordained by God to further their calling in indirect ways. As the motion of the gears of a clock sometimes appear confused, and certain gears may actually turn in opposition to the hands of the clock, they make an essential contribution to the final purpose of telling time.

3. Both abilities and disabilities contribute to our social context. Because of aptitudes, one naturally develops relationships, connections and obligations. It may be connections to those who share the same abilities; it may be connections to those in need of those abilities; in either case our abilities connect us to certain authorities, awaken certain passions, and enmesh us in certain obligations. Disabilities create a social context as well—shared gifts and shared needs are equally likely to create a context for human relationships. Once this context is created, all the normal human structures of authority, obligation and relationship ensue. And callings are imposed upon us through these social contexts—whether in the formal fashion of civil authority which Perkins describes, or through the more diverse but equally real informal structures of civil society.
4. Though not explicitly mentioned by Perkins, it is worth noting that neither abilities nor disabilities completely define who we are. In fact, it is often distressing to a person to be overly defined either by ability or disability. It is both painful and common for those with disabilities to be labeled by that disability and effectively have their identity reduced to their disability. But abilities can also constrict one's identity, for example, the actor who is "typecast" by a notable success in a particularly distinctive role. In effect, one's identity has become defined by a single feature of one's person and as a result, one's calling becomes artificially constrained. So it is well to remember that though both abilities and disabilities contribute to calling, neither one should be allowed to define one's calling completely.

Disability and Ability in Contrast

There are also clearly differences between abilities and disabilities—especially regarding their subjective experience. As was mentioned at the outset, it is common to perceive a disability as an imposition or limitation. It is not a way to express our freedom, but rather a limitation on our freedom. In this sense, disabilities are the opposite of abilities which usually grant us powers of self-expression. Gifts are often merged into our self-perceived identity, so we think of ourselves as "a great artist" or a "strong leader." Indeed, it is so natural to incorporate our gifts into our identity that we often forget that they are a gift at all. We feel proud of our gifts, almost as if they were our achievement. Though one can bear a disability well, it is more common to be proud of how one has born a disability than to be proud of the disability itself.

Disabilities may also be seen as disruptive to our callings. They impede our ability to fulfill our calling, posing challenges which make it more difficult to accomplish our God-given tasks. Abilities, in contrast, are generally our allies in pursuit of our calling. They not only serve to confirm our callings in the way Perkins describes, they enable us to perform our callings well.

It also appears to me that disabilities and abilities both impact our lives, but they tend to do so in different ways. Abilities shape our lives silently. We assume them to be part of ourselves and take them for granted. They open doors and create a social context in a way that we perceive as "natural." In contrast, disabilities do not so much order our lives as re-order our lives. They are not so readily assumed as a background condition because they constantly intrude into our consciousness. They may very well contribute to our social context, but they often do so in ways that we perceive as an intrusion. They may be a gift, but they are a gift that was not on our list.

Disabilities as the Call of the Individual

So how, then, do we understand the relationship between disabilities and calling? It is helpful to understand that callings are generally an imposition, so that a disability is therefore not contrary to the very concept

of calling. However, it would be easy to read what has just been written as an argument that disability contributes to calling as a negative imposition, merely by closing doors that would otherwise have been open to us. But is there anything positive to be said about the relationship between disability and calling? And perhaps more importantly, is there a way to make our disabilities generative of calling rather than degenerative to our calling?

I believe the answer to these questions is, "Yes." To lay a theological foundation for considering a more generative view of disabilities, I will appeal to the contemporary theologian Kevin Vanhoozer. In his seminal work *The Drama of Doctrine*, Vanhoozer suggests that theology be approached as a theo-drama. This drama includes the real lives of real people acting in history, as well as the acts of God himself. For present purposes, I will pick up a single thread of his argument. He identifies the essential role of Scripture in this theo-drama, but he points out that it cannot function simply as a script functions for an actor:

> [Scripture] plays the lead role in training Christian actors to make good judgments . . . Yet the metaphor of performing a script does not quite address the problem of having to speak and act in ways that fit new situations and address new problems.[7]

The challenge is that Scripture was written in a different time and place. It was often answering specific questions at a specific time—whether prophetic answers to the problems of the Jewish monarchy, or epistles answering questions of the early church. But we are called to answer contemporary questions, not ancient ones. Of course, the answers to the ancient questions should shape our answers to contemporary questions, but how?

Vanhoozer likens our situation to an improvisational theater. An ancient script has been given us to which we must be faithful. However, our contemporary culture poses new questions to us—these questions serve as prompts, or in the language of improv, an *offering*. To this offering, we as Christian actors must respond. Vanhoozer describes the process as follows:

> The technical term used in improvising . . . is *offering*. Anything someone does is an offer. Statements, gestures, actions—all are invitations to respond by extending the action and keeping the play going. Offers can either be "accepted" or "blocked." To accept an offer is to respond in such a way that maintains and develops the initial premise . . . A block, by contrast, is anything that prevents the action from developing. The bad improviser says no to offers, rejects the premise of the game, and thus halts the action . . . Improvisers are trained to accept offers and to say yes.[8]

So in Vanhoozer's vision, we are actors in an improv theater, responding to the "offerings" in our particular time and place. Good improv involves "accepting" an "offering" and carrying the action forward in an authentically Christ-like manner. Bad improv means "blocking" an "offer" and shutting down the action. It is not so much a bad response as a refusal to respond because it refuses to take up the "offering."

With this perspective in hand, let us return to disability and calling. I contend that a disability comes to us as an "offering." It is thrust upon us, not chosen. It is called out to us—perhaps from the audience of contemporary culture but more often by our particular life circumstance. And we, as improvisational actors, are called on to respond to the "offering" which is our disability. If we choose to be good improvisational actors, we must "accept" this "offering," rather than "block" it. In accepting the offering, we take it up and include it in the action. In blocking the offering we shun it, push it to the side, and refuse to narrate it into the drama we are enacting. In the first case, the offering becomes generative. It is allowed to contribute to the story. In the second case, the offering is degenerative. It is an interruption to the story, and the audience is left in awkward silence wondering, "What was all that about?"

The tipping point in making a disability generative to calling is the decision to accept or block it. It is as if God has come to us through circumstance and issued a call, and we must choose to accept or block.

Every individual confronted with a disability must consider: Will I *accept* this offering which God has given me and include it in the story I act out, or will I *block* and reject, choosing to live around my disability rather than live through it?

How do we accept or block an offering? Ownership is the first step toward accepting a prompt; distancing is the first step toward blocking a prompt. When one owns a disability one effectively includes it in one's story. It becomes a part of one's dramatic role, so to speak. When we block, we refuse to include our disability as part of who we are. It is an odd ornament dangling from the belt of our costume without explanation. It serves as an impediment to us and an irritant to our audience. And it impedes and irritates not because it is large or ugly, but rather because it is unaccounted for. It is there for no reason. It refuses narration.

Accepting the offering of our disability, therefore, entails a willingness to include it in the next step of our life. It is a choice to go on with it, instead of going on as if it were not there or refusing to go on at all. With smaller disabilities, this process is relatively easy, both because it is easier to go on, but also because it demands less explanation to be included in the narrative of our life. If the disability is more profound, it is easier for the generative process to break down—a person can no longer conceive of a possible story line that can continue the action but also include the disability.

Perhaps the importance of narration and story-telling deserves some further explanation. We continually make of our lives some sort of narrative—at the very least for our own self-understanding, but generally also for presenting ourselves to others. I was struck by the importance of this in a conversation with a good friend. He was trained both as a philosopher and a psychiatrist and I had learned to have a high regard for his thoughtful insights. I was working on a project on human flourishing, and appealed to him for insight on what he had found to be the most essential elements of "human flourishing." After a long pause he said, "People have to make of their lives a narrative whole." He went on to explain that unnarrated parts of our lives have a way of demanding narration. We must narrate significant life events into the story of our lives. Refusing to confess sin, or accept failure, or embrace disappointment, or forgive offenses, leaves these elements unnarrated. And because they refuse narration they refuse resolution.

Narrating something into a story almost always involves granting it a future and a purpose. Meaningful components of a story almost never make a cameo appearance. They return of necessity. They may haunt the narrative with occasional appearances, they may surprise with a sudden appearance in an unexpected place, or they may be consistently woven into the plot itself. There are many options for narration, but "one and done" is generally not on the list. But it is a tempting strategy for narrating a disability. At the other extreme, granting a disability a future should not be confused with granting it eternity and goodness. Too often we demand resolution by having everything bad become good. This is indeed a common and particularly pleasant form of resolution. But it is common to fairy tales and G-rated movies. Life is rarely G-rated and it has far more in common with a Russian novel than it does with a fairy tale. We do not need to try to repaint all that is bad into being good. Our disability can remain a bad thing, but it must find its place and purpose within our story. It may be a foil to show true goodness; it may be a black background to show a polished gemstone with greater clarity; it may be the sand which creates the pearl; it may be the enemy that is beaten back for a day, but one knows it will rise again. However it is included, a disability must find its place.

And a final note on narration: the key to good narration is attachment to the hero of the story. The plot that drives the good story is at every point attached to the protagonist. The same way one makes sense of the diverse motions of the wheels of a clock by the movement of the hands, so one also makes sense of all the diverse stories within a story by their connection to the main character. We tend to see ourselves as the main character of our story, and this tendency is amplified when we are experiencing pain and suffering. But surely this tendency is mistaken. The main character of our story is Jesus Christ. It is his purpose that makes sense of our callings, his plot makes sense of our stories. He is ultimately writing us into his story. We do not simply suffer, we share in his sufferings. We are not merely tempted, we are tempted as he

was tempted. We do not merely wrestle with the flesh, we share in his incarnation. As we long for release from "this body of death," we are really longing to join in his resurrection. Our drama points forward to fulfillment in his Kingdom, and it is foreshadowed in his life, death and resurrection.

Disability and the Call of the Church

Everything that has just been said about disability, calling, and the individual has a direct parallel with the local church. Just as a disability comes unbidden to an individual, likewise disabled members can come unbidden to a church. The presence of a disability, whether in an individual or in a church, can feel as if it is a kind of imposition. But an imposition is not contrary to a calling. When God calls, he does not always call according to the preferences of an individual or according to the mission statement of a church. God ordains gifts and weaknesses, abilities and disabilities. It is easy for an individual or a church to look at a disability and say, "I have no need of you." But God has apportioned these abilities and disabilities as he wills, not as we choose. And no eye can say to a hand, "I have no need of you." Indeed, the weaker parts of the body are indispensable. They are to be treated with greater honor. They constitute a call, which when taken up, will be found to have edified the body.

The most important question regarding disabilities for a church is the same question that comes to an individual. In Vanhoozer's terms, will we accept the offering or will we block it? Will we do good improv or bad improv? Will we allow the disability to be narrated into our story, and brought forward into the drama, or will we block it?

Sadly, the church all too often blocks the offering.

We often tell our stories around the "normal" progressions of "normal" people. Those who fall outside the norms are somehow assumed to be external to the story of the church. Their life comes to the church as an imposition and an interruption. We must learn to narrate disabilities into the life of the church. Oftentimes it is the pulpit which most directly narrates the life of the church. It is there that we make sense of the connection between our contemporary lives, the Scriptures and God's eternal purposes. It is there that the improvisational life of the church is brought to completion. The countless activities of its many members are made sense of within the biblical narrative. Part of the task of the pulpit ministry is to include the disabled members of a congregation within the story of the church.

And furthermore, those with disabilities have much more than just their disability. Like every other person they are a composite of ability and disability, and no one ability or disability may be allowed to control a person's entire contribution to the life of the church. Finding a place for disabled persons also involves finding a place for their abilities—serving according to their abilities in all the ordinary tasks of the church just as any other member would. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find those with disabilities are even more eager than many other members in the congregation to serve in areas where their abilities are needed.

And finally, the church must seek to attach her disabled members to the central character of the narrative—to Christ himself. This must not be reduced to an eschatological hope for healing and completeness. Living and functioning in the eschatological Kingdom of God is a wonderful hope to which we all look forward with joyful anticipation. However, joyful anticipation is no replacement for present participation. The most direct way to attach those with disabilities to the main character of the divine drama is through attaching the disabled directly to the body of Christ itself as expressed in the substantive relationships which make up the local church in this present age. In this fashion, our improvisational response to disability will express not only an eschatological hope but also an immediate calling, imposed on man and church alike, ordained by God for the common good.

Notes

1. As Perkins puts it, "Every person of every degree, state, sex, or condition without exception must have some personal and particular calling to walk in." Perkins, William. *The Workes of That Famous and Worthie Minister of Christ*, In the Universitie of Cambridge, M.W. Perkins. [London]: Printed by I. Legate, 1605, vol. 1, p. 909.
2. Ibid., p. 903. Perkins, and Puritans more generally, distinguished between "general" callings and "particular" callings. The general calling is to salvation and new life in Christ and is the foundation of all callings. The particular calling comes to each individual as a life task. This discussion will center on the "particular calling."
3. Ibid.
4. For example: "The value of our calling is that it requires us to express the most fundamental truths of who we are. Our true life's work returns us to ourselves. Self-recognition and self-acceptance may be our calling's first gifts to ourselves. And the world." From *Find Your Calling Love Your Life: Paths to Your Truest Self in Life and Work*, by Martha Finney and Deborah Dasch, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1998, p. 21.
5. Perkins, p. 913–915
6. Perkins, p. 915.
7. Vanhoozer, Kevin J. 2005. *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 335.
8. Ibid., p. 339.

About the Author

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