

From Being Retained to Being Retrained: How God Led One Lawyer to Ministry Life

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Abstract: This personal story tells of my practice as a lawyer, and how God called me to use my skills, gifts, and knowledge in service of vocational ministry. It concerns how God is at work in the lives of ordinary believers who might have never considered vocational ministry, and encourages those who are prompted by the Spirit in this direction to heed that call.

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I spent ten years of my life as a lawyer. This is not a confession, although it sounds like one. As a lawyer, I worked predominantly as a litigator (trial counsel) but supplemented that with solicitor's (planning) work. God used moments in both aspects of my legal career to call me out of it and into vocational ministry.

My solicitor's work involved estate planning, which included preparing clients' wills—how their assorted possessions would be distributed at the eventuality of their death. One client who came in to have a will prepared was a very mild-mannered older gentleman. He had been divorced and had a son and daughter. He saw his daughter only infrequently, he told me, and he and his son had mostly been on good terms, but some financial issues between them had frayed the relationship of late. He explained in our appointment how he lived alone and spent most of his time tending to his coin collection. When he came back to sign his will after I had prepared it, he gave me a sleeve of vintage foreign coins, each with a paragraph written about

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their history and quality. He found reasons to pop by the office a few times over the next couple of weeks, leaving a gift every time. He was clearly desperately lonely, but my role was to competently draft his final wishes, which I did.

A few months later, a younger woman came into my office and asked to meet with me. She was clearly agitated when I met her, and she explained that she was this man's daughter. He had neatly arranged all of his possessions so they could be divided according to his plans and ended his own life in the basement he rented. My role, however, had been to competently draft his final wishes, which I did.

Some time later, I represented a man in what was, ostensibly, a family business dispute. Though he had been made co-owner and manager of the family business by his mother, she continued to rule the operation by absolute fiat. When she decided that her son (who had worked for the business since he was in elementary school) had not given enough to it, she unilaterally withheld his part of the profits to "reinvest them" for him. Her behaviour was, frankly, atrocious and unlawful. My client spoke in our initial meeting about how he "hated" his mother and wanted to "get his revenge." Once again, I was retained to provide my services to seek legal redress, which I did.

After two years, the matter proceeded to a lengthy trial and my client ended up recovering all that was due to him. In the end, however, he had not "gotten his revenge." He clearly hated his mother even more after the trial, because now all of his worst suspicions about her had been proven true. I, however, had been retained to provide services to seek legal redress, which I did.

Both of these stories sat uneasily with me. In each of them, I had done nothing wrong—in fact, I had done a pretty decent job! Yet, as I reflected on both of these situations, the Lord stirred in me the realization that while I may have solved these clients' financial and legal problems, both of them had much deeper hurt and suffering in their lives that I had not addressed. After all, those were not the services that I had been retained for.

Still, in many ways my work was rewarding, and I especially enjoyed the intellectual challenges that formed the meat of the

practice of law. I had no plans to change my career. However, while my heart may have sought to plan my own way, the Lord was busy establishing my steps in a much different direction.

On a sunny Saturday morning in March, while I was (of all things) washing my car in the driveway, the Lord, in His wisdom, communicated those plans to me. I am neither a charismatic nor the son of a charismatic, but for the first time in my life since my conversion, I sensed the tangible presence of God around me, giving me a picture (albeit through a glass darkly) of myself teaching the Scriptures to a group of people, with my legal practice in the hands of a longtime friend and law school classmate. Though the details were not filled in, the call to me was clear—I was to pursue vocational ministry. I had no choice but to consider my steps as having been established.

From an objective viewpoint, I was not the prototypical candidate for vocational ministry. Having come to faith in my early twenties, I did not grow up in church and had no formal theological education. Still, the Lord had placed this call on my heart and was making it evident to me that His call was indeed clear, and that it was one that was necessitating urgent action on my part.

I have come to understand that this is the way God often chooses to work. When Jesus started out His earthly ministry, here is how Mark records Him calling His first disciples:

Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father

Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him. (Mark 1:16-20)²

I note two things from this account of Jesus calling these men—laymen who, like me, did not have any formal theological education or seemingly any ministry experience. First, they *immediately* followed Him (and that is not just due to Mark’s love of the word “immediately” in his gospel account; Matthew 4 uses the same adverb). These men, by God’s grace, recognized the urgency of the situation and responded accordingly. However, what stood out even more strongly was how Jesus drew directly upon the life experience of these men in calling them. “Follow me,” He said to these men who had known nothing professionally but a life of being fishers of fish, “and I will make you become fishers of men.”

The Barristers’ and Solicitors’ Oath of the Law Society of British Columbia requires lawyers, among other things, to “uphold...the rights and freedoms of all persons according to the laws of Canada and of the Province of British Columbia.”³ My job had been to advocate for people to receive everything that was due to them according to their rights, but it seemed that Jesus was now calling me to encourage people to receive everything that was promised to them by being right with God.

I do not mean to overstate my case, or put myself in the company of the first disciples on account of my experiences. That said, it does not surprise me that our unchanging God uses the same method today that He has throughout redemptive history: calling the foolish and the weak to plainly proclaim the testimony of Jesus. For me, however, this is a paradigm shift—God has shown me that I am to use the skills that I have developed advocating for my clients to get every last penny due to them to instead convince people to follow the example set by the One “who, though he was in the form of God, did

² All scriptural references in this article are to the English Standard Version (ESV).

³ Barristers’ and Solicitors’ Oath of British Columbia, pursuant to The Law Society of British Columbia, *Law Society Rules 2015*, r 2-84

not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:6-8).

And so, God has laid it on my heart, as He has with many throughout the generations, to call His people to let their manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ. Colossians 3:17 has been a lodestar verse for me as I have sought to be faithful to this call, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” It is a reminder to me that Jesus is the Lord of my life in all things, and there is no area that His counsel and the Scriptures do not touch. In every area, I am to consider whether my words and actions are honouring and glorifying God.

He has been good as I have walked out the call so far. That classmate of mine that God showed me taking over my practice? That picture became a reality within seven months of that fateful car wash. The trials occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, while sometimes maddening, have given me ample opportunities to think and pray through the intellectual and spiritual questions that come from being a leader in the church and follower of Christ in a time of tumult. I have seen God at work in many ways that have been made explicit, and know He is at work in myriad other ways that He has, in His wisdom, not yet shown me. He is truly Lord of all.

This is only my story. It may not be yours; indeed, one of the beauties of the diversity of the body of Christ is that we are all gifted in different ways, and the Lord will use each of us as He sees fit. Maybe, though, you are in a position similar to me, where you have been prompted by the Spirit to use your gifts in a different way than you do now. Perhaps you know someone who has sensed a calling to something beyond what they have known, and they are unsure of how to proceed. Do not forget that God does not conform to the wisdom or the patterns of this world; sometimes He calls fishermen to do His work, sometimes He calls tax collectors to be His apostles, sometimes

He even calls lawyers to help share the key to knowledge, and to help others enter His kingdom. His call, when it comes, is always urgent. My (non-legal) advice? Follow it.