

UNDERSTANDING κλη̂σις IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Lois K. Fuller Dow

McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, ON, Canada

Introduction

κλη̂σις is a feminine noun whose form is related in a quite regular way to the verb καλέω. A number of grammarians have noted that such nouns in -σις generally express the *action* of the related verb.¹ This is in contrast to neuter nouns related to verbs but ending in -μα, which generally denote the *result* of the action (cf. ἡ κρίσις and τὸ κρίμα).² In the case of κλη̂σις, however, there is no corresponding -μα noun.³ This means that a speaker or writer had no choice in the matter. He or she could use only κλη̂σις or the articular infinitive⁴ to nominalize the action of καλέω, and there are in fact no articular infinitives of καλέω in the New Testament.⁵ This would make us suspect from the outset that κλη̂σις would have to signify both action and result.

BDAG⁶ gives two basic meanings for κλη̂σις: (1) An invitation to experience of special privilege and responsibility, *call, calling,*

1. E.g. Bruce M. Metzger, *Lexical Aids for Students of New Testament Greek* (Princeton: by author, 1978), p. 42, and A.N. Jannaris, *An Historical Greek Grammar* (London: Macmillan, 1897), § 1018.

2. Jannaris, *Grammar*, § 1023, but he notes a trend over time to change -σις nouns into -μα nouns (§ 369) and says that today -μα nouns denote both actions and abstract notions, a trend that must alert us that these characterizations were probably not absolute even in New Testament times.

3. The noun κλη̂μα means a twig, and comes from a different root.

4. K.L. Schmidt, ‘καλέω, κτλ’, *TDNT*, III, pp. 487-96 (493), says κλη̂σις is equivalent to καλεῖν or καλεῖσθαι, but the difference of form most likely signals some difference of meaning.

5. GRAMCORD search.

6. Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, et al., *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3rd edn, 2000).

invitation. Mostly by God, a divine call and invitation to enter the kingdom of God. (2) Position that one holds, *position, condition*. First Corinthians 7.20 is cited for the second meaning, while all the other New Testament references (1 Cor. 1.26; Rom. 11.29; Eph. 1.18; 4.1,4; Phil. 3.14; 2 Thess. 1.11; 2 Tim. 1.9; Heb. 3.1; 2 Pet. 1.10) are cited for the first.

The Controversy over 1 Corinthians 7.20

It will be helpful here to quote the verse around which controversy centres, 1 Cor. 7.20: ἕκαστος ἐν τῇ κλήσει ἣ ἐκλήθη, ἐν ταύτῃ μενέτω (NASB: Let each man remain in that condition in which he was called).

Not everyone agrees that the meaning ‘position or condition’ is a valid one. Schmidt in the *TDNT*,⁷ for example, hotly contests its admissibility. His polemic is directed against Luther’s translation of κλήσις in 1 Cor. 7.20 as *Beruf* (occupation, trade, profession) rather than *Berufung* (calling), which was the basis for Luther’s doctrine that all occupations are divine callings, not just the positions of clergy and religious. Schmidt insists that κλήσις everywhere in the New Testament is ‘a technical Pauline or deutero-pauline term’⁸ for God’s calling to salvation, and so has nothing to do with one’s position or condition in life. This is related to his assessment of καλέω, which he says is ‘an ordinary word which acquires special significance through the naming of salvation as the basis and goal, and especially of God as the Author and Consummator’.⁹ Regarding 1 Cor. 7.20: ‘The sense of calling as a state is ruled out elsewhere in the NT. We may thus conclude that a special sense should not be assumed in one verse so long as the normal sense is possible.’¹⁰

A brief survey of a few theological dictionaries and commentaries finds most authors in line with the position of either BDAG or Schmidt. Bromiley, not surprisingly, supports Schmidt,¹¹ and says that the call comes to those in various circumstances, but is not those circumstances. Grosheide says 1 Cor. 7.20 means that one is to remain

7. Schmidt, ‘καλέω’, pp. 487-96.

8. Schmidt, ‘καλέω’, p. 491.

9. Schmidt, ‘καλέω’, p. 491.

10. Schmidt, ‘καλέω’, p. 491.

11. G.W. Bromiley, ‘Call, Calling’, *ISBE*, I, pp. 580-82.

in Christianity, which is the meaning here of κλη̂σις.¹² Vincent on this verse says κλη̂σις is ‘not the condition or occupation, a meaning which the word does not have in classical Greek nor in the NT, where it always signifies the call of God into his kingdom through conversion’.¹³ Bruce maintains that κλη̂σις here ‘is the divine call from darkness to light (cf. v. 17); it is to this, not to one’s social status, that everyone should remain faithful’.¹⁴ Kruse,¹⁵ Farrer,¹⁶ and Morris¹⁷ also see κλη̂σις as God’s call in this verse, though in conjunction with the external circumstances of life. On the edge of this position, Thiselton thinks that God’s call is the meaning, but says, ‘The very use of the phrase ἐμέρισεν ὁ κύριος in v. 17a should make us wary of claiming that Paul did not regard some prior role in society as a matter of divine vocation.’¹⁸

On the other hand, Craig writes, ‘Usually κλη̂σις means “calling” in the sense of invitation to Christian discipleship (1.26). Despite the lack of parallels, it must mean here [1 Cor 7.20] *state* or “lot”.’¹⁹ Mare concurs: ‘In the New Testament, *klēsis* is used of God’s effectual call...but here must be taken to include one’s station in life.’²⁰ Louw and Nida are also in this camp. κλη̂σις is entered in two semantic

12. Frederik W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 169.

13. Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, 1887), III, p. 219.

14. F.F. Bruce, *I and II Corinthians* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 71.

15. C.G. Kruse, ‘Call, Calling’, in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daneil G. Reid (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Downers Grove/Leicester: IVP, 1993), pp. 84-85.

16. M.R.W. Farrer, ‘Call, Calling’, in J.D. Douglas (ed.), *New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 181-82 (181).

17. Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC; Leicester: IVP, 1958), p. 113.

18. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), p. 549.

19. Clarence T. Craig, ‘The First Epistle to the Corinthians’, in *IB*, X, pp. 1-262 (82).

20. W. Harold Mare, ‘I Corinthians’, in Frank E. Gaebelein (ed.), *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), X, pp. 173-297 (233).

domains, ‘communication’ and ‘status’.²¹ Under ‘communication’ it is placed in the more specific categories of ‘call’ and ‘invite’. Words in these domains are: ‘call’ φωνέω, καλέω, προσφωνέω, προσκαλέομαι, συγκαλέω, παρακαλέω, μετακαλέομαι, κλήσις and κλητός; ‘invite’ καλέω, φωνέω, παρακαλέω, είσκαλέομαι, άντικαλέω, κλήσις and κλητός. Notice that κλήσις is the only noun in these lists. Under ‘status’ as a general category, κλήσις shares the domain with two other nouns, τόπος and βαθμός. The New Testament seems not to have had much need of a general noun for status, since all three of these nouns are used only once or twice with this meaning. Coenen, however, lists a number of more specific nouns that could have conveyed the sense of one’s situation or role in life before conversion in 1 Cor. 7.20: ἔργον, πόνος, ἐπαγγελία, πρᾶγμα, τέχνη, σχέσις and τάχις.²² This may indicate that the special association of κλήσις (related to calling) may be significant to Paul in his choice of word in 1 Cor. 7.20. Although Coenen says the translation ‘condition’ or ‘state’ for κλήσις in this verse is ‘lexically questionable’, his closing comment, ‘It is more likely that Paul has in mind a particular place or station (perhaps even in the church),’²³ leaves it unclear whether he accepts the second BDAG meaning or not. We should also note that Louw and Nida put καλέω but not κλήσις into the semantic domain of ‘name’.

Use outside the New Testament

At this point, we must carry our study a little farther and try to find out what κλήσις seems to have signified in the Greek of New Testament times, and if this throws light on the New Testament usage. According to Liddell and Scott, the meanings of κλήσις are ‘I. 1. *a call, a calling*, 2. *a calling into court, summons, prosecution*, 3. *invitation to a feast*, 4. *invocation (of gods)*, 5. *calling to aid*, 6. *calling in a religious sense (1 Cor 7.20)*; II. *a name, appellation, reputation*; III. Grammatically, *nominative case nouns*; IV. in one place, [a folk] etymology of the

21. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida et al. (eds.), *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: UBS, 2nd edn, 1989).

22. L. Coenen, ‘Call’, in *NIDNTT*, I, pp. 270-76.

23. Coenen, ‘Call’, p. 275.

Latin word *classis*.²⁴ It is not clear what is meant by ‘in a religious sense’. (Coenen mentions divine call in mystery religions.²⁵)

Moulton and Milligan²⁶ show κλη̂σις in papyri and inscriptions meaning a ‘summons’ to testify in court, a child’s ‘name’ on her tombstone, and an ‘invocation’ or incantation to be recited for magical effect.

The Septuagint uses κλη̂σις only three times (Jdt. 12.10; 2 Macc. 5.14; Jer. 38 [31].6) to mean invitation to a banquet (Judith and 2 Maccabees) and calling to go to Zion.

Josephus uses κλη̂σις six times,²⁷ where it means a name or appellation (four times), a summons, and pronouncement.

The Apostolic Fathers follow Pauline usage, with *1 Clem.* 46.6 echoing Eph. 4.4, and *Barn.* 16.9 speaking of ‘the calling of his promise’. Hermas means by κλη̂σις the initial call to salvation (Herms, *Man.* 4.3.6) and, apparently, the people who are called (Herms, *Sim.* 8.11.1)²⁸ (in the sense of κλητοί? cf. English, ‘the washing’ to mean the laundry, i.e. clothes that are being washed).

BDAG cites Philo (first century) as a witness for the meaning ‘position or condition’ in life, in *Legatio ad Gaium* 163. Philo uses the word κλη̂σις twenty-five times in his extant writings.²⁹ The translators³⁰ understand all of them as ‘name’, ‘title’ or the word used to designate a thing. *Legatio ad Gaium* 163 is no exception. It says the Egyptians call ibises and vipers ‘god’, giving them this appellation or title. Philo is poking fun at someone who calls himself a god. (Cf. *Leg. All.* 1.95,96, where the Supreme Being uses the names or titles θεός and κύριος.) To see this as a condition of life, rather than a name or

24. H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon* (revised by H.S. Jones and R. McKenzie; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

25. Coenen, ‘Call’, p. 270.

26. J.H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (1930; repr. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997).

27. Karl H. Rengstorf (ed.), *The Complete Concordance to Flavius Josephus* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2002).

28. Kirsopp Lake, *Apostolic Fathers II* (LCL 25; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912), p. 215.

29. Günter Mayer, *Index Philoneus* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974).

30. F.H. Colson and G.H. Whitaker (eds.), *Philo with an English Translation* (LCL; Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1929) and various translators of *Les Oevres de Philon d’Alexandrie* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1962–1975).

title used by others to designate and ascribe, unnecessarily distances the usage in this passage from its clear consistency of use in the rest of Philo.

The other writer cited in BDAG for ‘condition, position’ is Libanius. He was the rhetoric teacher of John Chrysostom and wrote about 300 years after Paul. In the *Progymnasmata* 2 (Censure of Hector),³¹ Libanius says that everyone knows that a person called (ἐν τῇ κλήσει ταύτῃ, i.e. designated) a Phrygian is a coward. Here also κλήσις is much more naturally understood as the designation or name ‘Phrygian’ than as referring primarily to a condition or position in life. The second passage in Libanius cited by BDAG at first glance seems more apropos to their purpose. In *Argumenta orationem Demosthenicarum* 6, Demosthenes’ father being the owner of a swordmaking workshop from that (ἐντεῦθεν) got (ἔλαβεν) the κλήσις of swordmaker. BDAG translates this: ‘took up the occupation’. But did he get the occupation or the title? The ἐντεῦθεν seems to argue for the latter as the emphasis of this sentence, otherwise it is redundant. Libanius is likely referring to a passage in Plutarch (*Dem.* 4.1) ‘the father of Demosthenes was of the class of gentlemen as Theopompus reports, but had the nickname of (ἐπικαλεῖτο) “the sword-maker”, since he had a large factory and slave workmen engaged in the trade’.³² κλήσις here means appellation, not occupation. Thus, none of the non-biblical witnesses used by BDAG to support the meaning ‘condition, position’ for κλήσις is convincing.

Application to New Testament Uses

In view of the fact that κλήσις so commonly in the first century meant a name or designation, it might be worth investigating whether this meaning could be in the background of any New Testament uses of κλήσις. The verb καλέω, both in the LXX and the New Testament, certainly means to name or designate in many instances (e.g. Mt. 1.21; Acts 1.12; 1 Pet. 3.6; Rev. 1.9; 19.13). In Rom. 9.7, 24-26 and 1 Cor. 15.9, Paul seems to relate the meaning of καλέω as ‘give a name to’ to the idea of calling to salvation or service, since the names/designations

31. The Libanus citations can be found in Richard Foester, *Libanii Opera* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1963), VIII, pp. 290, 601.

32. Cited by E. Badian, ‘The Road to Prominence’, in Ian Worthington (ed.), *Demosthenes: Statesman and Orator* (London/New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 9-44 (12).

given are ‘offspring of Abraham’, ‘people/children of God’ and ‘apostle’ (cf. Heb. 2.11; 11.18; Jas 2.23; 1 Jn 3.1). The calling is a kind of fiat by which pronouncing the new appellation creates the new status. (Cf. Rom. 4.17, God ‘calling not existing things as existing’ καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα; and 1 Jn 3.1: ‘that we might be called children of God, and so we are’ ἵνα τέκνα θεοῦ κληθῶμεν· καὶ ἔσμεν.)

It is also possible to see in some of the uses of the noun κλήσις in the New Testament the idea of calling as a name given by God, perhaps the names ἅγιοι and τέκνα/λαὸς θεοῦ. This may not be the meaning in the foreground, since names are not specified in the context (except Heb. 3.1, where Jesus calls those he saves ἀδελφοί in 2.11). But for example: to walk worthy of the calling/walk worthy of the name (Eph. 4.1), to be counted worthy of the calling/worthy of the name (2 Thess. 1.11); called with a holy calling/called with a holy name. What this highlights is that there may indeed be a status idea in κλήσις. As noted above, κλήσις has to do duty for both action and result. However, this status (having a name) results from God’s action (calling).

The meaning in 1 Cor. 7.20 must take into account the fact that the κλήσις is something a person is supposed to stay in. This sounds like a status or situation. But is this the person’s status as a believer or status in society? The verse is the centre of a section (vv. 17-24) about the relationship between life situations regarding circumcision and slavery, and God’s call. Thiselton points out that ἐκλήθη in vv. 18, 20, 21, and 24 refers to the time when a person became a believer.³³ If one is to remain in the calling *in* which one was called, this sounds as if the calling was previous to being called, meaning that κλήσις in this verse is not the same as God’s call to salvation. However, the relative pronoun is in the dative without ἐν, and it would be possible to translate it as an instrumental, ‘Let each one remain in the calling *by* which one was called’.³⁴

Verse 17, which begins the section, is often translated in such a way as to make the two clauses beginning with ὡς refer to the same thing (e.g. NIV: ‘Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him’). But they may refer to two separate conditions. The person should live (1) ‘as the

33. Thiselton, *First Corinthians*, p. 549.

34. It could have been an instrumental even if introduced by ἐν, but the omission of ἐν may show that the idea ‘in’ is not being stressed.

Lord has apportioned to each person (i.e. a life situation such as being circumcised) and (2) ‘as God has called each one’ (i.e. the call to follow Christ). The command then is to stay in the social situation but to also live out the call to follow Christ in that situation. The following verses demonstrate that the life situation (circumcised, uncircumcised, slave, free) makes no difference to the condition of being called to Christ. One can live successfully as a Christian in any of them. Thus, v. 20 (using a feminine relative pronoun whose antecedent must be ‘calling’) exhorts the readers to stay in the calling (to Christ) by which (ἧ) they have been called, and v. 24 (using a neuter relative pronoun with an unexpressed antecedent) exhorts them to stay in their life situation in which (ἐν ᾧ) they were called, adding that this too is lived before God (παρὰ θεῶ).

Conclusions

First, the meaning *position* or *condition* in the sense of life situation or occupation for κλησις in the New Testament is unwarranted. Secondly, the meaning often includes the result of the call as well as the action of calling. It can mean a *status of being a called person*, with its concomitant responsibilities, privileges and expectations. In this use it is linked through passages about being called (named) by new appellations or designations to the idea of having a new identity or name.