

EMBRACING THE CALL
A Review of Martin Marty's Presentation

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By Dr. Ron Benefiel
President, Nazarene Theological Seminary

Dr. Martin Marty is one of those rare individuals who makes an impact on his world with ideas, new ideas, the re-forming of the old into the untried molds of the new, the synthesis of the theological with the historical and sociological. One of those people who is "ahead of his time" and always "stirring the pot." Dr. Martin E. Marty is professor emeritus at the University of Chicago where he taught on three of the university's faculties. He has served as the director of the Public Religion Project Linking Religion and American Public Life and the senior editor of Christian Century. Dr. Marty has authored over 50 books and received the National Book Award in 1972 for "Righteous Empire". He is past president of the American Academy of religion, the American Society of Church History, and the American Catholic Historical Association. Dr. Martin had been awarded over 60 honorary doctoral degrees.

As he spoke to us at the recent Faith, Learning and Living Conference, the ideas came out "fast and furious" (laced all along with humor). Wit and wisdom were intertwined seamlessly. As I listened, I was keenly aware that by the time I engaged one of the profundities he laid on the table, he had, in the meantime, moved on to three more equally profound thoughts... leaving me in the dust. This man can conceptualize, frame sentences, and speak faster than I can think! Initial impressions of Dr. Marty? ...a brilliant man, an earnest scholar, one who is spunky and essentially happy, and -- a characteristic not to be taken for granted -- a great churchman. It was

apparent from the beginning of his presentation that he had plenty to say to us, about his topic and about life in general.

The thesis of his presentation centered around the idea that everyone has a calling. Institutions also have a calling. And that calling is measured in "billions of particulars". That is, the calling we receive is very specific to us and is discovered in the specific characteristics or our individual persons and events of our every day lives.

Sociologists place us into categories. We are all classified by discipline, denomination, gender, age, and so forth. But we don't want to be limited by the categories we are placed in. "The last thing a crab wants to be called is a crustacean!" So even though it may be helpful to categorize, our sense of calling transcends our being categorized.

For Marty, part of our uniqueness has to do with our distinctive set of multiple identities... the specific worlds we live in and carry with us that create for us a space, a particular identity, and a specific calling that are uniquely ours. From our unique perspective, we can see things others cannot see. Potentially, we are on a horizon that is ours alone. At this point, Marty proposes coining a new word for the English language. He suggests that people responding to their specific calling from their unique place in life might be called "horizontal" people. (Not to be confused with "horizontal"!).

Not everyone responds to their calling. The rich young ruler was called to sell all and follow Jesus. In the billions of particulars of life, there was one particular that kept him from following the call of Jesus -- his unwillingness to sell all and give to the poor.

Thinking further about how people experience a call, most people have a sense that:

- they are not alone in the universe (basic belief in God);
- God is not "it" but "Thou" (belief in a transcendent God);
- they matter and what they do matters

(God knows them personally and cares about them).

For Marty, these are the beginning elements of a call.

From this point, Marty proceeded to discuss different dynamics of a call, especially as it relates to our students and the opportunities we have as professors to encourage students in the pursuit of their calling. First, he suggested that few of our students have any technical sense of why we use the word "calling". Prior to a few centuries ago, the common understanding was that only a few people had a call. But the influence of Luther, Calvin and others has produced, what Marty called, the "democratization of the call", the sense that all are called and that our calling is carried out into the events of our every day lives.

Second, Marty warned that "where one loses the calling, one loses the soul". For Marty, this is very much evidenced in our world today. Consumerism and accumulation of goods have replaced a sense of calling for many people. Those who want a full life would be well advised to approach it by "embracing their call". For people in the 21st century, words from the Christian vocabulary are especially relevant here... words like mission, stewardship, and especially vocation (or calling).

Third, for many people a calling is a concept, but not something they know personally. That is, it is conceptual but not existential. Marty suggests that experiencing a call is best experienced in community, or at least in social relationships. In the history of education in the Western world, there have been three primary credos:

-- I believe in order to understand

(truth is divine and can be apprehended);

-- I think therefore I am

(truth is rational and can be acquired); and

-- I respond although I will be changed

(truth is social and can be gained in human interaction).

Marty prefers the third. A calling is best known and embraced in a social context.

Fourth, for the Christian, the call is framed in the language and knowledge of Scripture. The picture of a call is Abraham out under the stars, Jacob wrestling with an angel, Paul confronted with the question, "Why are you persecuting me?" Here again, we see that a call is always personal. "It always has a name on it". It is particular. If nondescript is recognized in the English vocabulary, why not "descript"? Our calls, the calls of our students and the calls of our institutions are specific, they are "descript".

Finally, in our very secular world we can be tempted toward being overwhelmed. There is plenty of bad news to focus on. The temptation of many is to "whine" about all the changes in our world and how terrible it is becoming. Instead, Marty proposes that we explore alternatives and offer alternatives to our students. While being aware of and knowing how to read "the signs of the times", rather than being overwhelmed, we should be confident in our calling and in the One who calls us. Further, we should encourage our students to embrace the alternatives by helping them discover their calling as well. We can do this in part by asking them probing questions. Questions like:

-- "Do you know what it would be like to live your life with a sense of calling?"

-- "Are you aware of the irreplaceability of your call as you find your particular calling and your place in the Kingdom of God?"

Marty closed with a final challenge for us to take seriously the opportunities we have both to live out our own calling before our students and to encourage each of them to discover their own God-given calling in the billions of particulars of life.

Thank you Dr. Marty! I dare say Martin Marty's words will be long remembered and valued. His reminder that we have a specific calling and that life is fulfilled in discovering and living out that calling is a timely challenge. Further, the idea is reassuring that in a world that threatens to be overwhelming, confidence in our calling and in the One who calls us can give us hope and confidence to move ahead, to be "horizontal" people.

In reflecting further, I do have a couple questions in the presentation that I wish we could have discussed. I wondered at times if Dr. Marty was addressing the notion of calling from something of a generic perspective. It seemed that he discussed calling as "democratic" not only as "for the common people" but perhaps also as "available to be discovered by all" (regardless of whether one is a person of faith or decidedly secular). The question is, what place does God play in our calling? Is a calling something we find inherent within ourselves or is it something we discover in interactive relationship with God? Or is it both? Is there a difference in the calling one embraces as a Christian from the calling one might know as a secularist?

I also wonder about how the idea of a very specific, particular, "descript", personal, (private?) calling interfaces with the idea that we have privatized Christianity in our modern world.

Is the idea of our personalized calling in any way at odds with the sense of finding a new identity in Christ that is primarily a matter of becoming part of a new corporate identity (the Church)? If I have a specific calling, how does it relate to the calling of others? If institutions also have a calling, how do the particular callings of individuals interrelate in such a way that a shared institutional calling is heard and embraced?

And finally, what is the direction of a call? If it is intensely personal, can a call be confused in its direction so that we think it is essentially for and about us instead of for and about the Kingdom?

Thank you Dr. Marty for stirring the pot...