Calling and Clarity, by Doug Koskela

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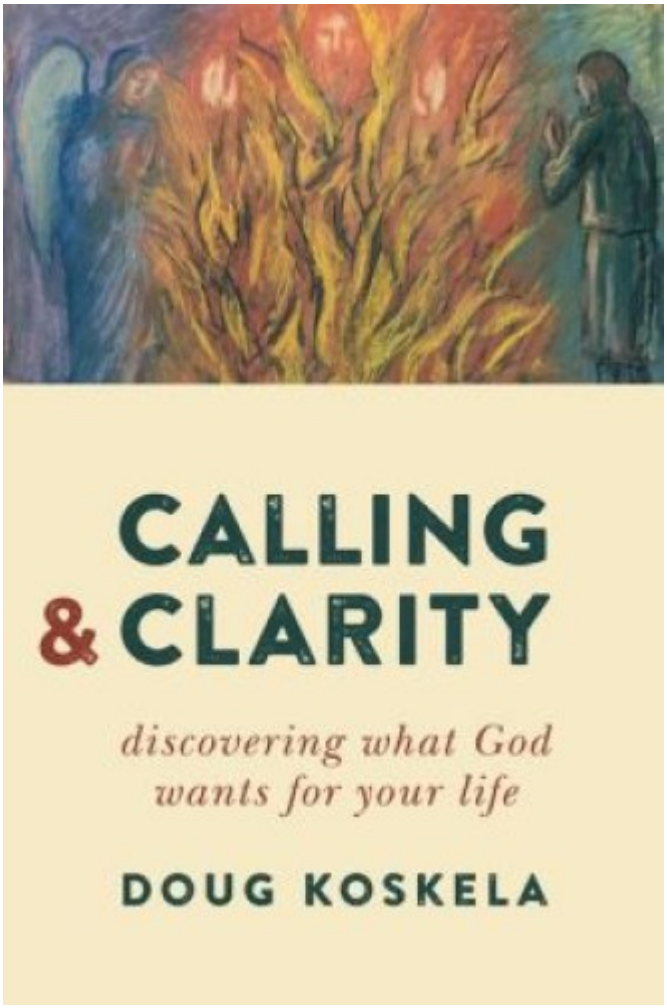
In Review



Calling and Clarity

By Doug Koskela
Eerdmans

What should I do with my life? What is God calling me to do?

These familiar, often unsettling questions are simultaneously broad and specific—an unknown ocean, threatening to overwhelm the asker. Hopes, limitations, cultural expectations, skills, loves, communal voices, and questions of identity and self-worth all contribute both clarity and confusion. The sheer volume of inputs from partially authoritative voices often make any answer seem partial and contingent, with revision an ever-present possibility.

An abundance of Christian writing on calling addresses this challenge. New resources on Christian discipleship, the relationship between faith and work, and theologies of vocation seem to come out almost weekly. In both mainline and evangelical contexts, the feast continues to increase.

Doug Koskela, associate professor of theology at Seattle Pacific University, provides another serving, this one intended for young adults. To cut through the confusion and frustration that surrounds questions of vocation, Koskela addresses the what, the how, and the who of calling. After providing a vocabulary of calling, he lays out a process of vocational discernment and unpacks a relational theology of calling by asking, Who is the caller? The book is practical, conversational in tone, and peppered with accessible stories and scriptural examples of calling.

Vocation and calling are about all of life, and Koskela captures how we follow God’s voice in everything from work, to family, to reconciling with friends. God’s calling can meet us on our road to Damascus, but it is also present in the mundane. Koskela provides clarity by way of a threefold definition of calling: missional calling, direct calling, and general calling.

The most valuable portions of the book are the discussions of missional calling, which Koskela defines as your purpose and your primary contribution to God’s kingdom—“the thread that ties together” your gifts and passions with the world’s needs. This calling, which takes time and community to discern, provides the orientation and direction for your life. Missional calling may overlap with your work, but it might not, and it can be summed up in a sentence or two.

The heart of Koskela’s idea of missional calling resonates with a point made by the poet W. H. Auden: “To acknowledge a vocation is, like marriage, to take a vow, to live henceforth by grace of the Absurd, to love for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.” Missional calling is the particular activity in God’s kingdom that you are married to, the service and work

you sustain as part of God's redemptive work in the world.

Koskela names and critiques the vocation-related myths that are in the cultural air young adults breathe while "finding themselves"—the idolatrous dream of always "keeping your options open," and the dramatic call to "change the world." He also notes that career and calling are not synonyms; that obsession with the future is an easy way to be unfaithful in the present; that true freedom resides in sustained dedication and obedience to God's voice; and that God's new world will be free of poverty not because of our efforts, but as a result of God's restorative work. These are correctives that Christians in any context need, but they are especially pertinent to college settings.

Without resorting to clichés, Koskela argues that the how of discerning a calling is daily, communal, often hard, almost boring. No "vocational algorithm" exists. Instead there is a sustained rhythm to the act of discovery through a commitment to the spiritual disciplines. These practices are about deepening your relationship with God, forming yourself so you can "learn the sound of God's voice" and provide fertile soil for the discernment of a missional calling. Calling is about discovering truths about yourself, but it is more about encountering the truth of who God is and what God asks of us in a broken world. Unfortunately, a glaring omission in Koskela's book is the practice of sabbath. His account forgets that we do not hear God's voice through the sheer effort of busy, disciplined activity.

A central weakness of so much literature on vocation is that it presents itself as universal when in fact it is for a specific few. Much current theology regarding God's calling is by the creative class for the creative class. Koskela, who names this danger, does not fully escape the classist trap. Although he asserts that there is breadth to the kingdom work God calls us to, there is little breadth to the stories of discernment and calling he shares: most of them are situated in college classrooms and professors' offices.

As Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson says: "To be is to have a role in the story of Jesus." There is danger in perpetually deferring the discernment of that role, and Koskela provides a helpful map. Yet this map is not for everyone. While it is certainly for young adults trying to discern God's call, *Calling and Clarity* seems better suited for those who listen to students asking the questions of calling in collegiate settings—college chaplains, professors, guidance counselors, and pastors in college towns. Simply put, Koskela provides guidance for those who guide.