

# Life: Bold and spicy

## *Finding Your Place in Ministry*

Acts 6:1-7

November 18, 2007

According to a story in the San Diego Union-Tribune, 17-year-old Nicholas Zenns was taking orders at the drive-thru window during his night shift job at Taco Bell when he heard a woman screaming. He turned and saw a very pregnant woman standing in front of him. So he pulled off his headset, called the paramedics and tried to make her comfortable. But the baby just wouldn't wait. "The baby's head just popped out into my hands," Nicholas said. Paramedics finally arrived and Nicholas washed his hands "about a thousand times" and finished his shift. According to Nicholas, this experience changed his life. "Things have been pretty bad in my life lately," he said, "and then I got to do this. I'm really glad."

We all want to be involved in something significant. For a Christian this flows from the nature and reality of what we call the Gospel ... And it is our participation in the Gospel (in other words, it's after we have accepted Christ) that we want to ask about how we find our place in the Gospel story. In the traditional language of the Bible, we need to find our calling. Calling has a very personal dimension to it. The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote in his *Journal*: "The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wants *me* to do; the thing is to find ... the *idea for which I can live and die*." That is the important personal dimension of calling.

But calling also has a very important corporate or communal dimension. For instance, what you just heard read from the Book of Acts, is not just about *me* finding *my* calling - because a big part of calling is not just "who or what am I supposed to do or be?" but also "Who or what are we are we supposed to be?" Calling flows from people finding their calling in community. What does this passage have to say about finding our calling? I will not give you (in 25 minutes or less) everything you need to know about finding your calling for the rest of your life. This story represents one slice from the early church about a community, a family of people, working together to find their sense of calling. Some people might call this a model for helping people find their place in ministry. What can we learn from finding our calling in this slice of life from the early church?

First, calling involves *identifying needs* - and plowing into those needs. In other words, ask yourself these questions: what needs or issues or relationships move you deeply at this point in your life? What causes you to weep or at least wring your hands? What causes you to say, "This has got to stop!" or "Someone has to do something about \_\_\_\_\_." It's interesting that some of the most profound callings and ministries and movements are borne out of struggle and suffering and problems. Somehow, someone turned a struggle or a crisis or a tragedy into an opportunity. (Our friends Eduardo and Juliana King who lost a son in Iraq and who started a ministry to hurting people in their

own community – it was out of their pain and grief and loss that God birthed a ministry that is touching others).

There was clearly a need, a problem, a crisis brewing in the early church. You can pick it up in verse 1. Here what was happening: back up to Acts 4:34-35 - “There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned fields or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostle’s feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.” That was the plan: people donated money for the needy people in the church community and the church leaders took it and distributed it. And apparently, it was working. But then the church growth (“In those days the number of disciples were increasing.”) put a strain on the administrative infrastructure. And as a result, some of the widows weren’t getting their daily hot lunches. These two groups had some tension to begin with: the Hebraic Jewish widows and the Grecian Jewish widows represented two different cultural groups and they didn’t always like each other. So the Grecian Jews started complaining – that’s a nasty Greek word, *goggysmos*, which was the same word translated from the Hebrew Bible when the people complained in the desert against Moses (see Exodus 16:2 – from this point on there was an unending process of complaining and murmuring. See Numbers 20:2-5).

Clearly, this is a potential crisis. This could blow up the whole church resulting in a church split: the Grecian Jews could have gone one way and the Hebraic Jews could have gone another way. What’s the big deal? The big deal is that the whole thing called Christianity and the Good News of Jesus Christ was at the stake. Followers of Jesus call it the Gospel and the Gospel is all about God’s plan to save us and make us new (see Acts 5:30-32). And it’s not just for individuals; it’s for the renewal of human connection. And the place where that connection happens is called the church. And the church is and always was supposed to be a multi-cultural, multi-racial, multi-ethnic family of diverse people united in Christ.

So clearly this is a crisis. There is a need. But the early church dealt with it so well. This could have tried to ignore it (as a friend of mine said this week Human beings are really good at denial”). Or it could have degenerated into finger-pointing and blaming – “It’s your fault, you don’t care about us Greeks.” “Hey, are you calling us incompetent? Your widows are just a bunch of crybabies.” They never let it get to that point. They saw the need and they said, “We have to do something about this need. This isn’t just a problem or a crisis; this is an opportunity.” So in verse 2 they gather everyone together and say, “Look, as a community we’re called to do something about this need.”

The beautiful thing about this story of calling is that it begins with identifying the specific and unique needs that lie all around us right now. What are the needs that you see? What are the opportunities where you can actually make a difference? Where is there a need in your life? In some of the church circles I’ve been in people use the word “burden,” as in, “the Lord has put a burden on my heart.” It’s a good word. My burden these days: I don’t want to end my life and have God ask me, “So there were about a billion desperately poor people who did not know me on the planet while you took up 80 years

of space. What did you do to make a difference?" I want to be able to answer with something. What burdens you these days?

Second, calling involves *focusing your life*. Here's one of the harsh realities of life: you can't do everything. I remember my dad trying to tell me that over and over again when I was in high school in college. "You can't do everything, Matt." It used to infuriate me. "Who says I can't do everything I want?" Well, God for starters. It's not enough to identify needs and then to plow into them with a big generous, open heart. Our lives need to be focused.

Notice how the focusing took place in this story. Read verses 2-4. The spiritual leaders could have taken this on and said, "Well, we're already doing the preaching and praying and teaching and spiritual leadership, so why not just take on a few more duties." But the early church was really smart here. They said, "No, we have to stay focused on our calling. If we don't stay focused, we'll dilute our primary focus." And then they went on to say, "So we're not going to get involved in feeding the widows their daily lunch." Does that strike you as cold and heartless? "Wow, and you guys call yourselves spiritual leaders and you won't even take time to make lunch for the widows?" And the apostles said, "No, we're not going to do that. Because if we do, we'll dilute the calling that God has given us. We must stay focused. But we'll make sure it gets taken care of. There is a genuine need and we can't just ignore it." So they developed a plan that addressed the need but allowed them to stay focused. That's good, solid leadership: focused but faithful.

Now there's something important to note here: one calling is not superior to the other. Both groups were called the same thing: ministry or service. Both groups were called by God. That's the amazing thing about developing a biblical view of the world. According to the Bible, God doesn't divide the world up into religious stuff and non-religious stuff. All of life is sacred and important to God. Your whole life – from studying biochemistry, to washing dishes, to making a movie, to singing in a worship service, to serving widows lunch, to making lunch for our university students, to spending time in prayer – your whole life matters to God.

Calling is a very beautiful concept. It allows me and you to pursue different paths of service to the same Lord Jesus with the same spirit of service and joy. Martin Luther once said, "The works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, but that all works are measured before God by faith alone ... Indeed, the menial housework of a manservant or maidservant is often more acceptable to God than all the fastings of a monk or priest, because the monk or priest lacks faith."

Let me ask you this: is your life focused? Is it clear at the center? Or are you so scattered and so busy and so fragmented that you don't even know which end is up? What's important to you? Are you living the life you really want? If not, what's missing? If not, what's been added that just gets in the way? Is your life focused?

Third, calling involves not only identifying needs and focusing your life; it also involves *developing your character*. We find a very clear statement from the early church about leadership: “we don’t just want to fill slots with warm bodies; we want people of character and integrity and spiritual vitality to lead us.” Here’s how character is described in this story: “choose seven men (they don’t just have to be men, but in this instance they clearly were seven men) full of the Spirit and wisdom” (verse 3). In verse 4 they are described as responsible – i.e. when you give them a job they will get it done. In verse 5 they are described again as “full of faith and the Holy Spirit.”

What is character? First of all, it’s something supernatural. It’s something far greater than just you. That’s why these descriptions and definitions of character always mention the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Christian life is always a supernatural life. It’s not just you or you and me gutting it out, doing our best to get life together. It’s a surrendered life, life given over to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. That’s the point of the laying on of hands in verse 6.

Secondly, it’s also the inner, deeper life of you. Someone has defined character as “who you are when no one is looking.” Character is who you’re becoming apart from blaming other people for our problems and defects. It’s easy to say, “I’m a pretty loving person except for when I’m around him or her or them.” No, that’s just the real you coming out. “I never get angry but they really tick me off.” No, that’s just the real you coming out. Who are you when no one is looking? Who are you below the water line of your life?

Did you know that when the Brooklyn Bridge was built in 1872 the engineers specifically designed it so that the amount of the masonry work under the waterline equaled the amount of masonry work above the water line? The construction team did their most patient and daring work where no one could see it: on the foundations of the tower under the water line. Character is who you are below the water line. It’s who you are when no one is looking. Character involves taking responsibility before God for my sins and my flaws. It’s saying, “He or she or they or those circumstances push my buttons of fear or anger or whatever, but you know what, the buttons are mine and ultimately I stand before God as a person of character so with the power of the Spirit within me, I don’t have to get my buttons pushed.

How about you? God doesn’t just want warm bodies to fill slots so we can get more done. That’s the horror of efficiency for efficiency’s sake. God doesn’t need that kind of volunteer force. God is looking for men and women of growing and sustaining character. So the question is not: Are you perfect? Are you complete? But the questions are: Are you growing? Are you learning from your mistakes and failures and even your sins? Is your heart growing softer in love and patience? Are you confessing your sins to someone – or do you have huge cracks under the water line that no one knows about? Are you approachable and teachable or do you get defensive and touch? If you understand the message of the cross ... you will be the most non-defensive person in the world. Do you spend as much time working under the surface of your life or do you just focus on what others can see? Does someone know your faults and rough edges and cracks? Are you

dealing with them? Are you blaming others for your character deficiencies? Is it really their fault or her fault or are you just failing to love well?

Then notice the results of this imperfect community of people as they struggle together in their sense of calling – verse 7. As people identify needs rather than live in denial, as people focus their lives, as people grow in character, and as they submit to one another, they grow together in love. The Christian community comes alive with power and vitality and love.