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Theological Understanding of Full-Time Ministry Calling and Commitment: Insights From Galatians 1:11–24 among Bible School Students in Kupang, Indonesia

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explores how Bible school students in Kupang, Indonesia, interpret the call to full-time ministry through the lens of Galatians 1:11–24 and how this understanding shapes their vocational commitment. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis of reflective essays. Thematic analysis revealed three primary themes: (1) Divine Initiation of Calling, (2) Personal Transformation and Sacrifice, and (3) Navigating Practical Challenges. Findings indicate that grounding vocational identity in biblical narratives enhances theological conviction, fosters personal transformation, and equips students to respond resiliently to contextual challenges. The study highlights implications for holistic theological education that integrates biblical foundations, reflective practice, mentorship, and practical preparation, ultimately cultivating ministers who are both theologically grounded and contextually competent

1. Introduction

Background of the Study

The call to full-time ministry is a central theme in Christian theology and practice, often viewed as both a divine initiative and a vocational commitment (Banks & Ledbetter, 2001; Guinness, 1998). Throughout church history, the sense of calling has shaped the lives of ministers, missionaries, and church leaders who dedicate themselves to lifelong service (Tidball, 2008). This vocation is not merely a professional occupation but a spiritual identity that demands faithfulness, sacrifice, and perseverance (Hunter, 1987). In contemporary contexts, how individuals perceive and respond to God's call remains critical, particularly as ministry increasingly requires resilience amid social, cultural, and economic challenges (Schwarz, 2013).

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Among the many biblical foundations for understanding the call to ministry, Galatians 1:11 - 24 offers a unique perspective. In this passage, the Apostle Paul narrates his testimony, a powerful account that emphasizes the transformative power of the gospel he preached, which was not of human origin but received through revelation from Jesus Christ. Paul's defence of his calling, which highlights the divine authority of his commission and his radical transformation from persecutor of the church to servant of the gospel, provides an enduring framework for theological reflection on the nature of ministry as a divinely initiated calling that requires unwavering commitment.

Problem Context

In Indonesia, theological education and Bible schools are crucial in preparing future ministers for pastoral and missionary work (Steenbrink, 2003). These institutions provide biblical and theological knowledge and cultivate spiritual maturity and vocational commitment (Sumual, 2019). Students entering Bible schools often come with a sense of calling; however, their journey is marked by various challenges. Economic pressures, family responsibilities, and cultural expectations frequently test their determination to pursue ministry full-time (Pariela, 2016).

The context of Kupang, a region in East Nusa Tenggara, exemplifies this tension. While Bible schools in this region continue to produce committed ministers, students often face questions about the sustainability of full-time ministry in a society where financial stability is highly valued (Boiliu, 2020). Therefore, the case of Bible school students provides an important lens to examine how theological understanding interacts with personal commitment in shaping future ministers. Central to this study is whether theological reflection—particularly through Paul's testimony in Galatians—strengthens students' resilience in responding to their vocational call.

Theoretical Foundation

The concept of "calling" has been extensively discussed in theology, spirituality, and practical ministry studies. Martin Luther's notion of vocation emphasised that all work could be seen as service to God (Luther, 1520/2018), while modern evangelical traditions often distinguish between general Christian calling and specific vocational ministry (Guinness, 1998; Banks & Ledbetter, 2001). Within this discourse, commitment to ministry has been analysed as a personal conviction and a communal responsibility, where perseverance plays a key role in sustaining long-term service (Carroll, 2006).

Paul's Galatians 1:11–24 account contributes a theological foundation to this discussion. His insistence that his gospel came "not from man, nor was he taught it, but received through a revelation of Jesus Christ" underscores the divine origin of his mission (Bruce, 1982). Furthermore, Paul's transformation illustrates that calling involves a radical reorientation of life, where personal ambitions are subordinated to divine purposes (Dunn, 1993). For Bible school students, such a perspective provides a theological anchor, affirming that ministry is not self-chosen but God-ordained, and therefore requires enduring commitment.

Research Gap

Although scholarship on vocational calling and ministerial identity is abundant in Western theological literature (Carroll, 2006; Schwarz, 2013), studies focusing on the Indonesian context remain limited. Most existing works on ministerial commitment in Indonesia emphasise sociological or institutional aspects, such as church growth, leadership, or denominational development (Pariela, 2016; Boiliu, 2020). Few have examined the theological dimensions of calling and commitment among students in Bible schools, particularly in relation to biblical texts that shape their self-understanding.

This gap is significant because theological education in Indonesia is deeply intertwined with cultural realities (Steenbrink, 2003). Students must navigate between scriptural ideals and societal pressures, and their ability to integrate the two determines the strength of their vocational identity (Sumual, 2019). By focusing on Galatians 1:11–24 and its interpretation among Bible school students, this study addresses the need for context-sensitive theological research that connects biblical insights with contemporary ministerial formation.

Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is threefold. First, it aims to explore how Bible school students in Indonesia interpret the call to full-time ministry based on Paul's testimony in Galatians 1:11–24. Second, it examines how much this theological understanding influences their commitment to lifelong ministry. Third, it intends to contribute to the broader discourse on theological education by providing insights into how biblical foundations can be integrated with contextual realities in preparing future ministers.

By pursuing these objectives, the study seeks to demonstrate that theological reflection is not merely an academic exercise but a vital component of vocational identity and resilience (Carroll, 2006; Guinness, 1998). It also underscores the need for Bible schools to intentionally engage students with biblical texts that shape their understanding of calling and commitment.

2) Material and Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the theological understanding and vocational commitment of Bible school students in Indonesia. The case study approach is suitable for examining complex phenomena within their real-life context (Yin, 2018). By focusing on a specific cohort of students at a Bible school in Kupang, the research allows for an in-depth understanding of how biblical interpretation (Galatians 1:11–24) shapes students' perception of calling and their commitment to full-time ministry.

Participants

The participants were 20–25 students enrolled in the Bible school's ministry program. Selection was based on purposive sampling, targeting students who had expressed a clear sense of vocational calling and were willing to engage in theological reflection. Demographic data such as age, gender, and length of study were collected to contextualize the findings.

Data Collection

Multiple data collection methods were employed to ensure triangulation and enhance the credibility of the findings, namely (1) semi-structured interviews – conducted individually to explore students' personal understanding of calling, their reflections on Galatians 1:11–24, and their perceived commitment to ministry. (2) Focus group discussions (FGDs) – facilitated dialogue among participants to capture collective perspectives, shared experiences, and challenges in pursuing full-time ministry. (3) Document analysis – review of students' reflective essays, sermon outlines, and personal journals to corroborate interview and FGD data.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying, coding, and categorizing patterns and themes related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process included familiarization with the data by reading transcripts and notes multiple times; Generating initial codes to identify key theological concepts, vocational experiences, and perceptions of commitment; Searching for themes by clustering related codes (e.g., divine calling, personal sacrifice, societal challenges); Reviewing themes to ensure they accurately represent the data and answer the research questions; and defining and naming themes to produce a coherent narrative linking biblical understanding to vocational commitment.

Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility, dependability, and confirmability, the study implemented several strategies, namely (1) member checking – participants reviewed and verified key findings for accuracy; (2) triangulation – combining interviews, FGDs, and document analysis to cross-validate findings; and (3) peer debriefing – consultation with fellow researchers and theological educators to review interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Bible school administration. All participants provided informed consent, were assured of confidentiality, and had the right to withdraw at any stage. Data were anonymized, and sensitive information was handled with strict confidentiality.

3. Results and Discussion

Data Presentation

Data analysis focused on exploring how students interpret the call to full-time ministry based on Galatians 1:11–24 and how this theological understanding influences their commitment to lifelong service. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), three primary themes emerged from the interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis: (1) Divine Initiation of Calling, (2) Personal Transformation and Sacrifice, and (3) Navigating Practical Challenges.

Theme 1: Divine Initiation of Calling

Participants consistently emphasized that ministry is perceived as a God-ordained vocation rather than a personal career choice. Many students referenced Paul's testimony in Galatians, highlighting the significance of divine revelation in confirming their calling:

> "Like Paul, I feel my call to serve is from God, not from what people expect of me. It's a matter of obedience to His voice" (Student A, Interview, 2025).

This perspective reflects a strong theological foundation in which students understand that ministry is initiated and directed by God. By interpreting Paul's calling as divinely sanctioned, students differentiate between human ambitions and spiritual vocation, internalizing the principle that true ministry is obedience-driven rather than reputation- or status-driven. Several participants articulated that recognizing divine initiation fosters humility, as they acknowledge their role as instruments in God's work rather than architects of their own ministerial careers.

Furthermore, this theme suggests that vocational identity is inseparable from spiritual discernment. Students indicated that understanding ministry as God-ordained gives them clarity in decision-making, particularly when facing societal pressures or conflicting personal goals. It reinforces perseverance, as the recognition that God has called them provides an anchor against doubts, fears, and external discouragement. Ultimately, this theme demonstrates that theological conviction—the belief that God actively calls and commissions—forms the core motivational framework for students' commitment to full-time ministry.

Theme 2: Personal Transformation and Sacrifice

Students recognized that full-time ministry demands personal transformation and sacrifice, highlighting that commitment is both spiritual and practical. The data revealed that understanding Paul's radical change from persecutor to servant inspires students to reorient their own priorities:

> "I realized ministry is not about personal ambition. I have to surrender my plans to serve where God leads me" (Student B, FGD, 2025).

This theme underscores that ministry is not merely an occupation but a life-altering commitment requiring the realignment of personal desires, lifestyle, and ethical frameworks. Many participants shared that embracing full-time ministry meant confronting personal weaknesses, reevaluating career ambitions, and cultivating virtues such as patience, selflessness, and integrity. The reflective essays analyzed in this study highlighted students' acknowledgment of daily struggles, including emotional fatigue, interpersonal conflicts, and spiritual doubts, which they view as opportunities for growth and sanctification.

Additionally, the theme of sacrifice emphasizes the relational dimension of ministry. Students expressed awareness that dedicating oneself fully to God's work can affect family relationships, friendships, and social status. Yet, by internalizing the narrative of Paul, they perceive sacrifice not as loss but as participation in God's redemptive mission. This theological lens transforms challenges into meaningful experiences, reinforcing that spiritual transformation and willingness to sacrifice are central to sustaining a lifelong ministry vocation.

Theme 3: Navigating Practical Challenges

While theological understanding provides motivation, students also face practical realities such as economic pressures, family expectations, and societal norms. Several participants expressed concern about balancing ministry with financial stability:

> "I want to serve full-time, but I worry about supporting my family. Sometimes it feels like a tension between faith and reality" (Student C, Interview, 2025).

This theme illustrates that vocational commitment is not solely a matter of spiritual conviction but requires strategic engagement with contextual challenges. Participants reported navigating pressures to pursue secular employment or additional income sources, highlighting the tension between obedience to God's call and meeting basic life responsibilities. Recognizing these challenges allows theological educators to tailor programs that not only impart biblical knowledge but also equip students with practical skills in financial stewardship, time management, and interpersonal negotiation.

Moreover, this theme emphasizes the importance of resilience and adaptive problem-solving. Students who integrate theological understanding with realistic preparation are more likely to sustain commitment despite obstacles. Educators can respond by providing mentorship, pastoral guidance, and peer support, creating an ecosystem where spiritual formation and practical preparation reinforce one another. By addressing both the divine and the contextual dimensions of ministry, this approach ensures that students are holistically prepared for long-term vocational engagement.

Discussion

This study analyzed how students interpret the call to full-time ministry through Galatians 1:11–24 and how this theological understanding shapes their lifelong vocational commitment. Employing thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), as stated above, three primary themes emerged from interviews, focus groups, and document analysis: (1) Divine Initiation of Calling, (2) Personal Transformation and Sacrifice, and (3) Navigating Practical Challenges.

First, the findings illuminate the complex interplay between theological understanding and vocational commitment among Bible school students. The first theme, Divine Initiation of Calling, aligns with classical theology that views calling as a divine initiative shaping identity, direction, and purpose (Guinness, 1998; Banks & Ledbetter, 2001). Students' reflections demonstrate that grounding vocational identity in biblical narratives like Paul's testimony in Galatians 1:11–24 enhances decision-making clarity, fosters humility, and strengthens resilience. Theological education should therefore intentionally center on such biblical exemplars to help students internalize ministry as obedience to God rather than human approval or ambition.

The second theme, Personal Transformation and Sacrifice, corresponds with research emphasizing vocational calling as involving spiritual and ethical formation (Carroll, 2006; Hunter, 1987). By engaging Paul's transformation, students recognize that full-time ministry demands surrender of personal ambitions, character cultivation, and endurance through challenges. Reflective exercises and narrative engagement facilitate this transformative process, integrating theological insight with self-awareness and ethical discernment. Consequently, curricula should promote reflection, mentorship, and experiential learning to foster deep personal and spiritual growth.

The third theme, Navigating Practical Challenges, highlights economic pressures, family expectations, and societal norms that test vocational commitment. While theological conviction motivates, effective ministry preparation requires equipping students to address contextual obstacles (Schwarz, 2013; Pariela, 2016). Integrating practical training—such as financial stewardship, time management, and interpersonal skills—within theological programs enhances resilience and sustainability. Mentorship and peer support further help students negotiate tensions between spiritual ideals and real-world demands, bridging academic learning and lived ministry.

Collectively, these findings advocate for holistic theological education that integrates biblical foundations, reflective practice, personal formation, and practical preparation. This approach aligns with contemporary pedagogical models emphasizing cognitive, affective, and behavioral integration (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Theological education must transcend content delivery to actively cultivate vocational identity, moral character, and adaptive capacity.

Moreover, this study contributes a context-sensitive perspective on ministry education in Indonesia and similar sociocultural settings. Students navigate a complex matrix of spiritual aspiration, economic necessity, and social expectation. Curriculum design and mentoring should reflect local realities while maintaining biblical fidelity. Addressing both divine calling and practical challenges enables institutions to produce ministers who are theologically grounded and contextually competent.

Based on the Paul's narrative in Galatians, it is known that Paul emerges the text as a vital pedagogical tool. Galatians 1:11–24 functions not only as theological text but also as a model for vocational identity, ethical commitment, and resilience. Engaging students with biblical case studies illustrating lived ministry fosters deeper understanding of spiritual vocation and its demands, bridging doctrinal knowledge with practical formation. Besides be based on the text, execcise and peer learning as well as mentroship are needed.

Reflective exercises, peer learning, and mentorship are critical strategies for sustaining vocational commitment. These align with experiential and collaborative learning approaches in theological education (Banks & Ledbetter, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Structured reflection and dialogue enable students to process challenges, discern God's guidance, and cultivate resilience. Mentorship provides role models, accountability, and practical advice, linking classroom learning with real-world ministry.

It is revealed also that vocational commitment is dynamic and relational, shaped by divine calling and human experience. Students' reflections reveal growth as they integrate theological insight, personal transformation, and contextual awareness. Theological education should thus be an ongoing process, supported by mechanisms extending beyond formal coursework, such as alumni mentorship, spiritual retreats, and continuing formation.

Finally, ethical and servant-oriented leadership must be intentionally cultivated within curricula. Students' understanding of ministry as service to God aligns with leadership theories emphasizing humility, accountability, and relational integrity (Carroll, 2006). Embedding biblical exemplars and reflective practice in leadership training prepares leaders to navigate spiritual and practical challenges with integrity. This study's insights extend beyond Indonesia, offering a global model for theological education that integrates biblical foundations, reflective exercises, mentorship, and practical preparation to cultivate ministers who are both faithful and contextually effective.

Implications for Theological Education

This study underscores the centrality of biblical narratives in shaping theological identity. Engaging texts like Galatians 1:11–24 helps students perceive ministry as divinely initiated rather than humanly chosen, fostering a robust sense of vocational purpose that informs both intellectual understanding and spiritual formation.

Paul's transformation—from persecutor to gospel servant—provides a powerful exemplar, illustrating that true ministry entails radical life reorientation, sacrifice, and obedience. Integrating this narrative into curricula emphasizes calling as relational and transformative, inspiring students to reflect on their spiritual journeys and vocational motivations. Structured reflective exercises—journaling, guided theological reflection, case studies—enhance theological understanding and personal growth by connecting biblical teachings with lived experience. Reflection fosters critical thinking about calling, commitment, and ethical ministry, promoting self-awareness and spiritual maturity.

Moreover, as stated above, mentorship programs offer guidance, encouragement, and practical insight from experienced ministers, modeling navigation of spiritual and practical challenges. Such programs bridge theoretical knowledge and lived ministry, reinforcing classroom lessons and fostering resilience. Addressing practical challenges is vital for sustaining long-term commitment. Integrating discussions on economic pressures, family expectations, and societal demands equips students to anticipate and respond strategically to obstacles, cultivating problem-solving skills, adaptability, and perseverance.

Therefore, theological education should integrate academic learning with spiritual formation. Courses combining biblical exegesis, doctrinal studies, ministerial practice, and

spiritual disciplines create holistic environments where students embody theological principles and internalize their calling. In Indonesia, theological education must address the interplay between biblical principles and local cultural realities. Contextualized teaching enables students to apply theology faithfully and responsively, preparing ministers for effective community service.

Next, as has been described, peer learning and collaborative exercises reinforce understanding and commitment. Small-group discussions, projects, and peer mentoring foster community, accountability, and collective resilience essential for sustaining ministry. Also, tthical and servant-oriented leadership development is crucial. Examining biblical leadership models like Paul's ministry teaches service, humility, and integrity. Embedding these principles in teaching, mentorship, and reflection strengthens ethical frameworks and prepares responsible leaders.

This study, in deeper understanding, also reflect ministry demands continual growth and adaptation. Theological education should instill lifelong learning, encouraging ongoing engagement with scripture, theology, and practice to maintain spiritual vitality and vocational commitment. Addressing ministry's emotional, social, and practical challenges requires fostering resilience and well-being. Programs on stress management, spiritual disciplines, and community support promote holistic development, preparing students for ministry's demands.

These implications extend globally. Emphasizing biblical foundations, reflective practice, mentorship, and contextualized teaching offers a model for preparing committed, competent ministers worldwide, integrating spiritual formation, academic learning, and practical training to bridge divine calling and real-world ministry.

4. Conclusion

Based on what have been described above, this study explored how Bible school students in Kupang, Indonesia, understand the call to full-time ministry through Galatians 1:11–24 and how this shapes their vocational commitment. Three interrelated themes emerged: Divine Initiation of Calling, Personal Transformation and Sacrifice, and Navigating Practical Challenges.

The first theme reveals that students view ministry as God-ordained, emphasizing obedience to divine calling over personal ambition. Paul's testimony anchors this understanding, reinforcing that ministry originates from God and sustains vocational identity amid societal pressures. This highlights the necessity for theological education to ground students in biblical foundations to strengthen spiritual and vocational formation.

The second theme shows that full-time ministry requires profound personal transformation and sacrifice. Students recognize the need to realign their lives with God's purposes, prioritizing service over ambition. Reflective exercises, mentorship, and engagement with biblical exemplars foster self-awareness, ethical discernment, and spiritual growth, enabling internalization of ministry's relational and transformative nature.

The third theme underscores the importance of navigating practical realities such as economic pressures, family expectations, and social norms. Vocational commitment depends not only on theological conviction but also on adaptive strategies and resilience. Integrating practical preparation with spiritual formation equips students to address real-life challenges effectively, demonstrating the need for holistic theological education that blends biblical knowledge, personal development, and contextual awareness.

Together, these findings affirm that preparing competent, committed ministers requires more than academic instruction. It demands intentional engagement with scripture, reflection on personal and ethical challenges, mentorship, and practical skill-building. Students' experiences in Kupang indicate that integrating these elements enables theological education to cultivate ministers who are both theologically grounded and contextually equipped for lifelong vocational commitment.

Recommendations

For theological institutions, curricula should intentionally integrate biblical narratives such as Paul's calling in Galatians 1:11–24 to strengthen theological identity and provide concrete vocational models. Reflective practices—including journaling and discussion—should be incorporated to facilitate personal and spiritual growth. Establishing mentorship programs that connect students with experienced ministers is essential for vocational discernment, ethical decision-making, and practical skill development. Contextual training addressing societal pressures, economic realities, and family obligations will better prepare students for ministry's practical challenges. Additionally, fostering community through peer learning and collaborative projects enhances mutual support, accountability, and resilience.

Students are encouraged to engage actively with scripture and theological reflection to internalize ministry's divine foundation. They should approach ministry as a transformative journey, embracing sacrifice and ethical responsibility as integral to vocational service. Developing practical skills to navigate contextual challenges is vital for maintaining vocational integrity while balancing spiritual, social, and economic demands.

Future research should include longitudinal studies tracking vocational commitment over time among Bible school graduates. Expanding research to other Indonesian regions and international contexts would assess the generalizability of these findings. Investigating the effectiveness of educational interventions such as mentorship and reflective exercises can identify best practices for sustaining vocational commitment in theological education.

In conclusion, this study advocates for theological education that holistically integrates biblical foundations, spiritual formation, and contextual preparation. Such an approach cultivates ministers who are faithful to God's calling, resilient, competent, and effective in addressing ministry's practical realities. The insights provided offer valuable guidance for educators, students, and policymakers committed to strengthening vocational commitment and preparing future leaders for sustainable, lifelong ministry.

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