

CALLING, VOCATION, AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION FOR CHINESE MISSION

Introduction

This article is a brief discussion about calling, vocation, and spiritual formation as it relates to Chinese Christian participants in mission service. Originally written as an assignment for a class, the author interviewed Chinese Christians about their journey of spiritual formation, their life callings, and their vocational stewardship.

There are several misconceptions about calling, vocation, and spiritual formation in the Chinese church that may hinder the effective advancement of Chinese mission mobilization and training. First, involvement in global mission is seen by many as something special for the few select Christians who have one special missionary calling for a lifetime. As a result, the pool of potential missionaries is unnecessarily limited. In addition, this shows churches and some people do not really understand the very essence of the call to the Christian life. Second, missionary work is often assumed to be mainly focused on evangelism and church planting done by full-time professional Christian workers. Those who do not feel gifted in these areas do not even consider going to the mission field. This secular vs. sacred divide makes it difficult to mobilize all the talents and gifts of the body of Christ to accomplish God's global mission. Third, spiritual maturity is something to be achieved through having enough knowledge and theological training, which should be reached before one can consider serving God. Or some who feel called naively think that being called and having spiritual passion is enough, without preparing and being tested. A balanced viewpoint of calling, vocational stewardship, and spiritual formation is needed for all Chinese Christians, so that they can all fulfill God's calling for them as a people in this stage of the unfolding of the Great Commission.

Addressing the Misconceptions about God's Mission

Understanding Calling – The “Who” of God's Mission

The first misconception about God's mission is related to the understanding of calling. If God is the caller, who is He calling and what is He calling them to be in the world? Every person has a primary or general calling to “belong to Christ and to participate in His redemption of the world” (Theology of Work n.d.). Many Chinese Christians journey may began with a Gospel message where they learned that God loves them and what Jesus had done for them on the cross. They may think it is just an offer of salvation, a benefit for them without recognizing it involves giving over the control and lordship of one's life. This “too-narrow gospel” is too individualistic and “focuses only on what we've been saved *from* rather than also telling us what we've been saved *for* (Sherman 2011, 71). One interviewee clearly understood this at her conversion: “It was at that moment, I saw Jesus on the cross, I didn't die, He died. Now what do I do going onwards, living my life? And it was at that time, I know my life doesn't belong to me anymore.” Christians often have the wrong idea that only special people have a calling to join in God's work. Everyone is called to surrender their lives to follow Jesus and to participate in God's mission. Every Christian has a particular or specific calling to live out their life uniquely as God designed them with all their talents and gifts to glorify Him and serve others and the world.

Understanding Vocational Stewardship – The “What” of God's Mission

The second misconception in the Chinese church is the understanding what God's mission involves. What we are being called to do? First we must break down the false dichotomy of the sacred and secular arenas. Wright asked the question, “Where does “missionary work begin and end”? He challenges the idea that mission is only limited only to geographic

locations (i.e., overseas) or in the kind of ministry (i.e., evangelistic work). He raises questions like, “Is it only the moments of evangelistic opportunity in that world, or can our work itself participate in God’s mission?” His answer is “the whole world as arena of our mission” which includes all workplaces including “the public arena, the world of business, education, politics, medicine, sports” (Wright 2010, 17-18). There needs to be teaching for the Chinese church along the lines of what is being shared in the Theology of Work Project which said so succinctly the truth that, “All Christians are called (that is, commanded) to conduct everything they do, round the clock, as full-time service to Christ” (Theology of Work n.d.). Colossians 3:17 reminds us of this truth as well: “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.”

When global mission is mentioned, most Chinese Christians expect a missionary to be someone who is a full-time worker in evangelism and church planting in unreached places. The Chinese mission movement is targeting ministry along the Silk Road, which includes sensitive countries and people in the Muslim world. These places do not allow missionaries to enter, so what are needed are bi-vocational workers who have a legitimate job and can make tangible contributions to the society, doing that work with integrity and excellence while being salt and light for Christ.

One interviewee began with a clear calling to ministry to a particular minority group. Later her ministry expanded to serving other minority groups. But in recent years, a major shift happened that was in line with her changing understanding of calling over the years.

The word *calling* is also kind of redefined over the years. Back then I thought calling is just a special guidance to do a particular job. Now I think calling is for every Christian; it’s God’s call to every child of His to glorify Him. So, calling is the same for everyone, but He guides us differently to different job or situation, but our ultimate goal is to glorify Him. So, for several years I felt my calling was to work with the minorities ...God was leading me to leave full-time ministry and enter into business and to do ministry to fulfill

His calling with a different form, way of doing things. I was leaving ministry as I had known it and heading to business, entrepreneurial direction.

Though she began as a full-time minister, she continued to follow God's calling in her relationship with God and recognized when God was shifting her ministry focus and avenue. Those in full-time vocational ministry can sometimes lose sight of that. She warned about this tendency, "I realized sometimes Christians will worship our calling rather than worship God. So focused, we didn't even notice God has taken a turn, we're still heading toward our calling. So, I think it's very dangerous—this is my calling, stick to it. Not even looking at God who gives us the calling or who called us." When some vocational ministers make this shift, Chinese church leaders or congregants would begin to question whether they have lost their calling when they go into secular work. This "leaving the ministry to follow the world" attitude is unhelpful, especially for those who are in creative access countries. God can use previous experiences to lead His worker into a different phase of ministry that s/he would not have been equipped to do without those earlier callings. Chinese church senders need to understand the broader definition of God's mission so as not to discourage their bi-vocational workers.

In addition to answering the question of where, Wright also addresses the question of what we are to be and do: "Or does the church's mission include the embodiment of the message in life and action? Sometimes this question is raised as the tension between *proclamation* and *presence*. Or between *words* and *works*...the integration of what the church is meant to *be* as well as what the church is meant to say" (Wright 2010, 22). Garber supports this idea by laying out the vision of how Christians are to "Know the world and still love it" and to have the eyes to see the world through God's perspective and do something (Garber 2014, 19, 47). Sherman shared about a pastor who compared themselves to the pink spoons at Baskin-Robbins and challenged his congregants to see themselves as those who are "offering foretastes of the kingdom to our

neighbors near and far...stewarding our vocational power for the common good” (Sherman 2011, 23.)

Another interviewee also learned through many more shifts in her walk with God after giving her life to Christ. The subsequent life callings she experienced were to marriage, motherhood, children’s ministry, work as an engineer and manager, youth ministry, and Muslim ministry. Through all those roles, she summarized her understanding of God’s word in and through her in this way: “I learned true mission work, ministry work often times is done when you die with Jesus on the cross, it's not when you labor and do all this smart strategy, all this work. It was already done. It was more of your heart than your labor.”

In the Old Testament, the role of the priest was to act as mediator between God and people, like Aaron and his whole priestly line. But God also had in mind that God’s people would be “a kingdom of priests,” ministering to the world both in the Old Testament (Exodus 19:5-6) and in the New Testament (1 Pet. 2:9, Rev. 1:6, 5:10, 20:6). Traditionally, people have understood this as clergy serving the congregation in a professional way. Historically, after the Protestant Reformation, the emphasis on the “priesthood of all believers” was meant to unleash every Christian to participate fully in ministry to the world. Van Engen addresses the Biblical perspective of “laity” and “clergy”. The word “laity” really just means the “people of God” who are to grow up into maturity in Christ as the Church (Ephesians 4:15). Many churches are run by 10% of the church members. Often those few active members are viewed as helpers for the pastor. But in fact, though the ordained clergy have authority given by the community, they should be the servant of all. The pastor’s role is particularly important for equipping the rest of the church to serve with their gifts and talents the church, the unbelieving community, even the world (Van Engen 1991, 151-157).

The priesthood of all believers is hard for many Chinese churches and Christians who live in a hierarchical society and tend to elevate the pastoral and evangelistic callings. Yet the kinds of people needed to build viable platforms of ministry in creative access countries are likely entrepreneurs, accountants, teachers, and information technology, not necessarily only pastors and evangelists. Vocational stewardship of such gifts needs to be inspired and discovered in Chinese churches for use on the mission field.

There is a need for paradigm shifts in the theology of work. There is a universal command to work given in Genesis. Viewed correctly, work is good and God-given, not a result of sin. These ideas must be taught to Chinese who tend to have such a high value on hard work. They also tend to value those professions that have high status and pay. They need to see that God's work in the world includes everyone. Sherman's description of the different kinds of works of God (redemptive, creative, providential, justice, compassion, revelatory) is instructive for the Chinese church, who tends to only see evangelistic ministry work as the only aspect of God's mission (Sherman 2011, 102-103). Not everyone is necessarily called to evangelism and church planting. Frontline mission work in cross-cultural settings does require special training for contextualized gospel proclamation, but a living witness of a Christ-follower can be done in many roles and through many vocational avenues.

Understanding Spiritual Formation – The “How” of God’s Mission Preparation

The third misconception in the Chinese church is regarding the wholistic spiritual formation required for missionary preparation. Missionary candidates are often expected to be Christians who have met certain standards, that they must know exactly who, what, where of their calling. This is seldom the case as most people agree that calling is a dynamic process that

requires time and nurturing (Lemke 2020). It is also unrealistic to expect them to be super-spiritual and perfect people before they can be used by God on mission field. However, the opposite mistake of sending people out too early without adequate preparation is equally dangerous. Some churches are eager to get involved in the Chinese Mission Movement and send young people out as soon as they sense they are called to mission work. Others send people out to cross-cultural fields automatically as part of a Bible school even if the students have no heart for cross-cultural ministry. Often people interested in missions are encouraged to have Bible school or seminary degrees in theology or missiology. Certainly, formal theological training has its place. But there is a need for a paradigm shift in Chinese church leaders to a more holistic view of what is needed for mission preparation.

First, potential missionary candidates must understand the motivation and direction of their calling. This requires pastors and mission mentors to know them personally, patiently hear their life stories and the various factors that have led the person to conclude that God is calling them to cross-cultural mission work. The question isn't only whether the person has a calling or not, but rather where are they on the journey to obeying God's direction and what is the next step. They may not be ready now, but their call can be nurtured in the church and workplace.

Second, the key character traits of the person are as important as their skills and knowledge. Humble and teachable people can be taught along the way. Gifted and ambitious people who are not willing to listen to or work with others usually bring problems to themselves and others. Sherman addresses the importance of character formation as a priority emphasis when equipping vocational stewards. Four key character traits of servanthood, responsibility, courage, and humility must be cultivated. In addition, knowing how to share power and recognize the gifts of others according to God's example of managing power particularly in

situations where people seem less powerful (Sherman 2011, 138). An assessment of the person's spiritual walk and life experience should focus on faithfulness to what God has already asked of them and how that person has grown through the maturing process. Mistakes and failures may not be a sign that they are not called to ministry. It is important to identify if they recognized their weakness and were willing to grow through the lesson. Most candidates young in age, life experience, or spiritual maturity may not be ready to be sent right away. Spiritual formation is a process and God often takes His time in preparing His servants for the work He has called them to do. What may seem to be a detour in our plans can often be God caring about the transformation of the worker as much as the accomplishment of the work. When God calls His people to a task, He both accomplishes His mission through them and transforms them at the same time as they participate in His work.

One interviewee who served as a Bible translator surprisingly said that originally Bible translation was at the bottom of the list for his desired mission role. He has been greatly used by God to train translators, but he felt it was His way to transform his character:

This is really not my personality, study for 5-6 hours in the library, trying to do some in-depth research. I feel like I'm a people person, I'm not a book worm. God told me, "I will change you", so He did, He really changed me over the years. He let me know He can make me whatever He wants me to be. It's not about what I can do for Him, but it's about what He can work in me so I can serve Him. So, I think He used the Bible translation experience to let me experience Him in a very deep way."

Third, an assessment of the person's spiritual gifts and work experience. When a candidate is lacking in life skills, work or ministry experience, or teamwork, it is prudent to encourage them to spend the time to exercise their gifts and gain experience while in their home country before going to an unfamiliar cross-cultural situation. This is not wasted time, but training time.

One interviewee against her wishes reentered the work force after her kids went to school. She found a job outside of her major and had to go back to school to get better equipped. However, she was quite successful, getting multiple promotions and was even offered a top leadership position. She eventually felt that job was a calling, but not necessarily for the purpose of ministry,

It was continuation of my life belongs to Jesus, now He puts me in this working situation, and so I was submissive. I don't have a missional sense, but have a submissive sense, so I didn't actively do a lot of ministry over that platform...I certainly grew a lot, I prayed a lot, there were so many desperate points at work...I didn't know what to do...I experienced discrimination...often times I reached my utmost limits. It was difficult. But I overcome it because I stand not on who they think I am, but on who God thinks I am.”

Through that job, she felt she received a lot of diversity training and gained cross-cultural experiences in her workplace that ended up being particularly useful for her later when she began cross-cultural ministry.

The Old Testament story of Joseph is an example of God's sovereignty in positioning His chosen leader for His purposes. His brother's betrayal and unfair treatment in Potiphar's house and prison are hardly what one would welcome as character training. But Joseph was able to grow and endure through the hardships because God was with him (Genesis 39:2, 23). He learned valuable skills in administration along his journey.

Implications for Contextualized Professional Practice

In order to combat these misconceptions in the Chinese church, several areas of teaching and practice need to be considered. First, a more holistic missional emphasis in church ministry is needed. Pastors can provide clear teaching about the breadth of God's global mission. From salvation to service, Christians need to be taught clearly about the Gospel as wholistic transformation. Every Christian has been called to follow Jesus and participate in the expansion

of God's kingdom at home and abroad. Chinese churches are already promoting world mission through courses like Perspectives and Kairos. This is a good start, but it needs to go further into the practice of the church, helping people identify their gifts and calling, empowering them to use them to serve, not only in the church but in their community. This must include, but not be limited to, the many Chinese Christians interested in mission work who are struggling with the question of missionary calling and how to discern it. The church can make opportunities available for them to begin to take steps of faith to grow in areas of development toward potential mission field areas. Young people need to be given opportunities like short or mid-term mission trips to explore the possibility of long-term service.

Secondly, appropriate teaching on the theology of work and vocation would greatly benefit Chinese churches. Inviting church members of different vocational areas to share how they live out their faith in the marketplace can be an encouragement to see the other six days of the week as spiritual outlets. They can also be encouraged to meet for fellowship in vocational groups like medical field, business, education, technology to discuss and implement strategies for how they can be salt and light in their arena of influence. Young people in the church need opportunities to explore different career paths. Shadowing older church members in various fields and getting mentorship in the marketplace could be a more effective way of discipleship than just sitting in Sunday school.

Unlike the traditional missionary roles of the past, the new landscape of missions in sensitive countries requires more bi-vocational workers. The church is full of Chinese Christians who have gifts in many different vocations. Many of these gifts are needed on the mission field for reaching limited-access countries which require creative ways to penetrate and bring the Gospel to unreached places. What is needed is to mobilize and send vocational stewards with

those giftings to do what they do best for God's Kingdom work in those places. For this to happen, different levels of commitment to helping start mission initiatives can facilitate the use of people with gifts that some church planting missionaries do not have. One strategy is sending a whole team instead of just thinking of sending individuals. For example, Chinese churches are keen to use Chinese language teaching as a platform for ministry in Muslim countries. Clearly the main resource needed are language teachers, but that is not enough. In order to start a language school as a legitimate business on the mission field, they may need to recruit an entrepreneur, an accountant, administrator, and tech support in order to initially set up a working system. These support staff may contribute 1-2 years of time to launch the initiative. Those people may need some of the basic cross-cultural and language training in order to learn how to live in the country for a shorter stay, but their equipping will be different than some of the long-term workers. Having this kind of flexibility and thinking can involve more people with a variety of gifts which can open the pool of people that can be sent. Recruitment should not only look for young people, but seasoned middle age or retirees often have more life and work experience that can bring spiritual mentorship and stability to a team.

Lastly, whole life discipleship should be central to the pre-field training of missionary candidates. Physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual development should all be considered as people are being mobilized for mission work. Many of these areas cannot be learned just through books and classroom alone. Mission mobilizers are often eager to get people to raise their hand at a mission conference and commit to going to the mission field. Life experience and relational skills can sometimes only be gained through following through in work and family life takes time. Churches need to have the patience to help people walk through the process of preparation. Besides the important knowledge needed in mission courses and cross-cultural training, other

skills, apprenticeship can be encouraged as opportunities to grow. This could be in some vocational training area with a church member like teaching or medical care. Especially for young people, being given the chance to observe then lead Bible study or prayer meetings with a pastor or elder can be available coaching. They need opportunities for feedback, encouragement, even the chance to fail.

Conclusion

The goal in the local church needs to be preparing every member to be able to respond to a call to go wherever God calls them to go. Every believer needs to learn how to grow in spiritual disciplines to feed themselves spiritually and learn how to productively live and work together in community with others. It is also every person's responsibility to bear witness and bear fruit. So those who go out need to know how to share their spiritual story and live out their faith among those to whom God has sent them. This may require some basic language learning and culture learning for the sake of being able to build relationships, show hospitality, and live out their life in work and family with integrity.

When people recognize that all of life belongs to God and all our gifting and work is worship to Him, there is no need to divide what is spiritual or what is not. It's all a spiritual act of worship (Rom 12: 1-2). When people understand their Christian life is surrendering everything to Him, when we see needs that we can meet with our God-given talents, the areas of weakness or inadequacy are opportunities to grow and depend on Him. The church needs to grow in believing that when the needs of the mission field come up, it is their responsibility to share those needs with the congregation for prayer and potentially for someone to be called to step up and meet that need because they have what it takes if they're willing to be a redemptive agent of

change. That will include being a part of change in that situation that is needed at that time on the field and a willingness to be changed in the process of obeying God's call.

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Reflection Questions

1. How has calling and vocation been viewed in your church? To what extent has the secular vs. sacred divide been an influence in the Chinese church?
2. How can teaching about every Christian's general calling, theology of work, and particular ministry calling be incorporated into your church (from the pulpit, through small groups, or Sunday school?)
3. After several years of work experience in your field, could you consider praying about doing your vocation in an area of the world where the Gospel is needed? If you are a church leader, can you identify some mature Christian professionals in your congregation to consider how they might be part of a missional team in an unreached field?
4. What different levels and kinds of training could you consider connecting with now to begin moving in the direction of cross-cultural work?

Interview Questions

A. Your Spiritual Formation

1. What kind of spiritual or religious influences did you have growing up? Who were the key influencers?
2. Please briefly describe your journey toward a relationship with Jesus Christ. (include any key events, people, media, etc.)
3. What are some of the influences that has contributed positively to your Christian formation?
4. What have been your greatest obstacles to your Christian formation?

B. Life Callings

1. Can you name/list some of the life callings you have experienced and when did they occur in your life timeline? Then share a little about each of them.
2. When was the most challenging time working out your life callings? How did you overcome such struggles?
3. What do you think is the most important aspect of understanding your own calling?
4. What advice would you give to Chinese young adults who are trying to discover their calling after coming to Christ?

C. Missionary Calling and Vocational Stewardship

1. How would you define a missionary calling? A tentmaker? Would you call yourself either one of these? Why or why not?
2. How do you think the Chinese church is doing in encouraging their members to be faithful stewards of their vocational calling?
3. What relationship is there between the Chinese church's vocational stewardship and Chinese mission sending?

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Thank you for reading my paper. Feedback and dialogue about this paper is welcomed. Email me at: kuawenhua@protonmail.com.