

Vocation

Christian Reflection

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GENERAL EDITOR	Robert B. Kruschwitz
ART EDITOR	Heidi J. Hornik
REVIEW EDITOR	Norman Wirzba
WORSHIP EDITOR	Terry W. York
PRODUCTION ASSISTANT	Julie Bolin
DESIGNER	Eric Yarbrough
PUBLISHER	The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University PO Box 97361 Waco, TX 76798-7361
PHONE	(254) 710-3774
TOLL-FREE (USA)	(866) 298-2325
WEBSITE	www.ChristianEthics.ws
E-MAIL	Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

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THE MEANING OF VOCATION

To restore the original mystery and power of “vocation,” it should be disengaged from some modern assumptions. We do not simply “choose” a course of action, but respond to a summons—which often is against our will and involves hardships. And the greatest danger is not this sort of resistance, but the possibility of being distracted from the goal.

CALLED THROUGH RELATIONSHIP

The fullness of our calling is discovered in a way of life nourished by prayer, Sabbath-keeping, meditating on God’s Word, fasting, hospitality, and spiritual direction. Christian vocation is about listening to and with others for the guidance of God’s Spirit, about growing to understand our true need for communion with Christ’s Body.

CALLED OUT, NOT LEFT OUT

The lawyer, homemaker, teacher, and business professional are called to glorify God through what they do day in and day out. So why do we exalt those who are called out as ministers or missionaries, but leave others feeling left out of God’s vocational call?

INVESTING IN THE DIVINE ECONOMY

God created us to serve and be served by each other in the world of work. When we find our place in this interconnected system of mutual support, we participate in God’s way of caring for the human community. We invest ourselves in the divine economy.

FOLLOWING OUR VOCATION IN ORGANIZATIONS

Organizations can enable us to be of genuine and generous service to others. Yet they may sap our spirit with patterns of work that go against our divine vocation. We should approach our participation in them with not only a caring spirit but also a discerning heart.

THE DILBERTIZATION OF WORK

Many of us can identify with Dilbert’s world, where work is meaningless and the corporate structure engenders laziness, frustration, and despair. Deeply unsatisfied with work, we hang on because we need the paycheck. How should we think about work when we’re unhappy with our jobs?



Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

How does our primary vocation (or calling)—to enter the Kingdom of God in faithful obedience—transform our relationships, choice of jobs and careers, and deliberate preparation for these through experience and education? To find answers, our contributors disengage “vocation” from some modern assumptions and recover its original mystery and power.

Describing our divine calling, 1 Peter rejoices, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” Our primary vocation, or calling, is to enter the Kingdom of God in faithful obedience. What does this call imply about our personal and family relationships, our choice of jobs and careers, and our deliberate preparation for these through experience and education?

To answer these questions, we first must disengage “vocation” from some modern assumptions and recover a sense of its original mystery and power. We do not simply “choose” a vocation, A. J. Conyers observes in his rich study, *The Meaning of Vocation* (p. 11). Rather, we respond to a summons—one that is often against our will and involves hardships to be overcome. “Vocation is something that happens to us. It is an experience. Its truth is captured in the Apostle Paul’s words ‘we are his workmanship.’”

Another remarkable aspect of our Christian vocation, says Beth Newman in *Called Through Relationship* (p. 20), is that this gift from God comes through and is oriented toward community. “Christian vocation is about growing in our ability to be vulnerable, about listening to and with

others for the guidance of God's Spirit...in communion with the Body of Christ," she writes. "The fullness of our calling is discovered in a way of life sustained and nourished by Christian practices such as prayer, Sabbath-keeping, meditating on God's Word, fasting, hospitality, and spiritual direction."

We're to use our talents to serve others not only in church but also in society at large. Yet how can we know which school to attend, volunteer assignment to accept, career to pursue, or job to take? "Discerning the shape of God's will for our lives in the world of work requires a certain kind of literacy, an ability to read the divine economy of human labor and locate our place within it," Lee Hardy says in *Investing in the Divine Economy* (p. 29). We should evaluate a job by how it benefits, or harms, others. "Because of the effects of sin on the institutional shape of work in our society, we cannot assume that all existing occupations are equally helpful, or that the highest paying jobs are the ones that fill the greatest and most important needs."

We spend most of our waking hours doing our jobs, Todd Lake observes. "This is a stunning fact which tells us that if Jesus Christ is not Lord of our work life, he is Lord of very little." Indeed, lawyers, homemakers, teachers, and business professionals should glorify God through their daily work. "So why do we exalt those who are called out as ministers or missionaries, but leave everyone else feeling left out of God's vocational call?" Lake asks in *Called Out, Not Left Out* (p. 61). Lest we think that our daily work is spiritually inferior, Howard E. Butt, Jr. reminds us of Jesus' early training as a carpenter, or building tradesman. "As we study for a profession, let us sing the 'Doxology'! Let's play the 'Hallelujah Chorus' as we drive to work!" he urges in *Our Daily Work* (p. 65), for we can be "builders, following Jesus the builder—building our capacities and building other people up, building relationships and organizations, a company, a service, a breakthrough—building our ministry in daily life."

This call to serve others through our work animates composer Kyle Matthews' service of corporate worship (p. 50). In his new hymn on Jesus' summons to us, *Voice That Calls Us Each By Name* (p. 47), we sing, "Christ, who comes into our midst to show us what vocation is, we hear your call to give our lives so other souls may fully live."

Jesus' summons comes to us today even though we are imperfect and rebellious, just as he came to the tax-collector Matthew. Heidi Hornik's *Not the Righteous, But Sinners* (p. 44) helps us confront this truth with new eyes through a masterful examination of Caravaggio's self-reflective *Call of St. Matthew*.

Indeed, our vocation is always "a response to the forgiveness of sins," and thereby is "a gift from God, as free as grace,...not a duty, sacrifice, or conscious effort to reflect the glory of God in [our] work." These are deep

insights that Jill Pelaez Baumgaertner finds not only in George Herbert's remarkable poetry, but also in Hollywood films like *The Apostle*, *Dead Man Walking*, and *Wise Blood*. Surprisingly, given the individualism rampant in popular culture, "these films direct us toward God the Caller and link vocation to our struggle with obedience and acceptance of God's forgiveness," she says in *Vocation Goes to the Movies* (p. 77).

We live out our calling through organizations—businesses, schools, congregations, community groups, professional guilds, or societies—that have something akin to the vocations that God gives to persons. In *Following Our Vocation in Organizations* (p. 36), Gordon Smith helps us "read" their corporate vocations, so these "organizations can enable us to be of genuine and generous service to others." He warns us that organizations "can sap our spirit with patterns of work that go against our divine vocation. Thus, we should approach our participation in them with not only a caring spirit but also a discerning heart."

Unfortunately, too many people can identify with the comic world of *Dilbert*, where work is meaningless and the whole corporate structure engenders laziness, frustration, and even despair. "Some of us are deeply unsatisfied with our work, but we hang on because we need the paycheck," Al Hsu observes in *The Dilbertization of Work*. How should we think about work when we are unhappy with our jobs? "If we suffer from chronic Dilbert-feelings," Hsu writes, "this might be an indication to us that God has something better in store for us somewhere else."

Gilbert Meilaender's wonderful anthology *Working: Its Meaning and Limits* surveys the contrasting ways that Christians have related daily work to our divine vocation, while Lee Hardy's *The Fabric of this World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* and Gary Badcock's *The Way of Life: A Theology of Christian Vocation* draw on this rich tradition to deepen our understanding of work. Together these books "provide a tool-chest for anyone who wishes to think through the relation between God's calling and our daily tasks," Paul Contino judges in *Call and Occupation* (p. 84).

As several contributors emphasize, our Christian vocation should inform all our choices, not be something we think about only when we face major decisions. In *Discerning God's Call* (p. 89), Amy Castello evaluates recent books filled with practical advice about finding God's guidance throughout our lives: Bruce Waltke's *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?*, Debra Farrington's *Hearing with the Heart: A Gentle Guide to Discerning God's Will for Your Life*; and Gene Edward Veith, Jr.'s *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*. "A common theme is that discernment of God's desires for us is integrally related to our relationship with God," Castello observes. "If we want to know God's will, we must know God." ❖

The Meaning of Vocation

BY A. J. CONYERS

“Vocation” is distorted by two disastrous misunderstandings: a secularized idea of “career” and a monastic concept of the religious life. Both are less than the biblical idea of vocation, of which Jesus’ raising Lazarus is a rich image. Vocation is about being raised from the dead, made alive to the reality that we do not merely exist, but are “called forth” to a divine purpose.

The meaning of the term “vocation,” even in the context of the church, but much more so in the world at large, has suffered at the hands of linguistic habit. Like many terms that were once rich with religious implications, it has over time become first narrow in its association with only certain forms of religious life, and then secularized. While early in the life of the church, the teaching on vocation by Origen and Augustine would have included the call to every Christian, even to every human being, the later monastic movement so powerfully affected people’s notions of the extent to which one might go in answer to a divine call that “vocation” came to be associated with that one role in the church. Luther and the Protestant Reformers sought to reintroduce the teaching that everyone, no matter their occupation, was a proper object of divine call. The correction was long overdue. But the unintended effect was to suggest that vocation had merely to do with occupation; thus the way was open to a purely bourgeois and secular use of the term.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the celebrated young German theologian who was executed in a German prison during World War II, thought that the typical Protestant teaching tended finally to suggest “the justification and sanctification of secular institutions.”¹ In its Biblical roots it must mean more than

that, thought Bonhoeffer. For vocation “in the New Testament sense, is never a sanctioning of worldly institutions as such; its ‘yes’ to them always includes at the same time an extremely emphatic ‘no,’ an extremely sharp protest against the world.”² The monastic system had at least provided the death-defying “no,” even if it had failed to adequately provide the life-affirming “yes” of Christian vocation. The meaning of vocation, for most Christians of the modern world, therefore, has been sorted out between “two disastrous misunderstandings.” Both misunderstandings, “the secular Protestant one and the monastic one” are less than the Pauline and biblical idea of vocation deserves, and less than the church has at times seen in its fullness.

TOWARD AN AUTHENTICALLY CHRISTIAN DEFINITION

The familiar term “vocation,” whether used in religious or secular contexts, is rooted in the Latin *vocatio*, meaning a “call,” a “summons,” or an “invitation,” and is related to Latin-based words such as “voice” and “invoke.” The Greek word is *klesis* and is found in our words “cleric” and “ecclesiastical.” It is the root of the New Testament word for the Church, *ekklesia*, a point that can be over-stressed since assemblies of all kinds were referred to with the same term. However, to say that the church consists of those “called out” is significant for more reasons than can be traced through linguistic usage: it is the reality of being called by God to which the church has always attested.

In order to disentangle the term “vocation” from both its religious and secular misunderstandings, and restore a sense of its original mystery and power, let’s examine how, at several points, it should be disengaged from modern assumptions. We must do this first because, in truth, it is a term that does not fit well in the philosophies that have sprung up in opposition to a supernatural view of life—in other words, philosophies that are marked by the Enlightenment (during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the West) and its extended shadow that we call modern thought.

In both Jewish and Christian contexts, the human sentiment of a divine call plays an important role, and gives to the society in which it is embedded a certain character that is distinctly non-modern. Four distinctions must come to mind. First, the idea of a call implies an agent outside of the one who is subject to the call. One does not simply “choose” a course of action, but one responds to a summons. A person might be “free” in either case; but in the case of one responding to vocation, the freedom is not an inner-directed impulse, but the use of the will to respond to an unforeseen and perhaps unknown reality. This summons is characteristic of various reports, in a great variety of instances, from the summons of Abraham and the divine election of Moses, to the call of Isaiah, the baptism of Jesus, the blinding of Paul, the spiritual apparitions of Joan of Arc, and the divine compulsions of Martin Luther. Characteristic of each case is the summons

that is *external* to the person who is called.

Second, the summons is often *against* the will of the one who is called into service. Abraham at first doubted that God's covenant with him could be fulfilled. Moses complained that the Israelites, to whom God sent him, had never listened to him and therefore neither would Pharaoh, "poor speaker that I am" (Exodus 6:12). Jeremiah, the Hebrew prophet, not only resisted the call, but continued to complain that God had overpowered him and placed him in an impossibly difficult circumstance, even protesting that God's call had made him "like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter" (Jeremiah 11:19). Jonah attempted to flee from the Lord to Tarshish, rather than going to Nineveh where he had been called. Jesus prays to be delivered from his appointed calling.

By way of contrast, we can think of the way early Enlightenment thinkers emphasized reason. The real character of their emphasis is now almost always lost. The false implication is that they (the 'modern' Enlightenment thinkers) emphasized reason while earlier ages neglected it, or preferred superstition and unreason. Yet, who indeed were more devoted to the arts of reason than the disciples of Aristotle in antiquity, or those who, in medieval times, submitted everything to reason in the most rigorous fashion, the schoolmen from Anselm to Aquinas and beyond? The specific way in which the Enlightenment

used reason was *as a replacement for the idea of vocation*. One could then make *reasoned choices*. The true locus of personal decisions was to be found in the individual who "thinks for himself," as Kant would put it, and who declines to depend upon the "guidance of another."³ While vocation contradicts the will of the person being called, reason is the instrument by which the modern person thought his will could be enforced. Science, as Descartes said, is what can make us "the masters and possessors of Nature"—an extraordinary claim if we weren't so used to these exaggerations!

That reason does not have to be thought of in this individualistic way was shown by Gerhart Niemeyer when he said that the "creators of philosophy never spoke of reason in the way Enlightenment thinkers did." In fact, what they said was closer to the idea of vocation:

To disentangle "vocation" from its religious and secular misunderstandings, and restore a sense of its original mystery and power, it should be disengaged from modern assumptions. One does not simply "choose" a course of action, but one responds to a summons—a summons that is often against the will of the one who is called into service.

Parmenides experienced the Is in a vision; Socrates, Plato, and others experienced being “drawn,” “pulled,” even “dragged” to the true reality beyond the cosmos. They respond to these experiences with something they call “the quest,” “the arduous way,” “the search,” clearly conveying that the authority of truth is not found in themselves, nor in their method, but in their participation in a higher reality. Their attitude was one of love of the cosmos and of divine wisdom. Where in the Enlightenment do we find mention of “love” to characterize the attitude towards the cosmos or divinity? Enlightenment focuses on the objects of knowledge which mind can convert from multiplicity to unity, or from unity to composing parts, all for the sake of human control and mastery over nature.⁴

Next, the calling involves in almost every case hardships that must be overcome in order to answer the summons. Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Paul all found themselves under threat of death by their community. The very central fact of Jesus’ life and ministry is that he was called to die for the sake of others, and that he called others to follow the way of the Cross. Jesus’ moment of public vocation (his baptism) is followed by temptation in the wilderness. Paul’s vocation is accompanied by physical ailments, imprisonment, beatings, and exile.

Finally, from the point of view of answering to the summons, the greatest danger appears not in this kind of resistance, but in the possibility of being *diverted* or *distracted* from the goal. The whole of Joshua’s reiteration of the covenant with Israel, after they had settled the land of Canaan, was devoted to the threat and the consequences of being distracted from their promise to “serve the Lord” and to the warning against being tempted by other gods. In all of the Deuteronomic history of Israel—that history contained in the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings—the chief standard by which the nations of Israel and Judah and their kings are judged is their faithfulness to God, measured by their resistance to distraction by the religions of their neighbors. And the last petition in Jesus’ model prayer, “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” is an invocation against this distraction.

VOCATION IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Early Christian theologians saw the idea of vocation—God’s call to the human being—as being rooted in some of the earliest words of the Bible: “God created humankind in his image” (Genesis 1:27). Christians, especially since Origen, have understood this not as a static description of the human endowment, but a promise directed toward each human person.

Origen made this point by indicating the two ways in which these words are used in Genesis. First the text says, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” (1:26). Then, as God fulfills this stated intention, the text says, “So God created humankind in his image, in

the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (1:27). Such was Origen's respect for the very words of scripture that he believed the omission of "likeness" in the second statement could scarcely have been accidental. It must have been intentional; and it must therefore have meaning.⁵ Origen concluded that, while one can say that a human being is created in the image of God, the image is not yet perfected. That perfection of the *imago* as one grows in fellowship with God is represented by the word *similitudo*, likeness. Thus the idea of an image endows human beings with a fundamental calling that pertains to their entire living history in God.

From the story of Abraham forward, the Old Testament concern for the "call of God" generally pertains to the community. Israel is bound to God through its acceptance of a covenant, by which God binds himself irrevocably to the community of Israel. The covenant illuminates the moral dimension of the nation's life. To Abraham, the Lord says, "I am *El Shaddai*; walk before me and be blameless." And the covenant also binds God to this people: "And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God" (Genesis 17:1, my translation, and 17:8).

The concern of the Old Testament covenant, and of the Prophets of Israel who proclaim on the basis of that covenant, is clearly tied to the national life of Israel. Even so, as Israel is led into exile, the continued existence of the national life depends, at least in part, on the faithfulness of individuals and families

who refuse to be drawn off into the culture of their captivity, first among the Babylonians and later the Persians. Ezekiel's message, while clearly communal in its concern, is addressed, more than was pre-exilic prophecy, to the individual. "O house of Israel," says the God of Ezekiel, "I will judge all of you according to your ways" (Ezekiel 33:20b).⁶ In this transition from pre-exilic Israelite theology to post-exilic Judaism, we see the rise of the focus on the individual.

A similar movement can be seen in the Deuteronomic (prophetic) history, when for example the story is told of Elijah's encounter with the prophets of Baal and its aftermath. Here we see the contrast between, on the one hand, the overpowering public display of an Almighty God, who—

Reflecting on Genesis 1:26-27, Origen concluded that, while one can say that a human being is created in the image of God, the image is not yet perfected. That perfection of the "imago" endows human beings with a fundamental calling that pertains to their entire living history in God.

as in days of yore—answered with fire, proving his presence in outward demonstration of his power and, on the other hand, his private answer to Elijah. It is in the cave on Mount Horeb that the true center of the story is found. There it is no longer the God of the parted waters, the plagues in Egypt, and the consumed altar on Mount Carmel, which is in evidence. Until this point in the narrative, such was always the nature of God’s actions

In the New Testament, a remarkable transition takes place. While it is still the individual that makes the vocational response toward God, it is toward a new community that is no longer national, but ecumenical. And it is no longer a legacy from the past, but a promise regarding the future.

among the nations: it was an outward and public display that was, in the most ordinary sense, a communal act—the act of a national God. On Mount Horeb, however, all of the old signs—the great natural powers—are on display. First is the great wind, then the earthquake, and finally a fire. But the text reveals that the Lord was not in any of these things. Instead, “after the fire a still

small voice.” It was in this small voice that only Elijah could hear that the Lord was authentically present (1 Kings 19). The public, outward, and historic acts of God are now deepened into a recognition of God’s summons to the individual; yet the summons is given for the sake of community.

In the New Testament, an even more remarkable transition takes place. While it is the individual that makes the response toward God, it is no longer also a move toward a covenant nation in an historical sense. Instead, it is toward a new body, a supra-national community. The communal concern here is no longer national, but ecumenical. And it is no longer a legacy from the past, but a promise regarding the future. It retains both a sense of the dignity of the individual and the communal destiny of the individual. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that at no time is a person more alone than in becoming a Christian, but the alienation is for the sake of a new community.⁷ Furthermore, this community transcends the usual divisions. As the Apostle Paul stated it, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

There is no doubt that we are most indebted to Paul for the richness and the depth of the Christian idea of vocation. He is, as one writer commented, “on several counts...destined to remain the most memorable author on the subject.”⁸ Two features of Paul’s writings should strike us in this regard. One is the fact that his language reflects precisely those

sentiments that occurred to Gerhart Niemeyer when he was commenting on the broader phenomenon of “reason.” The founders of philosophy, Niemeyer said, thought of reason as something that called them to step outside of themselves and to undergo hardships and dangers. Their whole attitude is hardly that of an “enlightenment gentleman” reflecting comfortably from his armchair based upon superior calculations; rather it is the attitude of one engaged in an adventure. Their emotional tone conveys that they do not quite know the outcome of such a journey. Notice in Paul, for instance, his continual reminder to his correspondents of his vocation. I am “Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures” (Romans 1:1-2, except for “slave” which I render here literally to emphasize the arduous nature of the calling). I write to those who also are “called to be saints” (Romans 1:7). In the letter to the Romans, this gospel holds him captive, lays obligations upon him, and is a power which compels him. What has been wrought through him has been “by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God” (15:19). To the Corinthians he describes himself and the other apostles, called along with him, as being like people “sentenced to death,” who have become “a spectacle to the world,” “fools for the sake of Christ,” “held in disrepute.” Furthermore, he says, “we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless ...the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things” (1 Corinthians 4:9-13 *passim*). For the call of the gospel, he endures “afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger” (2 Corinthians 6:4-5). And in the Galatians letter, he reminds his readers that “I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body” (6:17).

I once ran across a book that was actually titled *How to Choose Your Vocation!* It is important to recognize that this reduced notion of vocation bears no resemblance to what Paul had in mind when he said that God “made us alive together with Christ...raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” We do not simply “know” about our vocation as we would an itinerary on a travel schedule. Much less do we choose it! Instead vocation is something that happens to us. It is an experience. Its truth is captured in the words “we are his workmanship” (Ephesians 2:5, 10, RSV).

The other matter of remarkable importance for Paul is the use of the corporate imagery of the body, the temple, and the household. We find these references throughout the Pauline letters, and they are similar in concept, whether from Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, or Ephesians 2. The idea of body is quite dissimilar, and dissimilar in important ways, from the Enlightenment attachment to the organized state. Through liberal democratic ideas (developing out of Thomas Hobbes’ idea of the state and then taking on their democratic form with the help of English and American thinkers,

including John Locke, John Stuart Mill and John Dewey), the most important feature of the 'members' of the political 'body' came to be equality. Of course, what makes members of a body significant in the original Pauline metaphor is not their equality but their difference. The hand is different from the eye and so they can each contribute to the unity of the body in their distinct ways. They exist, furthermore, not for themselves but for the sake of the body. This is an organic concept. The modern idea of the state is, by contrast, the concept of an organization. It is conceived mechanically rather than organically. Equality emphasizes the interchangeability of parts; while the organic body metaphor depends upon the interdependence of the parts. Equality jealously guards the rights of individuals; but membership in a body emphasizes the contribution to the whole. Liberal democracy values the uniform relationship of the parts to the whole, while the Pauline "body" concept values the eccentric and multiform relationship of the disparate members. I might say that equality has an important place in the Christian view of life—we are equally loved by God and equally accountable to God, and we are equally made in the image of God—but equality has been used in modern language in a way that actually loses its original Christian import. In the Christian context, as opposed to the secular, equality adds to rather than diminishes the importance and strength of community.

THE BALANCE OF VOCATION

John Calvin, unlike many of his later disciples, had a gift for exploiting theological balance, which came in part from his appreciation of the basic paradox of the Christian message. He used this lively sense of balance in his teachings on vocation. He saw the idea of vocation as having a double focus, one upon the earthly duty and the other upon the heavenly destiny. In this way the common tasks of the Christian, as well as those roles more greatly honored in society, are held in new esteem. He writes in the *Institutes* of those tasks as bearing a certain nobility when the person "will bear and swallow the discomforts, vexations, weariness, and anxieties in his way of life, when he has been persuaded that the burden was laid upon him by God." In this way, "no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight."⁹

We might think of Jesus' raising of Lazarus as a rich image of the deepest meaning of vocation. Lazarus is not merely healed, but raised from the dead. From the isolation of death, he is called by Christ's powerful voice to the community of the living. His grave clothes, in which he is bound, are loosed and he is made free to respond as one living before God and in the power of God. Each of us is so called. Vocation, *vocatio*, is about being raised from the dead, made alive to the reality that we do not merely exist, but we are "called forth" to a divine purpose.

NOTES

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 250.

2 Ibid., 251.

3 Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" [1784], *The Philosophy of Kant: Immanuel Kant's Moral and Political Writings*, edited by Carl J. Friedrich (New York: Modern Library, 1993), 145-153.

4 Gerhart Niemeyer, *Within and Above Ourselves: Essays in Political Analysis* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1996), 369.

5 With regard to Origen's doctrine of vocation I am in debt to Fr. José Alviar, *Klesis: The Theology of the Christian Vocation According to Origen* (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 1993).

6 The context is God's reply to the people's complaint that their exile unfairly punishes some faithful individuals: "Yet your people say, 'The way of the Lord is not just,' when it is their own way that is not just. When the righteous turn from their righteousness, and commit iniquity, they shall die for it. And when the wicked turn from their wickedness, and do what is lawful and right, they shall live by it. Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, I will judge all of you according to your ways!" (Ezekiel 33:17-20)

7 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 105-114. He says, for instance, "Through the call of Jesus men become individuals. Willy-nilly, they are compelled to decide, and that decision can only be made by themselves. It is no choice of their own that makes them individuals: it is Christ who makes them individuals by calling them. Every man is called separately, and must follow alone. But men are frightened of solitude, and they try to protect themselves from it by merging themselves in the society of their fellow-men and in their material environment.... But all this is only a cloak to protect them from having to make a decision" (105).

8 Robert B. Shaw, *The Call of God: The Theme of Vocation in the Poetry of Donne and Herbert* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1981), 5.

9 John Calvin, *Institutes*, III, 10, 6.

**A. J. CONYERS**

is Professor of Theology at the George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University, in Waco, Texas.

Called Through Relationship

BY ELIZABETH NEWMAN

Our vocation is a gift, not something we decide after assessing our skills and talents. To discover our vocation, then, we must learn to receive the abundant life God desires to give us. We respond to God in our lives by acquiring the practices of and accepting wisdom from a new community that includes “saints” across time and culture.

What should we do with our lives? Should we go to this college? Major in that subject? Marry this person? Take that job? Send our child to this school? Retire here rather than there? The stakes can be high and we're haunted with uncertainty over *deciding* what to do.

While these questions are understandable, they are not the first ones we should ask when we consider our vocation, and this for two reasons. First, vocation for Christians is not something we choose or decide. We can no more decide our vocation than we decided to be born. It's not that our lives are predetermined, that we have no real freedom. Rather, just as our birth into this world, our unique creation, was an incredible gift from God, so also is our vocation *as Christians* not a decision but a gift. Indeed, our freedom becomes constrained when we assume the burden of deciding “what to do” with our lives. Genuine freedom, the freedom to become who God created and desires us to be, flows rather from *receiving* our lives from the gracious hand of God. Though we might have to make decisions in the particular circumstances of our lives, we nonetheless misrepresent our vocation if we see it fundamentally as our choice rather than God's gift to us.

Second, our primary calling is to *be* a people who live in communion

with our triune God. Only in community with God and others do we begin to discover, occasionally like a flash of lightning, but more often haltingly and by fits and starts, what we are called to *do* in our lives.

VOCATION AS GIFT

Paul urges us to lead lives “worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-3). Yet, in any community—in our family, university dorm, or church—the stresses of daily life, the conflict of personalities, and the minor disagreements can add up to make Paul’s admonition seem unattainable. We don’t like bearing with those who rub us the wrong way, and making every effort to maintain unity looks like more trouble than it is worth. Even so, most of us desire to lead lives “worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”

Significantly, Paul goes on to say, “but each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (4:7). He does not say, contrary to our expectation, that we are given grace by the measure of *our* gifts. But what is the “measure of Christ’s gift”? In fact, Christ’s gift cannot *be* measured, for we are “blessed in Christ with *every* spiritual blessing” (1:3); Paul prays that we may know what are “the *riches* of [God’s] glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the *immeasurable* greatness of his power for us who believe” (1:18-19). The abundance of God’s grace available to us in Christ is inexhaustible and endlessly generative. If we root our understanding of vocation in God’s own abundance, then we see what a mistake it is to think about vocation simply as finding our talents and figuring out what to do with them. Rather and more fully, it is discovering and living out of the infinite and gratuitous abundance of God.

The story of Moses’ call to confront Pharaoh reminds us that calling may not match up with our talents. Initially Moses resists God, complaining, “But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me” (Exodus 4:1). God then gives him power to perform certain signs, but Moses continues to argue: “Oh my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (4:10). In other words, Moses tells God, “I have no talent for getting up in front of people and talking!” Though God promises, “I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak,” Moses still objects, “Oh, my Lord, please send someone else” (4:13). God grows angry, but nonetheless allows Moses the freedom to resist. In the end, they reach a solution: God sends Aaron to be Moses’ spokesman. But Moses, we might notice, is not off the hook; he accepts God’s call to lead the people of Israel, despite his own perception that he does not have the necessary talent to do this.

Moses does not invent or determine his vocation, he receives it from

God. In Scripture and Christian tradition, the word “vocation” (from the Latin for “call”) indicates that someone else is calling. “Vocation” differs from “career” in this regard; while “career” (related to a Medieval Latin word for “race track”) refers primarily to human effort (as in “What do *you do* for a living?”), vocation points in another direction. The initiative resides not with us, but with the One who calls and invites.

In Christian tradition, “vocation” (from the Latin for “call”) indicates someone else is calling. “Vocation” differs from “career” in this regard; while “career” refers primarily to human effort, vocation points in another direction. The initiative resides not with us, but with the One who calls and invites.

Listening for God’s call begins with seeing our lives as gifts. Like Moses, most of us cannot initially do this. At first Moses finds his calling to be as terrifying as the burning bush and even more intimidating in its demands, yet at the *end* of his life, he can say of God, “The Rock, his work is perfect; and all his ways are just” (Deuteronomy 32:4). As Moses looks out over the land that the Lord has sworn to Abraham,

Isaac, and Jacob, he recognizes that the promises of the Lord are being fulfilled in his own life and in the world. He ends his days singing not about his own talents, but about a God who is ever faithful, even when God’s own people are not.

But “we are not like Moses,” you may be thinking, for no clear and dramatic experience enables us to know our particular calling. Does God even work like this in the lives of ordinary people? We do know from countless disciples across generations that God continues to be present in individual’s lives in odd and dramatic ways. Martin Luther, Teresa of Avila, John Wesley, and, more recently, Millard Fuller (founder of Habitat for Humanity) and even some ordinary church folk describe extraordinary moments in their lives when they sense and “hear” the voice of God. Such moments are unpredictable and mysterious, and based, I think, on what God knows that each of us needs.

In any case, as Teresa of Avila reminds us, these experiences should not be given undue weight. At times she wished God would leave her alone as far as her unusual “spiritual” experiences were concerned. Teresa says that what matters more than having “special experiences” is living daily in faithful response to God through community with others. This involves learning to be “at home” with God so that we graciously, humbly, and without fear can receive what God desires to give. Such receiving, we dis-

cover, enables our fullest giving. According to Teresa, at the moment we reside in “the seventh mansion,” the most interior region of the soul, we will be most fully in service to others. We will be both Mary and Martha. By this she does not mean we will be “superwomen” (or men) by doing it all, but that our service to others (like Martha’s) and communion with God (like Mary’s) will be deeply connected. From this perspective, success is not measured by how much we accomplish or how well-known we become. “The Lord does not look so much at the *magnitude* of anything we do as at the *love* with which we do it,” Teresa concludes. “If we accomplish what we can, His majesty will see to it that we become able to do more each day.”¹

DISCOVERING OUR VOCATION THROUGH AND FOR THE BODY OF CHRIST

Let’s stop worrying then about *deciding* on a vocation, but gratefully *receive* our calling as a gift that is grounded in communion with God. However, more “existential” questions may haunt us: Where is God calling *me*? How do *I* discover my particular vocation?

While I will not dismiss these questions, let me draw attention to the fact that we tend to ask them as individuals. It seems “natural” to think about ourselves as “individual units” first, and then to wonder how we might connect with a community and ultimately with God. But this way of thinking about ourselves hampers us at the outset. Throughout Scripture we see that God desires and calls *a people*. True, the calling of God to Israel begins with a single individual, Abraham; but the purpose is for the whole people of Israel and for the world.² Beginning with Israel and continuing in the church, God calls a people to be His body in and for the world. I emphasize this not to deny that God calls each of us in unique ways, but to remind us of a point we easily forget: our vocation is not ultimately about us as individuals but about what God is accomplishing in the world in and through a whole people. Even Jesus’ twelve disciples “were not made the center of Israel because they were holier or more perfect than the others; they were not a bit better than anyone else,” Gerhard Lohfink notes. “The issue was never them as special individuals, but always and only the whole people of God, to whom they were sent.”³ God gives us our particular calling and gifts always for the sake of the whole, in ways perhaps that we cannot fully understand.

Our calling both *comes through* community and *is oriented toward* community. Now this raises a number of new questions: Do I let a particular community “tell me what to do”? What if that community is spiritually benighted or blind? What about becoming independent and finding myself? If our family is the community to whom we turn, we worry that parents may fail to truly perceive the calling of their child. The example of St. Francis comes to mind. His wealthy father was horrified when Francis

started a monastery and abandoned the plans his father had made for his life. If calling comes through community, should Francis have listened to his father? It matters, of course, which community we pay attention to and Christians believe that the community called “church” takes precedence over our natural family (see, for example, Mark 3:32-35). “Church” here refers not only to a particular local congregation, but also the whole communion of saints, those who have gone before us and those outside the walls of our particular denomination.

The interesting thing about Francis is that his calling did come through the Body of Christ, broadly understood: he absorbed in a new and creative way the gospel that he had been given by those who lived before him. Also, as Francis recounts, his encounter with a leper marked his life for good, for it led him to grasp both the humility of the incarnation and the passion of Christ. Francis became convinced that living in brotherhood and sisterhood is “constitutive of life according to the form of the holy gospel, and at the same time a condition for the correct understanding of the word of the gospel.”⁴ Subsequently, it has been the church, the “communion of saints” down through the ages, which has perceived and interpreted the life of Francis in ways that even he could not have foreseen. Francis provides us with one of many examples of how our particular callings come both through and for the community that God calls us to be.

DISCOVERING OUR VOCATION THROUGH CHRISTIAN PRACTICES

In the wealth of wisdom the “communion of saints” has given us, we find this recurring theme about discerning our vocation: we cannot simply *think* our way into living out our calling more fully. Rather, the fullness of our calling is discovered in a way of life sustained and nourished by Christian practices such as prayer, Sabbath-keeping, meditating on God’s Word, fasting, hospitality, and spiritual direction. We misunderstand these practices if we construe them as “hoops” to jump through to achieve a goal or get an answer from God. Rather, since the Christian vocation involves a way of life, these practices sustain us in that way. They also strengthen us to resist ways of thinking and living that would diminish our sense of vocation.

As I describe how these practices form us to discover and live more fully our vocation, keep in mind that it is always God’s grace that enables such discovery and living. These practices open us to receive God’s grace and to perceive, with Augustine, a “Beauty at once so ancient and so new!”⁵

Hospitality, the practice of welcoming another person—even a stranger—into our lives, trains us to be open to surprise. The Lord “put Himself at the disposal of those who needed Him,” St. Athanasius reminds us, “to be manifested according as they could bear it, not vitiating the value of

the Divine appearing by exceeding their capacity to receive it.”⁶ We trust that God continues to come to us in ways not exceeding our capacity to receive Him. But hospitality also enlarges this capacity and changes us in surprising ways. Recall that Saint Francis’s hospitality toward a leper changed his life forever, when through this encounter he came to know the presence and incarnation of Christ in unexpected, unimagined ways. For a more mundane example, when I was a graduate student, an Episcopal monastery welcomed me (a Baptist) to their table, both the Lord’s Table and their breakfast table. It was here that I met my future husband (a surprising place to meet a spouse!). Not only did their hospitality introduce me to my husband, but also gathering every morning around the Lord’s Table with these brothers in Christ changed me. I saw in a fresh way that the food we share with others is an extension of the food, the body and blood, which Christ gives to us. Though I had been trained to think of the Lord’s Supper as “just a symbol,” I came to see Holy Communion as a real means of grace, bringing me into communion with others in the monastery and wider community. All this is to say that hospitality shapes us and our guests to be open to the surprising grace of God. It enables us to resist the idea that the way things are is the way they have to be, or that our futures are easily controlled. Our calling is much more adventuresome than that, for we are called to be open to the strange ways God works in our lives and in the world.

The practices of *meditating on God’s Word* and *spiritual direction*, in differing ways, form us to receive guidance from another. When we meditate on Scripture, we trust that the Holy Spirit will speak to us through the stories and teachings of the Bible. Originally this practice, known as *lectio divina* or holy reading, involved “sitting” with a Scripture passage, repeating and even memorizing the words, and “chewing over” them in prayerful reflection so as to enter into communion with God in prayer. So understood, *lectio divina* enables us to grow in dependence not only on the Bible (and thus the earliest Christians) as a rich resource for forming us, but even more on God. It helps us resist the contemporary assumption that we discover our identity and vocation by breaking free from

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the past and pursuing a solitary quest to “find ourselves,” rather than in and through communion.

Spiritual direction opens us to receive spiritual guidance from another. An informal sort of spiritual direction takes place wherever we gather to discern God’s Word for our lives, whether in a Sunday school class, a Bible study, or even an informal conversation over coffee. More formally, spiri-

Christian vocation is about growing in our ability to be vulnerable, about listening to and with others for the guidance of God’s Spirit. From this perspective, we are not called to be without neediness, but rather to grow in understanding of our true need for communion with Christ’s Body.

tual direction is the practice of meeting with a spiritual friend who listens to our stories and joins us in discerning how God is working in our lives. This latter kind of spiritual direction has made its way only recently into some Protestant churches. But whether practiced informally or formally, spiritual direction trains us, like *lectio divina*, to resist the idea that we must discern

our vocation alone. Rightly understood, Christian vocation is about growing in our ability to be vulnerable, about listening to and with others for the guidance of God’s Spirit. We are not called to be autonomous but to be members of a Body where we rely on other parts; growth in vocation means perceiving how others’ gifts as well as our own gifts contribute to the whole. From this perspective, we are not called to be without neediness, but rather to grow in understanding of our true need for communion with Christ’s Body.

Fasting and Sabbath-keeping, by providing rhythm to our lives that can sustain us over the long haul, form us for “a long obedience in the same direction.”⁷ In the church year, fasting typically is followed by feasting; we fast during Lent and feast at Easter. This rhythm reflects the sadness, repentance, and longing for the fullness of God’s kingdom that is still to come, as well as the joy of the resurrection and the inbreaking of God’s kingdom. In this ebb and flow we see our vocation as something we live between these times of *already* promised and begun, and *not-yet* fully realized. We are called to be a people of longing and joy, both forgiven by God and forgiving toward others. In terms of our vocation, this rhythm helps us appreciate that wherever we are and whatever we do, there will be brokenness, disappointment, and tragedy, for the fullness of God’s kingdom is not yet. At the same time, brokenness and sin are not the final words, for we are called to embody the hope and joy of the resurrec-

tion. Our hope does not lie in human effort or potential, but in the reality of God's presence and promises. In our disappointment and failure, we need not despair. The realities of sin, forgiveness, and resurrection provide us a deeper, more profound way to interpret any particular situation, and thus to practice a long obedience in the same direction.

Sabbath-keeping trains us to participate in the rhythm of work and rest, as we set aside time to rest in God. We cease our work, busyness, and effort as a testimony to the conviction that *what we do* does not ultimately define *who we are*. To repeat what was said earlier, who we are is to be received as a gift from God. When we gather as church, we are trained to resist the idea that anything else—money, family, education, job, or reputation—ultimately defines our lives. Theologian James Cone emphasizes that church was the one place where African-American slaves refused to define themselves as their oppressors did. Before God in worship, they knew themselves to be full and blessed children of God. Sabbath-keeping can form us to “rest” our identities more fully in God, trusting that God alone creates, redeems, and sustains us, trusting too that we are given the grace to enter God's triune communion and so to become God's *pleroma* (abundant fullness) for the world. We see more clearly that our task is not “to get God to do something [we] think needs to be done, but to become aware of what God is doing so that [we] can respond to it and participate and take delight in it.”⁸

Central to all these practices is *prayer*. “Prayer consists of attention... waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive,” Simone Weil writes. “We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them.”⁹ Though I would add that prayer also involves the more active dimensions of petition, confession, and thanksgiving, Weil rightly indicates that practicing prayer means attuning ourselves to God. Thomas Merton, the great twentieth-century Catholic monastic, describes his “very simple” way of prayer as “centered entirely on attention to the presence of God and to His will and His love.... One might say this gives my meditation the character described by the Prophet as ‘being before God as if you saw Him.’”¹⁰ So understood, the practice of prayer helps us resist the idea, so common in our culture, that waiting is of little use. We typically associate waiting with frustration and wasted time. In our busy and fast-paced society, our lives are oriented around getting things done quickly, whether eating fast food or finding what we want on the Internet. Waiting is thus a profoundly countercultural act. The rich kind of waiting we practice in prayer trains us to be patient with ourselves, others, and even God. Such waiting means we do not have to work constantly to ensure our needs are met; rather we may trust God to provide. In terms of our vocation, prayer trains us to trust that God will provide what we need, both as a people and as individuals, to live lives of faithfulness to God.

These and other Christian practices can give us a rich sense of our vocation. We discover that though the particular circumstances and responsibilities of our lives may change over the years, the faithfulness of God does not. God's steadfast faithfulness and overflowing abundance enables us to live in grateful response to God *wherever we are*.

NOTES

1 Referring to Luke 10:38-42 Teresa notes, "...believe me, Mary and Martha must work together when they offer the Lord lodging, and must have Him ever with them, and they must not entertain Him badly and give Him nothing to eat." See *The Interior Castle*, translated by E. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books, 1989), 231. The quotation is from page 233, with my emphasis.

2 "Israel's being chosen is not a privilege or a preference *over others*, but existence *for others*," writes Gerhard Lohfink in *Does God Need the Church? Toward a Theology of the People of God* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 37.

3 *Ibid.*, 174.

4 "Franciscan Spirituality," in Michael Downey, ed., *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 408, my emphasis.

5 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961), 231.

6 St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1944), 78.

7 Eugene Peterson, borrowing this phrase from Friedrich Nietzsche, uses it in the title of his book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction, Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980), 13.

8 Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor, Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 4.

9 Simone Weil, *Waiting on God* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1950), 51, 56-57.

10 As quoted by Larry Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 97.



ELIZABETH NEWMAN

is Professor of Theology and Ethics at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, in Richmond, Virginia.

Investing Ourselves in the Divine Economy

BY LEE HARDY

In our work-related choices, we yearn for a sense of direction. How can we know which school to attend, career to pursue, or job to take? Discerning the shape of God's will for our lives in the world of work requires a certain kind of literacy, an ability to read the divine economy of human labor and locate our place within it.

As Christians we believe it is important to do God's will, especially in the momentous decisions of our lives. But it is precisely in making these big choices that we often feel at a loss. This is no less true of our work-related choices, when we particularly yearn for a sense of direction. How can we know which school to attend, which major to declare, which career to pursue, which job to take? In these situations we sometimes find ourselves wishing for a miraculous sign—a voice from heaven, an instructive dream, or maybe just a well-placed glow. Almost anything, it seems, would do if only God would speak to us directly and relieve us of our uncertainty. But usually such signs are not forthcoming. Has God spoken only to a select few and left the rest of us in the lurch?

Certainly not. But discerning the shape of God's will for our lives in the world of work requires a certain kind of literacy, an ability to read the divine economy of human labor and to locate our place within it. If that economy is hidden to us, it's probably because we tend to think of God as a distant deity, making only occasional appearances in a world that otherwise runs pretty much on its own. Allow me to bring this economy to light with two stories, and then indulge in a little historical theology.

TWO STORIES

Once upon a time there was a pious man standing on his roof, surrounded by rising floodwaters. His neighbor came by in a canoe and offered to take him to shore. "No thanks. God will take care of me," he informed him, with a remarkable air of calm. The waters continued to rise. Then a county sheriff came by in a motor boat and told him to hop aboard. He refused, saying "Don't worry about me, God is my help." The waters rose again. Finally a helicopter appeared overhead and dropped a line to him. But he didn't take it, calling out over the rushing torrent, "God will save me!" In minutes the river swept him away and he drowned. When he got to heaven he asked God why God didn't save him. God replied, "Didn't save you? I tried three times! First I sent your neighbor, and you refused. Then I sent the sheriff, and you refused. Then I sent a helicopter, and you refused again!"

This was one of my former pastor's favorite sermon illustrations and I heard it several times during his tenure. The point, however, was well taken each time it was made: with few exceptions, God has chosen to work in this world through the agency of human hands. We tend to limit God to the miraculous; but God has in fact resolved to take care of us largely through the ordinary activities of our neighbors. Each morning we pray to God for our daily bread—and already people are at work in the bakeries. For the most part, that's how God's world works.

Of course, God could have created a world in which he saw to our needs directly—a world where food miraculously appears on our tables at mealtime, clothes suddenly show up in our closets at the beginning of each season, and car repairs mercifully occur overnight as we sleep. But God did not choose to create that kind of world. He chose to create an even better, if more challenging, world. He chose to create a world where we, as God's representatives, are involved in the on-going business of creation and the repair of creation—a world where we assume responsibility for the well-being of the earth and all who inhabit it, exercise our minds and imaginations, and make significant choices and expend our energies.

The world that God created is also a world where we are not sufficient unto ourselves. Granted, each one of us has strengths and abilities. But we are also creatures of need. Again, God could have created the world differently. He could have made us so that we were capable of meeting all of our needs through our own efforts. But God chose to connect us to each other in a circle of need and care, to make of us a society of interdependent persons who serve each other and are served by each other. Every connection in the social bond is made where human need and human ability meet. We are born ignorant, but there are parents and teachers; we are born naked, but there are those who design, manufacture, and distribute clothing; we are born hungry, but there are those who produce, distribute, and pre-

pare food. Soon we grow up and come to find our own place in this interconnected system of mutual support. When we do so, we begin to participate in God's way of caring for the human community. We invest ourselves in the divine economy.

So much, then, for the drowned man who refused the help of others when he was in need. A story might be told about this unfortunate man's neighbor, Fred, as well. Fred was a pious man too. He was also a plumber. But he never had a sense of God's calling in his life. For years he would pray for a sure sign that would set him to a special task in Kingdom service. But it never came. And he remained a plumber until he breathed his last. When he arrived in heaven he asked God why he had never received a calling. God answered, "Remember when you tried to save your neighbor in the flood? I called you then. For I have commanded you to love your neighbor, and I gave you a boat and a neighbor in need. The call was clear and you responded. Indeed, as a plumber you were responding to my call all along—serving your neighbors in need with the talents, training, tools, and opportunities I gave you."

We tend to think that God calls people only to special tasks in spectacular ways, and sometimes God does. Like Fred, it's hard for us to see the connection between our ordinary work and the kind of life to which God calls us. Our work has

little, if any, religious significance for us. We tend to restrict the scope of God's call to churchly matters or mission projects. But we also need to recognize the call of God in the world of work, to hear him speak in the day-to-day circumstances of our lives. For there, too, God calls us to serve. The sixteenth-century reformer John Calvin had it right when he wrote,

"No task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight."

God chose to make us interdependent persons who serve each other and are served by each other. When we find our own place in this interconnected system of mutual support, we begin to participate in God's way of caring for the human community. We invest ourselves in the divine economy.

A LITTLE THEOLOGY

Early in its history the Christian church made an outstandingly unhelpful distinction between two kinds of Christian life, between two roads to heaven. The high road was for all who were willing to leave the world behind and enter the monastery for the life of prayer and meditation. They were full-time Christians. They had received a call from God, a call to

forsake their jobs and family in order to live the religious life. The low road was for the rest of us, either unwilling or unable to free ourselves from secular entanglements. We live a regular life. We work for a living, refrain from doing wrong as best we can, and attend church on Sundays. We are part-time Christians. We have one foot in the sacred realm, the other in the secular. Apparently we never experienced that call from God, that special vocation.

If a social structure—an existing pattern of practices and expectations—does not allow us to serve our neighbor and honor God, it must be changed. The Calvinist impulse was to bring existing social institutions into line with our vocations, not our vocations into line with existing social institutions.

Martin Luther, the German reformer, challenged this two-track version of the Christian life by claiming that all Christians have a calling from God, and that our calling can—and usually is—fulfilled in the midst of our “secular” involvements. Everyday life is in fact not secular; it is charged with religious significance. For it is the scene of God’s providential activity,

an activity in which we participate through our labor. God calls each one of us to serve our neighbors in the various roles, or “stations,” in which we have been placed. If I am a baker, then God is calling me to meet my neighbor’s need for daily bread. If I am a father, then God is calling me to care for and educate my children. If I am a citizen of a democratic country, then God is calling me to participate in the political life of the nation. In responding to our callings, we are actually participating in God’s care for humanity and the earth. We are God’s co-workers. The call does not bid us to leave the world, but to engage the world in God’s name.

The concept of vocation was modified by the second-generation reformers in ways that are important to us today. Luther taught that to discover our vocation we have only to reflect on the social positions we already occupy. He called those positions “stations.” Our calling is mediated by the duties that attach to our stations in life. To discover our calling, we need only remind ourselves of who we are. Still wedded to some degree to the medieval worldview, he thought that those stations were a direct expression of the creation order, as good and as stable as the turning of the tides or the cycle of the seasons. The Calvinists realized, during the social turmoil of the early modern era, that social institutions are in part the products of human hands, and therefore neither especially stable nor especially good. The duties and expectations attached to the social role of father in some societies can be dangerous and damaging. So can the duties and expectations that impinge upon those who currently practice family

law. For that reason, the Calvinists made two modifications to the received view of vocation. First, to discover our vocation we look initially not to the duties that attach to our stations in life, but to the gifts God has given us as individuals. Then we can consider how those gifts can be employed within a given social structure. Second, if a given social structure—an existing pattern of practices and expectations—does not allow for the use of our gifts in ways that truly serve our neighbor and honor God, then the social structure must be changed. The Calvinist impulse was to bring existing social institutions into line with our vocations, not our vocations into line with existing social institutions.

TWO GUIDELINES

The concept of vocation is rich and expansive, worthy of a lifetime of reflection and exploration. Among its implications are two guidelines that give us some direction to discern our vocation and thus invest ourselves in the divine economy. They follow immediately from the notion of work as the social place where we can put the talents God has given us in the service of others.

The first step in discerning a vocation is identifying the specific gifts God has given us. Gifts serve as indicators of what God would have us do with our lives. For God gave them to us with the idea they would be developed and employed for the good of the human community. We are enjoined, as members of the church, to “serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received” (1 Peter 4:10b). The same principle holds for society at large.

We should be careful not to give too narrow a definition of our gifts. Surely they include our talents and abilities, but also encompass our concerns and interests. Almost any ability could be used in a variety of jobs. Concerns and interests help narrow the field. If I am blessed with an unusual degree of manual dexterity, there are a number of jobs in which I could excel—anywhere from dentistry to watch-repair. But if I also find myself deeply concerned about the health of others and interested in the practice of medicine, then perhaps I should consider becoming a surgeon.

Discovering our gifts is not a matter of simple introspection or private self-estimation. We find out what we are good at by reflecting on the loop of our life experiences and the feedback we receive from others. What have I done, and done well? Was it a matter of working with people, ideas, or things? Do I work best in groups or alone? Do I lead or follow? Do I thrive on routine or variety? Can I sit for hours in an office or do I need to be moving around outside? In answering these questions it is important to listen humbly to others—they often have a better and more sober view of ourselves than we do. We all know of round pegs who insist on filling square holes, despite the fact that the mismatch has been repeatedly pointed out to them.

The second step in vocational discernment is finding a place where our gifts can be put at the disposal of those who can benefit from them. Of course, being the self-interested creatures that we are, the temptation is to consider first how our gifts can benefit us. We tend to evaluate a job solely on the basis of salary, security, status, and satisfaction. These are all legitimate considerations. No argument here. But the chief consideration for one

As Christians, we are obliged to evaluate a job on the basis of its social content—the way it benefits, or harms, others. Because of the effects of sin on the institutional shape of work in our society, we cannot assume that the highest paying jobs are the ones that fill the greatest and most important needs.

who would follow Christ in the world of work is service. Again, Calvin is on point: those who belong to the household of faith, he counsels, should “choose those employments which yield the greatest advantage to their neighbor.” This is to say that, as Christians, we are obliged to evaluate a job on the basis of its social content—the way in which it benefits, or harms, others. Because of

the effects of sin on the institutional shape of work in our society, we cannot assume that all existing occupations are equally helpful, or that the highest paying jobs are the ones that fill the greatest and most important needs. To catch hold of our calling, we need not only a sober estimation of ourselves, but a critical understanding of our society.

A vocation is a call from God to use the gifts that he has given us for the benefit of the human community. In response to that call, we need to discover and develop the gifts that God has given us, and then find a place where they can be exercised in the service of our neighbor’s need.

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Those familiar with the biblical language of calling may wonder if there is much warrant in Scripture for the concept of work as a vocation. Consider some of the key passages in the New Testament that speak of the Christian’s calling: we are called to repentance and faith (Acts 2:38); we are called into fellowship with Christ (1 Corinthians 1:9); we are called out of darkness and into the light (1 Peter 2:9); we are called to be holy (1 Peter 1:15); indeed, we are called to be saints (Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2).

I could list more, but perhaps we can already see the pattern. The vast majority of occurrences of the word “calling” (or, in Greek, *klesis*) in the New Testament do not refer to work, occupation, or paid employment at all. In these passages we are called, as the Scottish theologian Gary

Badcock recently put it, not to a particular job, but to a way of life—a life of love for God and neighbor; a life of faith, hope, kindness, patience, and charity. Here all Christians have the same calling: to follow Christ, and in so doing to be conformed to his image. So we might ask: what does that have to do with our work?

The concept of work as vocation comes to the fore when we ask ourselves how we propose to follow Christ. Christ commanded us to love our neighbor. How will we respond to that command? Here the concept of vocation picks up on the New Testament image of the church as a body: all are called to follow Christ, the head of the church, but each one has a special role to play in the body on the basis of a unique gift. The concept of work as vocation in effect says that the same principle holds for society at large. Like all Christians, I am called to love my neighbor. But I respond to that call on the basis of my particular set of abilities and passions—as a builder of houses, auto-maker, school counselor, youth minister, or dental hygienist.

Of course, my job is only one of the places I respond to my calling. I also respond as a citizen of a democratic country, as a neighbor in my corner of town, and as a member of a local community of faith. Human life is multi-faceted. And so will be our response to God's call. When Jesus called his disciples to love God and neighbor, he called them to a way of life that knows no bounds or compartments. That call, our vocation, demands a response in all the roles and relations in which we find ourselves.

We need not sell all our possessions and enter the monastery in order to be full-time Christians. Nor need we enter the mission field. We can respond to the call of God in the midst of our daily lives, including our work. That makes being a serious Christian both easier and harder at the same time: easier in that we do not have to give up marriage or money or success in order to follow Christ; harder because we really do have to follow Christ in all areas of our lives, at work as well as in church. When we are serious about that, we may find that the sacrifices required of us are just as great as the sacrifices made by the saints we admire from afar. But the rewards will be just as great as well.



LEE HARDY

is Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Following Our Vocation in Organizations

BY GORDON T. SMITH

Organizations can enable us to be of genuine and generous service to others. Yet they may sap our spirit with patterns of work that go against our divine vocation. We should approach our participation in them with not only a caring spirit but also a discerning heart.

From the first day on the job, Karl knew that teaching in this new situation would be more complicated than he'd anticipated. Sure, this school had a slightly different curriculum for its history students. And naturally, he had to learn what it meant to work with this administration and with students from a slightly different background. But the changes were much more subtle and pervasive; the entire spirit of the place was different than anywhere else he had taught. He sensed that serving at this institution would present a new challenge not merely to his teaching but also to what it meant to be a colleague to his fellow faculty members.

In contrast, Rachel assumed that if she knew how to do computer programming, then a job was a job; and she could do it anywhere. But after she made the jump to a new company, attracted by the salary and the easier commute, it was only a matter of weeks before she realized that her previous employer was a company where she felt at home. She missed the tone of the office and the camaraderie with her fellow programmers that she deeply valued. In her previous workplace, she had appreciated the way that decisions were made and that her perspective was always taken seriously in decisions that affected her work. Frankly, now she regretted her shortsightedness in making the move.

After Stan left a small-town church and accepted the call to pastor a congregation in the inner city of a large metropolis, he recognized the need

for major adjustments in the way he fulfilled his vocation. He could not simply import a vision of congregational life and witness; rather, to be an effective leader, he would have to learn its unique identity, character, and mission.

Karl, Rachel, and Stan were learning from experience that organizations—such as businesses, schools, congregations, community groups, professional guilds, or societies—have something akin to the vocations that God gives to persons. If they are to live out God’s call, they must appreciate the interplay of their personal sense of vocation with those of the organizations and communities around them. Indeed, discerning their call requires making sense of these corporate vocations—enough sense so that there is a genuine connection between their personal vocations and those of the organizations in which they serve.

OPPORTUNITIES OR ROADBLOCKS

We live in regular intersection with many organizations, which are collectives coordinated toward common ends. They give meaning to our lives by leveraging our talents and abilities in partnership with others to achieve social goals that matter to us. Because the impact of their collective efforts may be far greater than the sum of the parts, businesses where we work and associations where we volunteer can provide us with opportunities for generous service.

This is noteworthy because it helps to resolve a tension inherent in the Christian notion of vocation. “The place God calls you to,” Frederick Buechner famously says in defining *vocation*, “is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”¹ On the one hand, our work should be more than just a job; it should resonate with our inmost longings and aspirations. But the Christian idea of vocation also includes God’s call to generous, sacrificial service—to take up our cross and follow Christ. In this sense, we are called to give up ourselves—even our personal longings and aspirations—for the sake of others. No wonder that, as Christians, we experience a tension within our complex calling both to be true to ourselves and to give ourselves in generous service. Greg Jones suggests that we can best manage this polarity by examining each organization where we are invited to serve and seeking congruence between the institution’s vocation and our personal call.² When the organization’s vocation is fitting to our own, it can provide us with opportunities not only to exercise our gifts and passions, but also to be of genuine and generous service to others. In this way, organizations hold the promise that our work both be congruent with our identity and deepest joy, and enable us to make a difference for good.

Of course, we should be wary of the ways that some organizations sap the human spirit, foster the abuse of power and persons, and cultivate a pattern of work or approach to life that goes against our divine vocation. And even within a fine organization, what is good for one person is not

necessarily good for another; a position that for one person is an opportunity for generous service may be for another an unbearable cross.

Thus we should approach our participation in these collectives with not only a generous spirit but also a discerning heart. The process of our discernment—asking how we are called to fulfill our vocation in light of the collective vocations of organizations and institutions—requires considering

We need many skills—such as reading an organization, gaining a gracious differentiation from it, and maintaining a kingdom perspective on its goals—in order to work well in partnership with others within organizations.

our life stage and developing the capacities that enable us to navigate vocational transitions well.

STAGES OF LIFE

Our stage of adult life—young, middle, or senior adulthood—is a primary factor in how we relate to organizations. While the passages of adult life are surely more

complex than this three-fold distinction, this is a good place to begin, as long as we do not specify particular ages. We all pass through these transitions, but at different ages and at a different pace.

Young people frequently approach organizations as opportunities for learning and self-discovery. It is very tempting for a college graduate to look to organizations entirely as a venue for career advancement, as a way to “get ahead,” by making the right connections and establishing the very best possible resumé.

At its worst, this is nothing short of opportunism. And even some Christians never grow out of this propensity to see organizations as nothing but a means to a narrow end—the advancement of their own personal careers. When we observe it in young people, we hope that in time they will come to a more mature perspective. But when we see it in midlife, we recognize it for what it is—a pitiful self-aggrandizement.

But at its best, this perspective highlights the reality that as young persons we really have only a limited sense of self and vocation. And so these early years are an opportunity to foster self-knowledge and learning; we learn on the job about ourselves, others, and the world. When I took on my first pastorate coming out of seminary, I undoubtedly had a particular vision for the good that would be accomplished through my ministry. But in the end it became clear that I was the primary beneficiary of those few years, for I learned a great deal about myself and the way a congregation manages to be the Body of Christ.

In middle adulthood, though, our relationship to organizations calls for a different perspective. Midlife is ideally marked by a healthy view of our-

selves, including our talents, abilities, what really matters to us, and where and in what ways we might be called to steward the talent that God has given us. Thus the ideal is to see organizations as opportunities for generous service, for the exercise of our abilities in association with other people toward an end that can only be achieved through this partnership. A writer longs for the right publisher, a teacher seeks the school that most fits his vision of education, or a person in business looks to starting or finding a company that best represents her vision of commerce. What we desire during middle adulthood is not so much our personal advancement, but participation in an organization with a mission that represents our values and a vision that captures our attention, a collective enterprise that is worthy of the investment of our energies. To put it differently, what marks midlife is the resolve to invest our energies in an organization where we can leverage our skills, in partnership with others, to accomplish something that really matters. We make a difference as we work with other people, using our abilities and talents in ways that complement the skills of others. Knowing our limitations as well as abilities, we celebrate the skills of others, for it is the capacities of others that make our own abilities meaningful and effective.

Then in our senior years we realize that power and influence are not identical, and often are not even linked. For all the significance of organizations as vehicles for positive impact, including their necessity for civilization, they are only temporal. Power within them is meaningful and significant, but also transitory and ephemeral. The older we get, the more we appreciate that our vocations are not linked as closely to the organizations that once meant so much to us. So we “retire.” We step back and away from formal structures of influence and authority, and choose a posture of benediction—granting blessing and wisdom, as they are called for, in ways that transcend the boundaries and lines of authority of these organizations.

NEGOTIATING ORGANIZATIONS

The interplay between personal and organizational vocation changes over time, through the transitions of our lives and the unfolding of our vocations. Along the way we will need many skills—such as *reading* an organization, gaining a *gracious differentiation* from it, and maintaining a *kingdom perspective* on its goals—in order to work well in partnership with others within organizations.

Our capacity to thrive within an organization is dependent on our *ability to read an organization*—to discern the vocation of a business, government agency, church, or non-profit institution. The language of “charism,” prominent in recent thinking about religious orders within the Roman Catholic Church, is particularly helpful here. Vatican II urged each religious order or society to rethink its identity through a consideration of its original charism, or gift of the Spirit through which it had been founded. Since

each religious order represents a distinct way in which God has chosen to gift the church and the world, it could find clarity of mission and organizational renewal by living reflectively in the light of its founding charism.

I am struck that this perspective can help us think about virtually every organization, by asking, “For what purpose was this organization brought into being?” and “In what way does this institution or society or business reflect a way in which God is choosing to ‘gift’ the world?” Discerning charism is a matter of attending to an organization’s true mission and defining values. We consider the charism not because we hope to impose our vision or values on the organization, but as a way of recognizing that this organization has a life which began before we were on the scene and will continue after we have moved on or retired. Since our opportunity to make a difference to an organization lies, in large measure, in our resolve to embrace this larger agenda, we contribute most effectively when we attend to an organization’s fundamental charism.

Discerning an organization’s *true* mission and values, of course, is rarely as simple as reading its vision statement and studying its latest bulletin or quarterly report. Often we must “read between the lines” by listening closely to co-workers, carefully observing their day-to-day activities, and comparing and evaluating their dreams for the organization. Perhaps the published vision statement is out of date or irrelevant to new tasks; maybe it was written merely for “window dressing” and public relations all along. An organization can become tired and wandering, or self-deceived, or even hypocritical about its vision, and in these cases we may need considerable insight and subtlety of observation to discern its charism.

There is no such thing as a generic school or church or business. Each has a distinctive identity—a mission and a set of defining values—that is its driving energy, its reason for being. In our early adult years we explore the organizations in which we invest our energies—discovering how their values shape patterns of work and community, and how their missions are adapted, sometimes faithfully or not, within a changing environment. In midlife the stakes become higher, for we desire our personal vocation to be in significant alignment with the mission and values of the organization where we serve. Only when our vision of life and work resonates with the organization’s mission can we effectively employ our abilities, in partnership with others, toward important goals that are greater than any of us can accomplish alone.

A second key capacity is *gaining a gracious differentiation* from an organization. For the concept of “differentiation” we are indebted to family systems theory, particularly Edwin Friedman’s masterful study, *Generation to Generation*, which so ably articulates what it means to be an individual within family and organizational systems.³ Friedman warns that individuals can be inordinately influenced and unwittingly burdened by a diseased “system” of a family or organization. The only way to preserve personal

vocational integrity within a distorted system is to maintain a distinction between our selves and the organization—an otherness wherein our personal identity and vocation is never wholly subsumed and controlled by the organization.

There is, then, the need to sustain a gracious differentiation in which we are committed to a community and give ourselves in sacrificial service to the cause articulated in its mission, yet also affirm that we are distinct from this organization. We are never so identified by a role within the community that no one thinks of us except as part of the organization, and that we cannot conceive of ourselves except as part of the organization.

Differentiation allows us to sustain a sense of our own call within and beyond the organization. Only then can we have the courage to resign and move on from the organization when this might be required. Ideally in an organization our gifts are affirmed and recognized, and we have an opportunity to use and enhance our skills in partnership with others toward a common mission. But organizations change. Their needs may change in a way that indicates it is time for us to contribute our time and ability elsewhere. The very effectiveness of a pastor, for example, might mean that the congregation has developed in a way that calls for a different set of strengths or capacities in pastoral leadership; moving on, in this case, would be a sign of success, not failure. But such a move for the sake of the organization is only possible if we recognize that our identity, mission, and vocation are distinct from the organization. This recognition is vital to the well-being of the organization as well as the long-term fulfillment of our personal vocation.

A wholesome differentiation can free us from staying with an organization out of a misguided sense of obligation. But just as surely, such differentiation is a critical stance when it comes time to discern that we are to stay with a difficult situation, to persevere through a particularly frustrating set of circumstances. It enables us to ask, “Is this the cross that I am being called to bear?” and to be a source of wisdom and strength in the midst of that difficulty. This differentiation empowers us in such a way that the work we do is our work; we may do it for others and in partnership with others in an organization, but it is always *our* work.

A wholesome differentiation frees us from staying with an organization out of a misguided sense of obligation. But just as surely, such differentiation helps us to discern that we are to stay with a difficult situation, to persevere through a particularly frustrating set of circumstances.

Only with a healthy sense of “otherness” will we be able to both succeed and fail in our early adult years, and truly see our involvement in an organization as an opportunity for learning and development. Only then, whether as young or mid-career adults, will a work-related evaluation be an opportunity for growth that neither inflates our egos (if it is a positive evaluation) nor crushes our spirits (if it is negative).

And then, of course, only when we sustain a healthy differentiation will we be able to retire from our career with grace and strength. Only if we are “other” than the business or ministry we enjoyed over the years, can we stand back and actually have greater influence than we had within an organization.

As Christians it is vital that we cultivate yet another capacity for managing the interplay of personal and organizational vocation, that of *maintaining a kingdom perspective* on institutions. I have in mind here two things: first, that the small is often more significant than the large and prominent; and, second, that the work done in obscurity and “in secret” (beyond the notice and attention of others) is often more significant than that which happens in public (in the notice and with the affirmation of others).

We are too easily caught up in thinking that very large or high profile organizations are more significant for our attention and worthy of our endorsement. But a kingdom perspective on organizations reminds us that often it is the work of smaller, less noticed movements that have the greatest impact over time. This is not to discount the value of larger schools, churches, or businesses. It is merely to affirm that God often calls his people into work that is seemingly obscure and marginal. So we will be wise to consider small business, rural churches, or low-keyed operations as fitting avenues of service, for what God is doing through such organizations may have an impact over the course of many years or even generations.

A kingdom perspective on vocation reminds us that our accomplishments within organizations have integrity just when all that we do, both the noticed and the “behind the scenes” work, is done in response to God’s call and enabling. Whether it be the quality control that workers implement in manufacturing, concentration that preachers put into sermon preparation, or attention that nurses bring to the smallest details of care-giving, each of us really must approach our work with a care for excellence that is not ultimately directed to what our employer thinks is excellent. In the end, we are accountable to God for the quality of our work. We bear responsibility because it is, when all is said and done, *our* work, and not merely the product of an organization.

CONCLUSION

Any conversation about vocation, work, and career inevitably leads us to examine the organizations of which we are a part. I have been suggesting that this examination be guided by two defining factors: first, by where

we are in our own adult development, because we relate to organizations differently through the phases of life and work; and second, by the cultivation of the critical skills that enable us to fulfill our vocation within organizations.

We need to be able to “read” corporations, churches, guilds, and societies to discern the vision and values that shape them; I called this discovering the organization’s charism. Hopefully there will be a happy fit between the corporate mission and what God has called us to do; in this case, the organization can provide us with immense opportunities for service. Some organizations may actually pull against our divine vocation, however. Therefore, we must maintain a wholesome differentiation of ourselves from the organization that helps us know when to stay in a difficult situation, striving to inspire change and growth in the organization’s vision, and when to leave. Because our ultimate loyalty is to God’s kingdom, we can maintain a proper perspective on the significance of organizations and our work within them.

NOTES

1 Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 118.

2 L. Gregory Jones, “Negotiating the Tensions of Vocation,” in *The Scope of our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher*, edited by L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 220.

3 See particularly Chapter 8, “Family Process and Organizational Life,” Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985).



GORDON T. SMITH

is President of Overseas Council Canada, an organization that supports excellence in Christian theological education in the developing world. He previously served as the Dean and Associate Professor of Spiritual Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia.

This photo is available
in the print version of Vocation.

About the artist's depiction of Matthew in a tavern rather than a customs post, it is not an over-interpretation to say that Caravaggio could relate well to Matthew, the sinner. Both men were called to do God's work and both struggled with earthly temptations.

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1573-1610), CALLING OF ST. MATTHEW, 1600. Oil on canvas, 11'1" x 11'5". Contarelli Chapel, S. Luigi dei Francesi, Rome, Italy. Photo Credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

Not the Righteous, But Sinners

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Michelangelo de Merisi took the name of his family's hometown, Caravaggio, when he moved to Rome in 1592. Believing that the Renaissance masters had not been entirely successful in depicting nature realistically in painting, he became one of the founders of the Baroque style. Caravaggio's pursuit of a way of painting based in nature incorporated dramatic spotlight lighting, or tenebrism, and a sense of the momentary.

His personal calling to paint occurred at an early age. In addition to his religious training (he certainly knew the catechism), Caravaggio could read, write, and do basic math, and possibly he had a working knowledge of Latin. He had received some formal training in various painting studios in Milan.

Caravaggio's career was launched by a commission in 1599 from San Luigi dei Francesi, the French church in Rome, to complete the Contarelli chapel decoration. The chapel had been purchased by the French cardinal Matthieu Cointrel in 1565 and completed before his death in 1585. The cardinal, who Italianized his name to Contarelli, left specific instructions indicating that the subjects of the paintings should portray scenes from the life of Matthew, his patron saint. Caravaggio painted the *Calling of St. Matthew*, the *Inspiration of St. Matthew*, and the *Martyrdom of St. Matthew* from left to right on three walls of the chapel. These works, completed in 1600, gave Caravaggio extensive exposure and notoriety. After the success of this commission, his career changed dramatically and he no longer painted the small, inexpensive still-life and genre scenes that he was selling earlier.

Though much of Caravaggio's work is religious in theme, he placed details within the paintings that reveal his unconventional, and at times conflicted, life. *Calling of St. Matthew*, for example, shows Matthew counting money in a tavern setting; the artist frequented such establishments, and the tavern details and the garments of the seated figures are contemporary Roman. Jesus and Peter, however, wear robes associated in the visual tradition with the ancient times. The tenebrist light, from a source external to the painting, echoes the diagonal of Jesus' gesture and leads us to the bearded face of Matthew. Only Matthew seems to notice their presence and points to himself to ask "Who me?" as Jesus speaks. This mystical

experience of revelation is internal and spontaneous.

The Gospel account of Matthew's call is succinct: "As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the customs post. He said to him, 'Follow me.' And he got up and followed him" (Matthew 9:9-13; cf. Mark 2:13-17 and Luke 5:27-32). The next verses identify Matthew indirectly as a sinner, emphasizing that Jesus came "to call not the righteous but the sinners."

About Caravaggio placing Matthew in a tavern rather than a customs post, it would not be an over-interpretation to say that the artist could relate well to Matthew, the sinner. Both Matthew and Caravaggio are called to do God's work and both struggle with earthly temptations. We know much about the details of Caravaggio's life from police records: he had several violent offenses, including accusations of assault and murder. Though he lived the restless, tormented life of a wanderer, he produced a large number of religious masterpieces.

Because of Caravaggio's association with the low classes and outcasts, he often depicted great Christian themes in unglorified and unfashionable ways. Yet this indifference to Renaissance ideals of beauty and decorum found a place in counter-reformatory Rome: the Catholic Church recognized his unconventional interpretations to be in line with the teachings of the newly founded Jesuit order, the Council of Trent, and other Catholic reform movements of the day.

Matthew and Caravaggio help us reflect upon our personal vocation, or calling. Like them, we are sinners with a divine call and gifts to serve God and one another. We, too, often struggle to live out this vocation in God's world.



HEIDI J. HORNİK

is Associate Professor of Art History at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

Voice That Calls Us Each by Name

BY KYLE MATTHEWS

Giver of our daily bread
we seek you, hungry to be led
to useful work that will supply
our food and shelter overhead.

Teacher of eternal truth
who makes our labor something new,
help us to find the meaning in
the service we devote to you.

*Voice that calls us each by name,
we hear your summons and awake
to visions of your kingdom come
and gifts that we have yet to claim.*

Lover of the least of these,
we meet you daily in our streets,
and find fulfillment when our gifts
are used to help the poor and weak.

*Voice that calls us each by name,
we hear your summons and awake
to visions of your kingdom come
and gifts that we have yet to claim.*

Christ, who comes into our midst
to show us what vocation is,
we hear your call to give our lives
so other souls may fully live.

Voice That Calls Us Each by Name

KYLE MATTHEWS
Words and Music

1. Giv - er of our dai - ly bread we
2. Teach - er of e - ter - nal truth who
3. Lov - er of the least of these, we
4. Christ, who comes in - to our midst to

seek you, hun - gry to be led to use - ful work that
makes our la - bor some - thing new, help us to find the
meet you dai - ly in our streets, and find ful - fill - ment
show us what vo - ca - tion is, we hear your call to

will sup - ply our food and shel - ter o - ver - head. (to verse 2)
mean - ing in the ser - vice we de - vote to
when our gifts are used to help the poor and
give our lives so oth - er souls may ful - ly live.

1, 4 *Fine*

1, 4 *Fine*

you. weak. Voice that calls us each by name, we

hear your sum-mons and a - wake to vi - sions of your

king - dom come and gifts that we have yet to claim.

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Worship Service

BY KYLE MATTHEWS

Prelude

Preparation for Worship:

Whoever loves money never has money enough;
whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income.
This too, is meaningless.

As goods increase,
so do those who consume them.
And what benefits are they to the owner
except to feast his eyes on them?

The sleep of the laborer is sweet
whether he eats little or much,
but the abundance of a rich man
permits him no sleep.

I have seen a grievous evil under the sun:
wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner,
or wealth lost through some misfortune,
so that when he has a son
there is nothing left for him.

Naked a man comes from his mother's womb,
and as he comes, so he departs.
He takes nothing from his labor
that he can carry in his hand.

This too is a grievous evil:
as a man comes, so he departs,
and what does he gain,
since he toils for the wind?

All his days he eats in darkness,
with great frustration, affliction and anger.

Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink,
and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the

few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot. Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God. He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart.

Ecclesiastes 5:10-20 NIV¹

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.

Ephesians 5:15-16 NIV

Call to Worship:

“Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life”

Where cross the crowded ways of life,
where sound the cries of race and clan,
above the noise of selfish strife,
we hear your voice, O Son of Man.

In haunts of wretchedness and need,
on shadowed thresholds dark with fears,
from paths where hide the lures of greed,
we catch the vision of your tears.

From tender childhood’s helplessness,
from woman’s grief, man’s burdened toil,
from famished souls, from sorrow’s stress,
your heart has never known recoil.

O Master, from the mountainside
make haste to heal these hearts of pain;
among these restless throngs abide;
O tread the city’s streets again.

Till sons of men shall learn your love
and follow where your feet have trod,
till, glorious from your heaven above,
shall come the city of our God!

Frank M. North (1903), alt.

Suggested Tune: GERMANY

Word of Welcome

Silent Meditation:

Discovering vocation does not mean scrambling toward some prize just beyond my reach but accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation does not come from a voice “out there” calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice “in here” calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God.

Parker Palmer²

Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man, said, “In the coming world, they will not ask me: ‘Why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me: ‘Why were you not Zusya?’”

Parker Palmer³

The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.

Frederick Buechner⁴

Old Testament Reading: 1 Kings 3:5-15

Reader: This is the word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Prayer of Confession:

We come before you today, O God,
torn among our many responsibilities,
the varied roles we play in our careers and relationships,
and the desires of our hearts.

So often we have identified ourselves too closely with our jobs
and responsibilities,
forgetting that we are much more in your sight.
Broaden our vision and our self-understanding.

Forgive us where we have allowed ourselves to compromise
our convictions
on the altar of convenience.

Open our eyes to the ways we foolishly allow the ends to justify
the means.

Forgive us for treating things like treasures and people like things.
Make us sensitive to the people with whom we work and live.
Call our priorities back into order.

Forgive us for insisting upon our own way out of fear and insecurity.
Teach us to listen to others
and to your spirit as we go about our duties.

Forgive us for choosing security over the kind of risk-taking
that benefits others
and furthers your kingdom at the expense of our own prospects.

Remind us that we are, first of all, your children,
uniquely gifted to do what you have called each of us to do,
not only for ourselves,
but in order that your will might be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Restore to us our sense of place and purpose in your grand design,
through obedience to your commands. Amen.

Hymn:

“May the Mind of Christ, My Savior”

May the mind of Christ, my Savior,
live in me from day to day,
by his love and power controlling
all I do and say.

May the Word of God dwell richly
in my heart from hour to hour,
so that all may see I triumph
only through his power.

May the peace of God my Father
rule my life in everything,
that I may be calm to comfort
sick and sorrowing.

May the love of Jesus fill me
as the waters fill the sea;
him exalting, self abasing,
this is victory.

May His beauty rest upon me,
as I seek the lost to win,
and may they forget the channel,
seeing only him.

Kate B. Wilkinson (1859-1928)
Suggested Tune: ST. LEONARDS

New Testament Readings: 2 Corinthians 8:12-15 and 1 Peter 4:10-12

Reader: This is the word of the Lord.

People: **Thanks be to God.**

Responsive Reading:

O God, we are not all the same with regard to our work.

**Some of us cannot find the work we need
to provide for ourselves and our families.**

**We turn to you for help and for hope;
lead us to your provision.**

Some of us have work that is demeaning or ill-suited to our gifts.

**Help us to endure while we must
and to see every opportunity to serve others
as an opportunity to serve you.**

Lead us to new possibilities.

Some of us have work that we take for granted.

Forgive our idleness and teach us discipline.

**Make us stewards of our opportunities
and challenge us to invest ourselves more fully.**

**Lead us to become productive members of our communities
and witnesses to your own excellence.**

Some of us have fulfilling or rewarding work.

**Teach us gratitude,
reminding us that to whom much is given, much is required.**

**Lead us to opportunities for ministry within our work
and inspire us to provide opportunities for others.**

But all of us seek the purpose and fulfillment
of discovering and using the gifts you have given us.

We confess our dependence upon you
to show us who we truly are
and what we are uniquely suited to do.

**All: Lead us to make our work an expression of the ministry
you have given us**

**to feed, clothe, shelter, help, serve,
liberate, and redeem those you love,
that we might truly be your disciples. Amen.**

Hymn:

“Voice That Calls Us Each by Name” (pp. 47-49 of this issue)

Anthem:

“Lord, Make Me an Instrument of Thy Peace” (Lindh)⁵

*Sermon**Hymn of Response:*

“Father, Bless the Gifts We Bring You”

Fa - ther, bless the gifts we bring you; give them some - thing
kind to do. May they help some - one to love you:
Fa - ther, may we love you, too.

Words: Anonymous

Tune: WEBSTER by C. David Bolin © 2001 The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University

Offertory Prayer:

Giver of every good and perfect gift,
we, who consume more than we need and own more than we can use,
come before you today to confront the truth that our deepest need
is not met by possessing something, but by being a part of
something,
something bigger than ourselves,
something noble,
something beyond the borders of our little worlds,
and beyond the reach of our control.
Take these gifts from our hands
and do with them what we cannot do alone.
Transform our material offerings into spiritual things.
Move them from our unworthiness toward your worthiness.
Allow us to be a part of making
the crooked straight, the blind to see,
the lame to walk, the lost found,
and the dead alive again. Amen.

Doxology

Prayer:

O God, in the life of your son, Jesus,
and countless followers throughout the ages,
we see that your call to love and serve others
can be lived out through virtually any task,
if we are spirit-led and kingdom-focused.

Teach us to hear that still small voice
that knows us better than we know ourselves,
prompting us to be who you created us to be
and to use the gifts you have given us to use.

May we never forget that what we do, or fail to do,
for even the least of our brothers and sisters,
we have done unto you,
so that every hour of every day might become sacred to us.

Thank you, Lord,
that you are as close to us as we will allow you to be,
redeeming all our work for your higher purposes.

Send us out a people inspired
and impassioned by the good news we have heard! Amen.

Closing Hymn:

“Lord, Speak to Me, That I May Speak” (verses 1, 2, 4, 6, and 7)

Lord, speak to me that I may speak
in living echoes of your tone;
as you have sought, so let me seek
your erring children lost and lone.

O lead me, Lord, that I may lead
the wandering and the wavering feet;
O feed me, Lord, that I may feed
your hungering ones with manna sweet.

O teach me, Lord, that I may teach
the precious things you do impart;
and wing my words, that they may reach
the hidden depths of many a heart.

O fill me with your fullness, Lord,
until my very heart o'erflow
in kindling thought and glowing word,
your love to tell, your praise to show.

O use me, Lord, use even me,
just as you will, and when, and where,
until your blessed face I see,
your rest, your joy, your glory share.

Frances R. Havergal (1872), alt.
Suggested Tune: CANONBURY

Benediction:

Go now, and make this sabbath day
a day of rest and worship,
so that tomorrow you may allow Christ in you
to make the crucial difference in the good work you do,
for that is our true vocation,
to the glory of God, our true Master. Amen.

NOTES

1 Scripture passages marked NIV are from THE HOLY BIBLE: TODAY'S NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION ®. Copyright © 2002 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

2 Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 10

3 Parker J. Palmer, "On Minding Your Call—When No One is Calling," *Weavings* (May-June 1996), 15-22

4 Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 118.

5 "Lord, Make Me an Instrument of Thy Peace" (SATB) Words and Music by Jody W. Lindh. Copyright © 1992 The Chorister's Guild, distributed by Lorenz. Cat. # CG612.



KYLE MATTHEWS

is an award-winning songwriter for BMG Publishing and recording artist on the Grassroots label. He lives in Nashville, Tennessee.

➤ Other Voices ➤

God calls people. Whether it is the calling of Abraham to leave the land of Ur and go he knew not where, or the calling of Moses, confronted with the burning bush; whether it is the calling of Isaiah, who encountered the glory of God, or the calling of the apostle Paul to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, an awareness of calling is both mysterious and powerful. A calling is always a demonstration of the love of God and the initiative of God; but more, it is through vocation that we come to an appreciation that God takes us seriously.

GORDON T. SMITH, *Courage and Calling: Embracing Your God-Given Potential*

What do I mean by “calling”? For the moment let me say simply that calling is the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to his summons and service.

OS GUINNESS, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*

People sin in their vocations, and they sin against their vocations. And in not being aware of what their vocations are—and that there is a spiritual dimension to work, family, and involvement in society—they are plagued by a lack of purpose, confused as to what they should do and how they should live and who they are. At a time when, according to the polls, people’s major preoccupations are work and family, there has never been a greater need to recover the Christian doctrine of vocation.

GENE EDWARD VEITH, JR., *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*

[T]he Lord bids each one of us in all life’s actions to look to his calling. For he knows with what great restlessness human nature flames, with what fickleness it is borne hither and thither, how its ambition longs to embrace various things at once. Therefore, lest through our stupidity and rashness everything be turned topsy-turvy, he has appointed duties for every man in his particular way of life. And that no one may thoughtlessly transgress his limits, he has named these various kinds of living “callings.”

JOHN CALVIN, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

At certain junctures in our lives we are confronted with the need to identify our gifts and choose an occupation; and an occupation can provide us with the concrete opportunity to employ our gifts in the service of our neighbor, as God commanded us to do. This holds not only for the occupations within the church, but in society as well. For although the Bible concentrates on the spiritual gifts and their employment in the community of faith, the Christian tradition has generally extended the Biblical principle, confessing that our “natural” gifts also come from God and are to be employed for the benefit of the wider human community.

LEE HARDY, *The Fabric of this World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work*

Released from work as frenetic self-assertion, the justified person can enter into Work as free service of God’s grace.

M. DOUGLAS MEEKS, *God the Economist*

A right kind of work must be related, not only to the needs of (people), but also a willingness to love and serve the material body of God’s universe.

DOROTHY L. SAYERS, *Spiritual Writings*

If we are to live our lives fully and well, we must learn to embrace the opposites, to live in a creative tension between our limits and our potentials. We must honor our limitations in ways that do not distort our nature, and we must trust and use our gifts in ways that fulfill the potentials God gave us. We must take the no of the way that closes and find the guidance it has to offer—and take the yes of the way that opens and respond with the yes of our lives.

PARKER PALMER, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*

Enjoying what we do is not always a feeling of enjoyment; it is sometimes the gritty resolution a man or a woman shows in doing what must be done—perhaps with inner dread and yet without whimpering self-pity.

MICHAEL NOVAK, *Business as a Calling: Work and the Examined Life*

The task Your wisdom has assigned
 O let me cheerfully fulfill;
 in all my works Your presence find
 and prove Your good and perfect will.

CHARLES WESLEY, *“Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go” (altered)*

The Christian calling has implications that extend well beyond the world of employment; in fact, we may say that *employment*, narrowly conceived, is the least of its contents. Fundamentally, we are called to fellowship with God. Because God is love, this will always involve fellowship with other human beings as well. But it is God who matters supremely, and it is love for God first of all and above all commanded in Jesus' teaching.

GARY BADCOCK, *The Way of Life*

Vocation is responsibility and responsibility is a total response of the whole man to the whole of reality; for this very reason there can be no petty and pedantic restricting of one's interests to one's professional duties in the narrowest sense.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, *Ethics*

All human beings are called to the human vocation. Christians have heard the call of Christ and taken up their vocation of being fully human (life in the church being an outcropping of the Kingdom and a sign of the age to come), and their vocation of humanizing the earth for God's glory.

So the call to *belong* to God restores communion. The call to *be God's people* restores community building, though now with a double focus: the human community (family, neighborhood, city and nation), and also the community of faith (the church). And the call to *do God's work* recovers co-creativity, though now (again) with a double focus: making God's world work in all the ways we serve as regents on earth, and, in addition, to witness to the gospel since the goal of the Christian vocation is that people will have fellowship with God through Jesus Christ. All of this encompassed in the vocation to love, making amateurs of all of us.

R. PAUL STEVENS, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective*

The Christian calling is nothing less than to love God and one's neighbor, as Jesus teaches—or alternatively, to respond to the Word of grace with faith and obedience, to use a more characteristically Pauline expression. It is, in other words, to live the Christian life. This must be the substance of the doctrine of vocation—and the core of our answer to the question "What will I do with my life?"

GARY BADCOCK, *The Way of Life*

Called Out, Not Left Out

BY TODD L. LAKE

No one—other than a minister—is called to spend the bulk of his or her time serving God through the church. The lawyer, homemaker, teacher, and business professional are called to glorify God through what they do day in and day out. So why do we exalt those who are called out as ministers or missionaries, but leave everyone else feeling left out of God’s vocational call?

I have a confession to make on behalf of all of us who are ordained ministers of the gospel. We pastors trust God, but we find it hard not to let our minds wander to that third grade Sunday school class that is still without a teacher, or that youth mission trip that needs another chaperone. Of course, we ministers do need to focus on church-based work as part of our calling. We need to honor choir leaders and encourage those who run the congregation’s food pantry and clothes closet.

Yet the very ease with which we pastors can see how teaching a Sunday school class or leading a mission trip is a valid calling, is also our downfall. Because no one—other than a minister—is called to spend the bulk of his or her time serving God through the church. Instead, lay people—that is, 99% of all Jesus’ followers—are called by God to serve through their various vocations in the world. The lawyer, homemaker, teacher, and business professional are called to glorify God through what they do day in and day out. But since ministers lead the church, we often succumb to the temptation to view our own calling to church-based ministry as the best way for all Christians to glorify God. This enthusiasm for one’s own vocation is wonderful. But it becomes a liability when we who have the microphone on Sundays and Wednesdays exalt those who are

called out as ministers or missionaries, but leave everyone else feeling left out of God's vocational call.

A missionary friend of mine in Paraguay once said, "There are a lot of things that *aren't* in the Bible if you look carefully." For example, Scripture states, "all things have been created through Christ and for Christ...and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:16-17). Note that it doesn't

Christ calls all who are made in God's image to become co-laborers with God in the redemption of the whole creation. Each of us will spend most of our waking hours for the rest of our lives doing our jobs. This is a stunning fact which tells us that if Jesus Christ is not Lord of our work life, he is Lord of very little.

say "all *religious* things" or "all *church-related* things"; it says quite plainly, "*all* things." There is nothing about God's work of creation or redemption that should lead us to think that God is principally interested in religious things. We diminish who Christ is and what his death and resurrection have accomplished if we consign him to be Lord only of Sunday school and worship services.

The second person of the Trinity, co-creator with the Father, and the Spirit of all things visible and invisible, intends to redeem the entire creation. God did not become human and shed his blood on the cross merely to solve our individual problems, though he does that. Nor did he undergo his baptism of death simply to immerse us in church work, as important as that aspect of Christian life is. Instead, Christ calls all who are made in God's image to become co-laborers with God in redeeming the whole creation. Each of us will spend most of our waking hours for the rest of our lives doing our jobs. This is a stunning fact which tells us that if Jesus Christ is not Lord of our work life, he is Lord of very little.

"There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'" said Abraham Kuyper, the former prime minister of the Netherlands who also served as a newspaper editor and founded the Free University of Amsterdam. "That cry we have heard, and this work, far too great for our own strength, we have taken up in reply to this call." That's why Jesus told us to pray, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven." Jesus wants us to join him in his work, which begins with a change of heart to be sure, but does not end until we have "turned the world upside down."

The second person of the Trinity, co-creator with

In aligning our vocational lives with Christ's purposes for the world, we ensure that when his kingdom *does* come, our work in this world will not have been in vain. For in that day, Christ will bring to perfect completion the work that we have imperfectly begun. If the trajectory of our lives is on course, then we will be affirmed when Christ comes to make all things well. Instead of our life's work being burnt up as so much "wood, hay and stubble" in the Last Judgment, we will hear from Jesus' lips, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

The recent movie about the life of Martin Luther reminds us that the gravest danger for the church is not too little religion, but too much of the wrong kind. Luther spoke against a Church where only the clergy were considered to be called by God. He wrote, "The idea that service to God should have only to do with a church altar, singing, reading, sacrifice and the like is without doubt the worst trick of the devil. How could the devil have led us more effectively astray than by the narrow conception that service to God takes place only in the church and by works done therein.... The whole world could abound with services to the Lord, not only in churches but also in the home, kitchen, workshop, field." Unfortunately, most of us Protestants hear today what Medieval Catholics heard then: God calls ministers and missionaries, but as for the rest of us, our daily work does not really matter to God.

But we and our vocation do matter to God. The Bible is full of examples: Deborah as the judicial and military leader of Israel; Joseph as prime minister of Egypt, enacting a brilliant famine-prevention policy; Daniel as second-in-command of the Babylonian empire. In the New Testament, a variety of vocations are mentioned, including director of public works, lawyer, carpenter, tentmaker, businesswoman, and physician. Luke the physician even had the unenviable task of traveling for years with the apostle Paul, who could heal miraculously! Yet this odd pairing illustrates that no single calling is higher than another. Luke did not abandon his calling as a physician simply because Paul was able to work miracles. They both knew that it takes all members of the body of Christ, using all their gifts, to accomplish God's work in the world.

God calls lawyers and social workers, civil engineers and poets, teachers and actors, moms and dads. And they are not called simply to conform themselves to the reigning definition of their vocations. Instead, they are called to be "ambassadors for Christ" and ministers of the gospel in their respective callings. A Christian lawyer like Gary Haugen founds International Justice Mission to help free Thai girls from brothels and Indian children from sweatshops; a Christian poet like Wendell Berry puts forth a vision of what it is to be authentically human; a Christian physicist like Nobel-laureate William Phillips is awestruck and grateful as a scientist as he explores the depths of creation; a Christian businessman like Millard

Fuller uses his entrepreneurial abilities to start Habitat for Humanity; and a Christian pediatrician like Rev. Gloria White-Hammond brings healing in Jesus' name to the urban core of Boston.

We were not created in God's image, redeemed by Christ's blood, and filled with the Holy Spirit in order to "go and do religious things." Instead, we are called, like the Good Samaritan, into the world to "go and do likewise." We are not called to fit into our profession; we are called to "turn the world upside down" for Jesus' sake. We are called to be co-conspirators with Jesus against the principalities and powers. God wants to use our passion, skill, and creativity to move the world toward that day when "the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ." As Christians we remind each other of these truths, and encourage each other to turn our backs on the American dream and to work instead for Christ and his kingdom.



TODD L. LAKE

is Dean of University Ministries at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

Our Daily Work

BY HOWARD E. BUTT, JR.

**As we study for a profession, let us sing the “Doxology”!
Let’s play the “Hallelujah Chorus” as we drive to work!
We are builders, following Jesus the builder—building
our capacities and building other people up, building
relationships and organizations, a company, a service,
a breakthrough—building our ministry in daily life.**

It’s a truism to say that we live in a time of rapid change. As I scribbled my first notes for this article, I slipped and wrote “We live in a time of rabid change.” And so we do. The changes around us not only boggle the mind, they rearrange it. One of the great mental rearrangements of our time lies in the contemporary ferment about the purposes and philosophies of our work. We drown in books and articles about organization, leadership, time-management, at-home offices, flex-time, job fulfillment, workplace satisfaction.

We can’t get away from Tennessee Ernie Ford’s coal-miners’ lament:

You load 16 tons, what do you get?
Another day older and deeper in debt,
St. Peter don’t you call me for I can’t go
I owe my soul to the company store.¹

In recent years of corporate collapse, we see that the problem is not just restricted to coal miners. It also applies to a lot of hurry-hurry, go-go types and CEOs: we owe our souls to a company store. And all of it says that work is either a drudgery or a deity. But either way it’s a dead-end.

Over against that dismal workplace pessimism stands the gospel. The gospel by which work becomes a sacred calling. But my question today is: Why is that glorious reality not more widely known, believed, or enjoyed?

The explanation goes back to the Greeks, to whom we owe so much, but not—repeat not—here. Plato saw humanity as existing on two planes: a higher and a lower. The higher plane is, for Plato, the realm of rational thought and philosophic ideas. The lower realm is the realm of irrational, purposeless matter, and its observation. The higher level can never truly overcome the lower level.² And here's the tragedy: Plato's lower level—the unworthy, second-rate level—is the level of our daily, practical work. It's the world of material things, the world of stuff. The stuff that we discover, and see, and study. The stuff we take, shape, beautify, buy, sell, and use.

This Platonic thinking haunts us today because our early Christian theologians bought into its error. Neo-Platonic concepts influenced Augustine, just as Plato's pupil, Aristotle, later influenced Thomas Aquinas.³

So through the centuries of Western civilization, what has happened? The contemplative life is the spiritually *superior* life; the active life is the spiritually *inferior* life. This idea hardened, institutionally in our churches, into our hellish misunderstandings of clergy roles and laity roles: the spiritually higher clergy and the spiritually lower laity. It robs us today of a sense of sacred calling in our daily work. It's a vicious heresy, diametrically opposed to our Judeo-Christian Scripture.

For contrast, look at an ignored but strategic Old Testament figure. Do you remember Bezalel? He's the fellow, following the exodus from Egypt, who built the tabernacle, the portable sanctuary symbolizing God's presence with his people. It consisted of a series of massive hanging curtains. Seven-and-a-half-foot-high curtains formed an outer courtyard surrounding the interior tent-curtains which hung fifteen feet high. This sanctuary in the middle of the courtyard symbolized the dwelling place of God.

Bezalel and his big organization of assistants made these magnificent, multicolored linen curtains, covered on the outside with the choicest of leathers. He made the exquisite furnishings of select woods, sheeted and ornamented in gold, silver, and bronze. He made the lavish vestments of the priests. It took an army of 8,500 priests and Levites to use, maintain, and transport what Bezalel had created. He was an artist, a designer, a master craftsman, and a top-notch executive.

Exodus 31 quotes God explaining the Bezalel phenomenon: "Look, I have chosen Bezalel. I have filled him with the Spirit of God, giving him great wisdom, intelligence, and skill in all kinds of crafts." That's the first time the phrase "filled with the Spirit of God" is used in Scripture. It's not used of Moses or Joshua, or of any other priestly contemporary. As a matter of fact, God doesn't speak those direct words of anyone else in the entire Old Testament. "Filled with the Spirit of God" was describing a man who worked with his hands, leading people who were skilled in working with material stuff. *Take that, Plato!*

1 and 2 Chronicles tell us that Bezalel's tabernacle prefigured King Solomon's building of his father David's dream, the first temple. John's Gos-

pel says that in Jesus the eternal Word became flesh and “tabernacled” among us, and we have seen his glory. Jesus then spoke of his body as God’s temple, and Scripture teaches that his temple is your body and mine.

The idea that daily secular work is spiritually inferior comes to its ultimate destruction in the person of Jesus of Nazareth—the carpenter. The word translated “carpenter” is also the word for builder, someone in the construction trades. The Greek word is *tehton*, from which we get our word “technology.”

Traditionally we’ve thought of Nazareth as a rural village and the carpenter’s shop as a quiet, rustic place with a limited number of employees. That may not be the real picture.

In 1931 the University of Michigan began archeological digs at the ancient city of Sepphoris, just four miles northwest of Nazareth. From that research we know today that Sepphoris was a burgeoning, upscale Greco-Roman metropolis of 30,000 or more, located on the powerful east-west trade routes.⁴ Sepphoris was a moneyed city full of Jews, but also Greeks, Arabs, and Romans. Following an uprising around the time of Jesus’ birth, the Romans destroyed the city. Sepphoris was being rebuilt during Jesus’ lifetime—during his *building business* lifetime. Herod Antipas made Sepphoris his capital for ruling Galilee. During Jesus’ later public ministry, he avoided Sepphoris, probably because of its Herodian politics, and the fact that Herod had his friend and forerunner, John the Baptist, beheaded.⁵ Above all, Jesus knew that his ultimate human destiny lay in Jerusalem, not in Sepphoris.

But during his years in the building business, I find it hard to believe that Jesus and his team didn’t work in Sepphoris. In construction, it was the biggest thing going in his area—not far from his home. Among the artifacts found at Sepphoris are a dozen colors of imported marble, fragments of bright frescoes, artistically

molded limestone columns, and intricate mosaics. The Sepphoris digs have been continued the last twenty-plus years by the University of South Florida and now by a team of universities and schools. Archaeology has thus revealed to us what the Roman historian Josephus talked about so long ago. He called Sepphoris a jewel of a city, “the ornament of all Galilee.”⁶ Sepphoris had a large theater carved into a hillside. Scholars differ on when it was built,⁷ but can you envision Jesus attending that theater,

The idea that daily secular work is spiritually inferior comes to its ultimate destruction in the person of Jesus of Nazareth—the carpenter. The word translated “carpenter” is also the word for builder, someone in the construction trades.

and finding there his word, “play actor,” that he would later use to describe his enemies as *hypocrites*? Sepphoris sat high on a hill overlooking a valley. It was clearly visible from the outskirts of Nazareth. Could that be the “city set on a hill that cannot be hid?”

Whatever picture we may choose of Jesus at work, one fact is clear: the Almighty God, who created us all, became a human being and did ordinary, secular, hands-on work just like you and me. He died on the cross for our sins on Golgotha’s hill outside Jerusalem’s wall, according to the Scripture; and he rose from the dead the morning of the third day when the stone rolled back from Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb, according to the Scripture. This makes one truth eternally real for you and me. His living Spirit has been outpoured into our hearts today—a reality that makes our secular work sacred too.

So, as we study for our career or profession, let us sing the “Doxology”! Let’s play the “Hallelujah Chorus” as we drive to the office! Think of ourselves as builders—building our capacities and building other people up, building relationships and building organizations, building a company, a service, a breakthrough—building our *ministry in daily life*. In our values, honor, and integrity, in the excellence and usefulness of our work, in the quality of our dealings with people, our sensitivities to others, and the love we radiate from our life to everyone around us, we’re following Jesus the builder. And in so doing, my friends, every secular day of our lives we’re building the Kingdom of God.

NOTES

1 From “Sixteen Tons” written by Cliffie Stone and sung by Tennessee Ernie Ford.

2 Samuel Enoch Stumpf, *Socrates To Sartre: A History of Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 48-84.

3 Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1985), 39-59.

4 The significance of Sepphoris was called to my attention by the work of Dr. James F. Strange, the University of South Florida archeological scholar.

5 See Richard A. Batey, *Jesus & the Forgotten City: New Light on Sepphoris and the Urban World of Jesus* (Pasadena, CA: CenturyOne Media, 2000).

6 *Ibid.*, 14-15.

7 Eric M. Meyers, *The Surprises of Sepphoris*, accessed at www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/jesus/sepphoris.html (November 5, 2003).



HOWARD E. BUTT, JR.

is President of H. E. Butt Foundation, an organization devoted to Christian lay renewal, in Kerrville, Texas.

The Dilbertization of Work

B Y A L H S U

In Dilbert's world, work is meaningless and the whole corporate structure engenders laziness, frustration, and even despair. Many disillusioned office workers identify with him. Some of us are deeply unsatisfied with our work, but we hang on—we need the paycheck. How should we think about work when we are unhappy with our jobs?

I'm a Dilbert fan. I have a plush Dogbert toy on top of my office computer, and one of my coffee mugs depicts one of my favorite strips. The pointy-haired boss tells Dilbert, "I've decided to be more of a hands-on manager." Looking over Dilbert's shoulder, the boss commands, "Move the mouse ... up ... over ... more ... now click it! Click it! NO!!! YOU FOOL!!!" Dilbert sighs, "This has 'long day' written all over it."

Dilbert, which appears in more newspapers than any other comic, symbolizes a paradigm shift in our approach to work. Older comics had a certain work ethos, displayed in characters like Dagwood Bumstead of *Blondie*. Dagwood might symbolize the workers of the World War II generation: a lifelong company man whose years of loyalty had earned him his own office. Mr. Dithers may have yelled at Dagwood when he fell asleep on the job, but Dagwood never worried about job security or corporate downsizing.

Contrast this with Dilbert, the quintessential worker of the postmodern era. Despite Dilbert's education and specialized training as an engineer, his work is meaningless and unsatisfactory. Instead of an office, he has a cubicle. And his coworkers drive him crazy.

Dilbert's colleague Wally embodies the cynicism of the workplace; his purpose in life is to do as little as possible on the job without getting fired. In one strip, Wally rejoices because he realizes that he makes just as much

money whether he works or twiddles his thumbs all day. Beetle Bailey was lazy, but that was more a statement of his individualism within the military industrial complex. In Dilbert's world, the whole corporate structure engenders laziness, frustration, and even despair.

One positive aspect of *Dilbert* is that it serves as a critique of workaholicism. Christians can applaud this. But what about those who, like Dilbert, feel as if their jobs are meaningless? *Dilbert's* vast audience suggests that a large group of disillusioned office workers identify with him. Some of us are deeply unsatisfied with our work, but we hang on because we need the paycheck. How do we think about work when we are unhappy with our jobs?

THE NEW REALITIES OF YOUNG ADULthood

In previous eras, people had little career choice. Children would inherit their parents' farm or follow a father's trade. But today vocational counselors say that a recent college graduate can expect to have an average of ten to twelve jobs over a lifetime, including three or four different careers.

In addition, how we conceive of adulthood itself has shifted tremendously. Adulthood used to be thought of as beginning at sixteen or eighteen, or even twelve or thirteen, at which time we would begin the work that would continue until our death. In 1900, the average life expectancy was only forty-seven years. The concept of "retirement" was almost unknown simply because many people did not live to reach their sixties. Now life expectancies are about seventy-four years and increasing.

The actual beginning of adulthood has been postponed by the normalizing of the college experience, facilitated in the postwar era by the G. I. Bill and accelerated by the advent of the information economy. College graduation, moving out on our own, and landing our first job now signify the transition to "adult life" in "the real world." This first job out of college is likely to be what one of my coworkers, a recent college graduate, calls a "whatever job."

Twentysomething authors Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner, in their book *Quarterlife Crisis: The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties*, paint a stark portrait of this postcollegiate life.¹ Recent graduates become disillusioned with salaries too insignificant to justify their college expenses and student loans. Some with master's degrees find their academic fields so specialized that their only options are administrative work or waitressing. Many move to metropolitan centers for jobs, but find they are lost in the masses and unable to meet people and make friends. Many find that the abstract studies of their college years have little to do with the corporate office setting. Some pursue graduate school, attempting to recover the collegiate experience. Others move back in with their parents, facing crises of self-confidence and feelings of failure.

"The bewildering central task of the Tryout Twenties is to choose a life

course,” Gail Sheehy writes in *New Passages*. “Today, in the absence of any clear road map on how to structure their lives and facing an economic squeeze and the terror of unlimited choice, many members of the Endangered Generation have a new goal: *Stay in school as long as you can*. The twenties have stretched out into a long Provisional Adulthood. Most young people don’t go through the Pulling Up Roots transition until their mid-twenties and are still in Provisional Adulthood until close to 30.”²

First adulthood, according to Sheehy, doesn’t really begin until age thirty. By then we have probably tried enough different things to have figured out in a general sense what works for us and what doesn’t. We come to recognize that some kinds of jobs fit our personality while others do not. We find that some kinds of work are deeply motivating and satisfying while others are not.

In his book *Courage and Calling*, Gordon Smith says that most people don’t know who they really are until their mid-thirties.³ The years up until that point are a time of figuring out who we are, what we are interested in, what motivates us, how we work, what we want to do. It is a time of discerning our calling.

FEELING GOD’S PLEASURE

Richard Florida studied 20,000 information-technology workers to find what gave them the most job satisfaction. Of thirty-eight job factors, the three most significant factors valued were challenge/responsibility, flexibility, and stability. Compensation was ranked fourth.⁴ This suggests that today’s workers don’t see their job as “just a job” or paycheck. Whether they realize it or not, people are looking for a job fit that matches an intrinsic, God-given sense of calling or vocation in which they experience challenge, significance, and the satisfaction of meaningful work.

While vocational counselors may use a variety of assessments and indicators

to help people discern their calling, ultimately the question is experiential. The runner Eric Liddell in *Chariots of Fire* said that “God made me fast, and when I run I feel his pleasure.” All of us need to discern where we feel God’s pleasure. How has God made me? And when do I feel that I am doing what he created me to do? When I teach, when I sing, when I design, when I nanny, when I mentor or craft or diagnose or whatever it is that

The runner Eric Liddell in CHARIOTS OF FIRE said, “God made me fast, and when I run I feel his pleasure.” All of us need to discern where we feel God’s pleasure. How has God made me? And when do I feel that I am doing what he created me to do?

makes me say, "This is what God put me on the planet for. This is what I'm wired to do!"

This is what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls "optimal experience" or "flow," those times when we are completely immersed and satisfied with our work or activity.⁵ In contemporary terms, we might say that these are times that we feel like we're "in the zone." While all jobs will

By the mid-to-late forties, many find that they have plateaued in their jobs and feel stuck in their careers. Whereas in earlier centuries most people had no choice but to stick it out in their trade, today many people are making a transition to an entirely different venture.

have times of frustration, jobs where we experience regular times of "flow" or "feeling God's pleasure" may be good indicators that our work fits our calling. Absence thereof suggests the opposite.

Vocation and calling are very much tied to issues of spiritual giftedness. Theologian Miroslav Volf's "pneumatology of work" is based on Paul's discussion of the parts of the body in 1 Corinthians 12.⁶ Work is a

matter of doing what we are created to do. If we are gifted to be a teacher, then teach. If we are created with evangelistic skills and personality, then we will be most satisfied when we are doing evangelistic work. If we are wired to love detail and administration, then we will find deepest sense of vocation and calling when we are doing logistical planning work. Self-knowledge leads to discernment and optimal work fit.

Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* uses other terms to describe this same reality. He says that all of us are shaped by God in a unique way. His acrostic SHAPE stands for: Spiritual gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personality, and Experience.⁷ This model shows that people with the same spiritual gifts might have very different vocations because of different passions, personalities, or experiences. For example, Andy, Jenny, and Fred may all have the spiritual gift of teaching. But Andy has a heart for second graders, Jenny is geared toward teaching college English majors, and Fred is particularly excited about mentoring inner-city youth.

Personality assessments like the Myers-Briggs can also show us what careers might or might not be a good vocational fit. Most youth pastors tend to be wacky extroverts, and most accountants tend to be detail-oriented introverts. But not always. In youth ministry, an ideal scenario would be one where a team of youth sponsors has a mix of personalities, including more reserved introverts. After all, some teens will not respond

at all to a boisterous extrovert, but would gradually open up to a sensitive introvert. A ministry setting working with a mix of people requires a mix of personalities.

And experiences can profoundly shape the direction of one's calling and career. Many folks have gone into overseas missions because of the experience of a short-term mission trip. Chuck Colson's life took an unexpected turn when he was imprisoned for his involvement in Watergate. That time in prison impressed upon him the need for Christians in prison ministry, and as a result he launched the parachurch organization Prison Fellowship to minister to inmates, victims and their families.

The editor of *Fast Company* magazine wrote, "We believe that work isn't simply a paycheck; it is the ultimate expression of a fully realized self."⁸ While this may overstate the significance of work, it does get at the idea that work should be the convergence of one's life and calling. As Paul Stevens writes, "Our vocation comes out of our identity, not the reverse."⁹ Our being precedes our doing. Once we have a clear picture of who we are and who God has called us to be, we come to understand what kind of work we are called to do.

FINDING A FIT

By the thirtysomething years, many people will have found a job where what they do matches who they are. First adulthood lasts through the thirties, usually a busy time of hard work establishing a career and family. By the mid-to-late forties, many find that they have plateaued in their jobs and feel stuck in their careers. If they are parents, they may be facing the empty nest as well. At this point of midlife crisis, a renegotiation takes place. Whereas in earlier centuries most people had no choice but to stick it out in their trade for another twenty years, today many people are making a transition to their "second adulthood," which may be an entirely different venture.

Author Bob Buford says that this "halftime" period marks the transition from success to significance, when we are less interested in accomplishments and more interested in meaning and purpose.¹⁰ Therefore many midlife businesspeople leave their work, retire early if they are financially able, and begin a new phase of life. For some Christians, this might be full-time Christian ministry in church or parachurch work, either domestically or in overseas missions contexts.

On the other hand, Christians who have had lifelong "Christian work" may make the opposite move. Paul Stevens had been a local pastor for many years when he realized that his church work had isolated him from the realities of the marketplace. So he quit his pastorate and became a carpenter. There he rediscovered his sense of calling and ministry, through a new trade that opened up opportunities for physical work and interaction with non-church members.¹¹

Stevens' experience suggests that we can honor God's call in many different jobs. A Christian physicist told a friend that he feels like his work is not very "spiritual." He thought the only way he could be a Christian on the job was to evangelize non-Christian coworkers. His friend replied, "But God created the physical world. He delights in it. And he has called you to explore it and study it and to make that knowledge known to others. That's your way of declaring the glory of God." The physicist's work as a physicist could be a deeply meaningful Christian vocation.

While it is true that all work is potentially meaningful and significant, it is not true that all work is equally strategic. Some work may in fact be immoral or irrelevant. If a job seems meaningless and we don't discern that our presence there is of any long-term benefit to either the company and other people or our own well-being, and if the job doesn't fit our skills, interests, personality, or sense of calling, these may well be indications that we should pursue other opportunities, either within this company or elsewhere. A plateaued career can be a sign that God has something else in store for us.

Ideally, at some point in our career we will find congruence between who we are, what we do, *and* the organization we work for. "To thrive vocationally within organizations we must find congruence between ourselves and the organizations in which we serve," writes Gordon Smith. "People who have vocational vitality are in organizations whose missions they own and whose values they can identify with."¹² This usually only comes late in our career, perhaps in our fifties or later. By this point in life, we know who we are, and we know our gifts, abilities, and skills. By then, our cumulative experience and accomplishments may well lead us to a position and place where the organization's mission or purpose lines up precisely with our dreams and aspirations. All pistons are firing, we are in the zone, we experience flow, and whatever we do, we feel God's pleasure.

Like many young thirtysomethings, I've had five different jobs in the last decade. But compared to my fellow Gen Xers, I'm unusual in that all five of those jobs were at the same company. I concluded some time ago that rather than changing companies in search of more lucrative opportunities, it was more important that I work for a company that I believe in. It does not matter so much what I do as who I work for. Fortunately, I have been able to hold jobs that fit my interests and skills, and I have experienced a good degree of vocational congruence between my sense of calling and the company I work for. For that I am grateful.

HOPE FOR THE DILBERTESQUE

Scott Adams, *Dilbert's* creator, spent nine years as "a necktie-wearing, corporate victim assigned to cubicle 4S700R at the headquarters of Pacific Bell."¹³ He quit that dead-end job to pursue his love of cartooning. The rest is history. Has Scott Adams found his calling? He has certainly found a ca-

reer that matches who he is, where his work is tremendously successful and lucrative. But I don't know if he sees it as the fulfillment of a calling, or acknowledges his work as something that God created him to do. The cynicism that suffuses his cartoons, though amusing to a point, does not reflect the gospel hope offered by the One to whom he is called.

In contrast, another cartoonist, Johnny Hart, is known for his work on *The Wizard of Id* and *B.C.* Not only does Hart delight in his work and success in syndication, he also sees it as the fulfillment of a God-given call on his life. One of my favorite *B.C.* strips is posted in my office. A stone rolls away from a cave. A confused caveman sees footprints emerging from the cave and follows them. They go across the top of a pond. In the final frame, we see the footprints go right on top of a snake, who says, "Well, that was rude! Some guy just stepped on my head."

Many non-Christian readers might not catch the biblical allusion, and some Christians may be skeptical about Hart's evangelistic use of his comic strip. I find it a wonderful example of Christian vocation lived out in the marketplace, where a Christian cartoonist lets his Christian identity permeate his work in subtle and clever ways.

What if you hate your job? What if your pointy-haired boss is making work hell for you? On the one hand, Christians would counsel forbearance and perseverance. After all, it is still true that all work is significant. Wherever you are, be fully there. You may be there for a reason.

But consider whether your job is the most strategic fit for your identity and calling. Ultimately, we have only a few choices. We can change ourselves—either adjust our attitude so we are happier with the job, or develop our skills so we are better suited for it. We can change jobs and find something that fits better with who we are. If the job is fine but the environment is not, we can change companies. Or we could change careers entirely. None of these choices are easy, but this is why Gordon Smith titled his book *Courage and Calling*; it may require true courage to make the choices to answer God's call on our lives.

It's entirely possible that God does not want perpetually frustrated Christians working in what they feel are dead-end jobs. If we suffer from chronic Dilbert-feelings, this might be an indication to us that God has something better in store for us somewhere else.

Yes, God needs Christians in every field: he needs Christian lawyers and doctors and journalists and engineers and so on. But it's entirely possible that he does not want perpetually frustrated Christians working in what they feel are dead-end jobs. If we suffer from chronic Dilbert-feel-

ings, this might be an indication to us that God has something better in store for us somewhere else.

For those of us who find ourselves doing meaningless, Dilbert-like work, we would do well to reexamine the role of work in our lives. We know that we'll never find fulfillment in a mere job. If we are clueless about what our occupational future might be, then we might come to see job insecurity and even unemployment as blessings. By the grace of God, they can become opportunities for us to discern our true callings.

NOTES

- 1 Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner, *Quarterlife Crisis* (New York: J. P. Tarcher, 2001).
- 2 Gail Sheehy, *New Passages* (New York: Random House, 1995), 48.
- 3 Gordon Smith, *Courage and Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 63.
- 4 Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 87-91.
- 5 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990).
- 6 Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
- 7 Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 236.
- 8 John A. Byrne, "The Promise of Reinvention," *Fast Company* (August 2003), 16.
- 9 R. Paul Stevens, "Vocational Guidance," in *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity*, edited R. Paul Stevens and Robert Banks (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 1080.
- 10 Bob Buford, *Halftime* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995).
- 11 R. Paul Stevens, *Liberating the Laity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 13-20.
- 12 Smith, *Courage and Calling*, 176. See Smith's article, "Following Our Vocations in Organizations" on pp. 36-42 of this issue of *Christian Reflection*.
- 13 Scott Adams, *The Dilbert Principle* (New York: HarperBusiness, 1996), dust jacket.



AL HSU

is Associate Editor of General Books for InterVarsity Press and lives in Downers Grove, Illinois.

Vocation Goes to the Movies

BY JILL PELAEZ BAUMGAERTNER

At a time of rampant individualism in popular culture, how surprising it is to find that occasionally Hollywood gets the idea of vocation right in films like *THE APOSTLE*, *DEAD MAN WALKING*, or *WISE BLOOD*. These films direct us toward God the Caller and link vocation to our struggle with obedience and acceptance of God's forgiveness.

In my experience on the Lutheran-Evangelical frontier, as a Lutheran teaching at Wheaton College, “vocation” is a word heard more frequently on the Lutheran side of the hyphen than on the Evangelical. My evangelical students are much more likely to talk about “trying to follow God’s will for their lives.” While that may sound similar to the concept of vocation as God’s call, it actually puts all of the emphasis on our efforts to discern and almost none at all on God’s actual call. Vocation for the Lutheran involves more than occupation and more than human response. As Marc Kolden defines it,

It refers above all to the whole theater of personal, communal, and historical relationships in which one lives. The eschatological situation of struggle and ambiguity, the sense of the need for the Christian’s sinful self to be put to death within and by the demands of daily life in vocation, the choice involved in life lived in the freedom of being called by Christ, and the way in which this view holds creation and redemption together if it is to make any sense at all—these themes give a most promising basis for understanding Luther’s position. They should make it possible to include both his radical emphasis on Christian freedom and his insistence on the depth of human sinfulness, one or the other of which is often muted in discussion of vocation.¹

Given the rampant individualism in a culture in which this complex understanding of vocation does not exist, how surprising it is that occasionally Hollywood gets it right in films like *The Apostle*, *Dead Man Walking*, or *Wise Blood*. The directors of these films give every evidence that they know the theological traditions that direct us toward God the Caller and link vocation to our struggle with obedience and acceptance of God's forgiveness.

FORGIVENESS AND OBEDIENCE

Earlier artists were even more likely to get it right. The seventeenth-century metaphysical poets, for example, wrote graphically about the Christian's struggle with submission and obedience—in particular with how to get the self out of the way in responding to vocation, which they would have broadly defined as God's call. John Donne's efforts are legendary. He desperately wanted a position at court, but his elopement with Anne More cut off his chances for political appointment. Finally, after years of poverty and dependence on the generosity of family and friends, Donne acceded to James I's urgings to enter Holy Orders in the Church of England. Donne's initial motives for forsaking his Catholic roots and giving in to the exigencies that poverty presented to his growing family are suspect; what is clear, however, is that he became in time one of England's greatest preachers, leaving at his death ten volumes of sermons which are arguably as interesting for the patient reader as his extraordinary poetry. It is as a poet that most contemporary readers encounter Donne, but it was as a preacher that he found his lasting vocation. Notably, in his poetry, especially his *Holy Sonnets*, Donne often seeks God's violent intercession in his life and when it does not occur, he feels trapped and betrayed. "Batter my heart, three person'd God" he pleads, but there is rarely any indication that God responds to him with the violence he seeks. There is, however, every indication in Donne's biography that God pursued him until finally he could resist no longer.

Another metaphysical poet, George Herbert, also responded to the call to become an Anglican priest. Poised for a brilliant political career, he chose, instead, to become a pastor at Bemerton, a tiny parish outside Salisbury. The common misconception about Herbert is that his response to God's call was more settled and less tortured than Donne's. All one has to do is look carefully at his poem "The Collar," however, to discern serious spiritual struggle. The poem's title does not refer to the clerical collar, which was not yet in use when Herbert wrote his poem, but to the general image of restraint. Submerged puns on "choler" (anger) and "caller" also provide a more informed reading of the poem—especially the latter, to which the whole poem leads in the last few lines where after the torment of rebellion, the spirit responds simply and immediately to God's call:

But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde
At every word,

Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Child!*
And I reply'd, *My Lord.*²

Most notable in this poem and most important for a focus on the theme of vocation is the speaker's initial inability to accept the forgiveness available to him through the Eucharist. Here is one who does all he can to evade the grace offered to him. In the end, the call he hears and responds to is God's sovereign call of ownership concomitant with the offer of forgiveness.

Herbert's poem provides a compelling exploration of the meaning of "vocation" and brings to the foreground significant differences between two Protestant understandings of the concept. Herbert's call, a gift from God, as free as grace, seems more Lutheran than Calvinist. It is not a duty or a sacrifice or a conscious effort to reflect the glory of God in his work. It is, however, a response to the forgiveness of sins. The focus is not on the resultant actions of the individual to the call but on the individual's condition before the call—a condition which requires the forgiveness of sins.

Einar Billing has pointed out that our calling is to our professions *and* to belief, a Reformation idea which Luther invented.³ Luther says in the Third Article of his *Small Catechism* that it is the Holy Spirit that "has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy, and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith. Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins...."⁴ The Holy Spirit issues the call, and the call comes through the forgiveness of sins.

SCREENING VOCATION

Several contemporary films illustrate versions of this understanding of vocation which links belief and atonement with occupation. *The Apostle* (1997)

is, perhaps, the most notable. Eulis 'Sonny' Dewey, played by Robert Duvall, is a Pentecostal Texas preacher, filled with both swagger and conviction, who loses everything—family, church, and position—when he gives in to wrath and beats his wife's lover with a baseball bat at a Little League game. He leaves town and sheds all signs of his identity in order to evade police, settling finally in a backwater town in the Louisiana bayous, earning a few dollars as an auto mechanic while he follows the Spirit's irresistible

Herbert's call, a gift from God, as free as grace, is not a duty, sacrifice, or conscious effort to reflect the glory of God in his work. It is, however, a response to the forgiveness of sins. The focus is not on his response to the call, but on his condition before it—a condition which requires forgiveness of sins.

lead in his attempts to form a new congregation for poor, rural people. "This way to heaven" the illuminated sign reads on an arrow pointing upward over the church's roof, and Sonny Dewey reclaims his identity as a child of God and as a preacher. He is a sinner responding to God's call to preach the redemptive word to a world hungry for the gospel. Like Arthur Dimmesdale in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Sonny's secret awareness of his own sinfulness makes him a powerful witness for others. Through the betrayal of a congregant who overhears Sonny's confession to his associate minister, Sonny is eventually arrested, but the Spirit has him so firmly in its grip that even as the credits roll, we see that Sonny's future in a prison chain gang will only provide him with more opportunities to live out his vocation. He cannot keep from responding to the call. He cannot keep from preaching the gospel. He is always alert to the need for forgiveness and always ready to accept God's lead in whatever place he lands. One cannot help but think of Herbert's quick response in the midst of his ravings: "My Lord."

Dead Man Walking (1995) provides a different angle on the problem of vocation. That Sister Helen Prejean has received a call and is living out her vocation selflessly as a nun in inner-city ministry suggests that she has a mature understanding of servanthood and what it means to respond sacrificially to the Spirit's urging. Whereas Sonny Dewey's primary sins are intemperance and wrath, Sister Helen, typifying, according to many feminist theologians, the core sin for women, struggles with feelings of inadequacy. But she responds anyway to the letter from the rapist and murderer Matthew Poncelet, a death row prisoner, and stepping forward boldly, she becomes his spiritual director in the last days of his life. Her readiness to accept a role thrust upon her, even though she is inexperienced and unprepared, is a sign of her willingness to rely on the promptings of the Holy Spirit, but it also reveals a certain naiveté about the challenges of the journey she is about to undertake. What Sister Helen discovers is that the situation is not as simple as either the capital punishment proponents or the opponents say it is. It is much more spiritually complex than she had ever imagined. She recognizes the complete depravity of the acts Poncelet committed and the unredeemed spirit of this murderer and rapist, and she is deeply conflicted over her own role in his final days, but she also bears the responsibility of a spiritual counselor who must look upon Poncelet as reachable and potentially redeemable. In other words, she stands in the center of a paradox with sin and death on one side and the offer of grace and life on the other. Poncelet is a very unattractive candidate for grace, but that of course is the point.

The families of the victims feel only the loss of their children; when one family realizes that Sister Helen is not "on their side"—that is, prepared to wash her hands of Poncelet—they throw her out of their home. She is, ulti-

mately, confronted with the reality of the scandal of her choice to stand by the killer—related to the scandal of the One who chose the cross to redeem all sinners. In such a position, giving love to one who is particularly unlovable, she is finally able to break through Poncelet's posturings, lies, and sarcasm. In the final hours of his life he confesses the truth to her and she is able to offer him forgiveness. In his final seconds, as he receives the lethal injection, he looks through the glass separating him from the observers and locks onto her eyes which are filled with love. Sister Helen has been challenged to live out the gospel, and she realizes that her vocation means that she must love not only the children in her inner-city ministry but the criminal who has committed unspeakable acts—and that her role is not only to offer the message of salvation, but to offer it with love for the unrepentant. In this instance the forgiveness linked with vocation is that which the one who is called to serve offers others. It costs the giver.

Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* was adapted for film in 1979 by John Huston and is remarkably faithful to the novel by the southern Catholic writer, known for both her religious vision and the violence of her stories. O'Connor's characters are, like Matthew Poncelet, unredeemed and grotesque in the various creative ways they devise to resist the leading of God. Several years ago in a Religion in Literature group I was chairing in my local congregation, a Unitarian woman in search of a group that would challenge her in her choice of reading material, joined us the month the reading selection was *Wise Blood*. "These characters are so grimy and nasty that they do not deserve grace," she announced to the group, an observation that O'Connor would have appreciated in its unwitting display of the Christian understanding of the human condition. *Wise Blood*, in fact, is not only about an unlovely, unrepentant character, it is about a character insistent on creating his own "vocation" diametrically opposed to his calling from God.

Like so many of O'Connor's characters, Hazel Motes has been running from God's call ever since he was a child. Released from the Army, he heads to Taulkinham and his new profession: preaching the Church without Christ. Purposely set to follow his anti-vocational inclinations, Hazel's choices may seem to be clear-cut, but they are on the contrary always shot through with contradiction and ambiguity. Arriving in Taulkinham, he tells the taxi driver that he has chosen to believe in nothing instead of in sin (which would lead him circuitously to Jesus), and he asks to be left at a local prostitute's house. He says he believes in nothing, but he very purposely chooses evil, and in so doing inadvertently puts himself in a position in which God can woo him. To stand against God, one must first of all recognize that there is Someone to stand against. As O'Connor wrote in her note to the second edition of the novel, "Free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived

simply.”⁵ It is only after Hazel commits murder that he realizes how unclean and how undeserving he is. Finally responding to God’s irresistible call, Hazel commits the rest of his short life to acts of penance in full recognition that he desperately needs God’s forgiveness. He has found his true vocation.

The complexity of the relationship among free will, forgiveness, and vocation is ignored in the highly popular film, *The Mission* (1986), which presents a simplistic rendering of the concept of the call. The film is peopled by characters who are either completely virtuous, totally evil, or converted from evil to a kind of virtue that transforms violent motivations to purely good acts. Father Gabriel, a Jesuit called to serve the mountain natives of Brazil, is able, through hard work and sacrifice, not only to bring Christianity to the unredeemed, but actually within their civilization to recreate Eden before the Fall. This improbable setting is invaded by Mendoza, a slave lord, who, overtaken by wrath, has killed his brother. Under Father Gabriel’s influence, the evil Mendoza converts to Catholicism and becomes a virtuous priest. When the Portuguese reclaim the land the Church has cultivated, Mendoza renounces his vows and prepares the natives to fight in spite of Gabriel’s entreaties for him to minister to the people as a priest, not lead them as a warrior. Mendoza, now dedicated to fighting for the natives, not against them, does not save the people he loves. Neither does Father Gabriel. The totally evil Portuguese vanquish the natives and create martyrs out of the purely virtuous Gabriel and the highly-conflicted Mendoza, whose motives for violence are now entirely pure. This film masquerades as an exploration of the ambiguity of good and evil. It actually presents a much more dualistic picture of both missionary zeal and imperialistic aggression. Here one certainly sees that vocation is costly. But in the form vocation takes in *The Mission*, it is highly debatable if it is worth the cost. The message is that those who are true to their vocations lose, and those who are not, lose, too. Vocation seems entirely beside the point. It brings an entire civilization to destruction, and viewers can shake their heads over the evils of hegemony without confronting the deeper issues linking forgiveness, vocation, creation, and redemption.

PARADOXICAL FREEDOM OF THE CROSS

In *Bird by Bird* Anne Lamott tells the story of a young child whose blood is a perfect match for his sister, who needs a blood transfusion to save her life. He is asked by his parents if he is willing to give his blood to her, and his response is to ask if he can think it over. The next day he announces to his parents that he has decided that yes, he is willing to donate his blood to his sister, so later he is put on a gurney next to his sister and his blood travels through an IV straight into his sister’s arm. After a little while the boy asks, “How soon until I start to die?”⁶

Ah, such innocence, Anne Lamott says.

I'm not so sure about that. This child was conscious in a way most of us are not. This child was aware of consequences. He was fully prepared to go the whole way—to give not just a little, but his entire self, to lay down his life for his sister—and he had to think about it only overnight. A child who has not yet reached the age of accountability provides an example of the purest response. He was given permission to give himself, and what he did was something he had never done before, even though, of course, it had been done before, in cosmic terms, on the cross.

It is the cross that gives us eyes to see the truth that in a world where tragedy is inevitable for all of us and where death yells defeat, the surprise of joy, the happy ending is lurking just around the corner. The cross, an instrument of torture, is transformed into the sign of hope. The blind see—and better than before. What a surprise the gospel is for us.

Mariette in Ecstasy by Ron Hansen addresses this question better than any film or book I know. At the end of the book the main character, a rather lonely woman ostracized even by her Christian community, talks about her freedom in Christ and she says, "We try to be formed and held and kept by Christ, but instead he offers us freedom. And now when I try to know his will, his kindness floods me, his great love overwhelms me, and I hear him whisper, Surprise me."⁷ For the Apostle, for John Donne, for George Herbert, for Sister Helen, and for Hazel Motes vocation offers not the security of a known and familiar routine. It offers, instead, forgiveness hand-in-hand with a most radical freedom.

NOTES

1 Mark Kolden, "Luther on Vocation" *Word & World*, v. 3, n. 4 (1983), 383-84.

2 *The Works of George Herbert*, edited by F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), 153-54.

3 Einar Billing, *Our Calling* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana, 1958).

4 *Luther's Small Catechism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 35.

5 Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, second edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962), unnumbered page.

6 Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 205.

7 Ron Hansen, *Mariette in Ecstasy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 179.



JILL PELAEZ BAUMGAERTNER

is Dean of Humanities and Theological Studies at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois.

Call and Occupation

BY PAUL J. CONTINO

In common parlance, “vocation” refers to one’s job or career. But Christians understand vocation, or calling, in a more encompassing way and with a keen ear for Who it is that calls. The books reviewed here provide a tool-chest for anyone who wishes to think through the relation between God’s calling and our daily tasks.

In common parlance, “vocation” often refers to one’s job, or the career one has chosen to pursue. But the root meaning of vocation is calling: can we say that we are “called” to our particular jobs? Christians understand calling in a more encompassing way and with a keen ear for Who it is that calls. We are called by God, whose summons we hear in Scripture. The Lord’s words summon us to love God with all our strength; love our neighbor as ourselves; and pick up our cross and follow him who made it the symbol of sacrificial, redemptive love. Does this divine calling to discipleship and to sanctity point us to a specific occupation?

No, insists Gary D. Badcock. In his fine book *The Way of Life: A Theology of Christian Vocation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998, 128 pp., \$17.50), Badcock rejects the notion that God has drafted personal career blueprints and emphasizes instead the universal vocation to which all Christians are called. He observes that in “the Bible...the Christian calling refers to the reorientation of human life to God through repentance, faith, and obedience; to participation in God’s saving purpose in history; and to the heavenly goal: ‘I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus’ (Philippians 3:14)” (p. 10). The word “participation” in this sentence suggests a recurring theme in Badcock’s book: human freedom is exercised in response to God’s call, and “vocation...is best understood in terms of the human response to God” (p. 30).

In developing this vocational “theology of response,” Badcock turns an attentive ear to both Scripture and theology, especially the theological work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, who assists Badcock in developing his thesis: “A vocation is something lived, something enacted in a concrete life story.... God does not act out the details of my living for me, or even in me; instead my existence is one of created freedom. Even though my entire being is dependent on God, I nevertheless choose and act, and I build my own life story through the decisions and projects I undertake” (p. 53). He draws on Balthasar’s *Theo-drama*, which highlights the way in which the Biblical story—especially the gospel of Christ’s incarnation—reveals a God who “makes a place for the whole human story in the salvation-historical drama precisely by entering the world of space and time” (p. 59).

Here, too, Badcock accentuates “the universal principle of love” as opposed to “the particular mode of life by which [a person] will ‘plunge into the breach’ in and with Christ on behalf of others” (p. 116). Elsewhere in his book, however, he *does* attend to particular modes. Indeed, in his sole criticism of the theologian, he claims that Balthasar “seems unable to give an adequate account of the way in which it might be possible for the *individual* to hear the voice of God calling and the *individual* as such to respond” (p. 70, emphasis added). The charge is a bit unfair: among Balthasar’s numerous works are biographical studies of the particular vocations of the Carmelite nun Therese of Lisieux and the twentieth-century novelist Georges Bernanos. Indeed, Badcock draws on Balthasar to underscore the way Biblical figures like Jeremiah and Paul are called to “a specific plan or purpose” (p. 82). In his concluding chapter, Badcock draws from virtue ethics, which stresses that in seeking a narrative unity to the pilgrimage of life, the decisive question is not “What ought I do?” but “What kind of person ought I to be?” Be it firefighter, fisherman, or philosopher, “I ought to be a person for whom love, service, and obedience to God are the major priorities” (p. 136).

In *The Fabric of this World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1990, 231 pp., \$16.00) Lee Hardy also offers fine counsel, especially to young people discerning their career path. Hardy draws upon the Puritan distinction between the “general” calling of all people to the Christian way of life and the “particular” calling of an individual to certain occupational tasks. William Perkins, perhaps one of the most eloquent voices in this tradition, argues that we serve God by serving our neighbor in our work. We thus join the general calling with the particular. With confidence and vigor, Hardy defends this thesis; he offers wise principles to guide both the discerning of a particular vocation and integrating it with the general. First, we must ask not only “What are my interests?” but, realistically, “What are my gifts?” The judgment of others can be indispensable here. Second, we

must ask: “When can I meet genuine human needs with my gifts?” Given our consumerist-driven society, Hardy notes Yves Simon’s caution against “illusory services” which “assert that any and every desire is an expression of genuine need” (p. 94). Genuine service, to and for “the common good,” must take precedence (pp. 97-98). Further, as Hardy illustrates with real-life examples of doctors and lawyers, volunteer work—work for which we

We must ask not only “What are my interests?” but, realistically, “What are my gifts?”

The judgment of others can be indispensable here. Then we must ask: “When can I meet genuine human needs with my gifts?”

aren’t paid—may prove the most vital fulfillment of my particular calling to serve.

The first half of Hardy’s book is a very readable history of the way that work has been understood in Western civilization. For the ancient Greeks, work was a burden lifted by the many

to enable the god-like leisure of the few. Not that leisure is to be confused with laziness: for Aristotle, leisure provides the occasion for the receptive activity of contemplation, the wonder-infused study of the world. The medieval imagination sustains this view: it disparages ordinary human toil, except, perhaps, as a spiritual exercise to keep idleness at bay, and privileges monastic, contemplative prayer, which seeks union with God. In his discussion of monasticism, however, Hardy relies on historical accounts which tend to reduce the monastic life to its worst abuses. As Badcock—who, like Hardy, draws extensively on Luther’s valuable theology of vocation—observes, Luther “was deeply unfair to the ideal of religious community,” especially as that ideal was exemplified in his own monastic advisor, John Staupitz (p. 117). Here I recommend Jean Le Clerq’s wonderful study, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study in Monastic Culture* (Fordham University Press), which provides a fuller picture of the way the medieval monks rooted the tasks of reading and writing in the first and greatest commandment, and, as Hardy too observes, fulfilled the second commandment in their intercessory prayer for others.

The Italian Renaissance ushers in a revaluing of human industry, an elevation of creative toil to a godlike status, a presumption which reaches an atheistic apex in the thought of Karl Marx. The Reformation also affirms the great value of human work, but sees it more soberly in the service of God and neighbor. Here Hardy finds Lutheran, Reformed, and more recent Catholic traditions forming an integrated whole, “a remarkable ecumenical convergence in the practical theology of work” (p. 76). In his lectures on Galatians, Luther insists that every human station, and the most

humble and ordinary tasks, dutifully and diligently accomplished, “are fruits of the Spirit” (p. 47). The Calvinist tradition ushers in a broader dimension of social critique, and develops the notion that “not only people’s personal lives but also human society be reformed according to the Word of God” (p. 65). Finally, Pope John Paul II, in *Laborem Exercens*, following upon a century of Catholic social thought, affirms the dignity and duty of the human worker: “the word of God’s revelation is profoundly marked by the fundamental truth that man, created in the image of God, shares by his work in the activity of the Creator” (pp. 72-73). Hardy approvingly cites John Paul even further: “by enduring the toil of work in union with Christ crucified for us, man in a way collaborates with the Son of God for the redemption of humanity. He shows himself a true disciple of Christ by carrying the cross in his turn every day in the activity that he is called upon to perform” (p. 74). In this vision the general and the particular callings mystically intertwine. So too does the image of work presented in Genesis. Genesis 1 holds out a vision in which humankind, made in God’s image, is granted dominion over creation. On the other hand, Genesis 3, in which humankind must suffer toil in the wake of the fall, presents work as painful. A unified vision, such as that affirmed by Hardy, sees both images of work as offering a redemptive dimension.

Both passages from Genesis are included in the wonderful anthology *Working: Its Meaning and Limits* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001, 272 pp., \$15.00). In this portable library, Gil Meilaender presents a compendium of thought on this subject. In a splendid introduction which articulates the issues at stake, Meilaender divides his selections into three broad categories: “The Meaning of Work,” “The Limits of Work,” and “Rest.” Readers of *Christian Reflection* will find especially valuable—and provocative—the differing ways in which Christian thinkers have understood work in relation to vocation. For Dorothy Sayers, work *is* vocation, “the natural exercise and function of man—the creature who is made in the image of his Creator” (p. 43). Such a view, objects Joseph Pieper, defines a person solely in terms of his or her function and leaves no freedom for leisure. For Pieper, leisure means something very precious: “An attitude of total receptivity toward, and willing immersion in, reality”; it is “that precise way of being silent which is a prerequisite for listening in order to hear” (p. 63). Without leisure, we may be deaf to God’s calling. Jacques Ellul goes so far as to claim that modern work has become so debased by mechanization and commodification that, barring a miracle, “work can no longer be a vocation” (p. 102).

After encountering such vexing differences, it’s helpful to return to voices from the Reformation, which soberly appraise work as neither God-like co-creation nor fallen toil but, rather, as a sanctified vocation to be pursued “dutifully and diligently” (p. 11). Here, along with passages

from Calvin and Perkins, the reader will find a hymn by Wesley and a poem by George Herbert, in which ordinary work understood as vocation becomes “the Elixir” which “turns the base metal of drudgery into the gold of something divine” (p. 11).

Perhaps parts two and three are the most revealing sections of Meilaender’s book. Work has its limits; meaningful as it may be, we simply can’t work all the time. Thus St. Augustine reflects on a life that tacks between “sanctified leisure” and “the compulsion of love that undertakes righteous engagement in affairs” (p. 132). Karl Barth renders the way work changes in the developing stages of life—as, for example, the middle-aged man who has sown and now must reap, who “see[s] at a distance the end, ‘the night when no man can work’” and is thus stir[red]...to measured haste” (p. 134). And Leo Tolstoy, in the searing novella *Death of Ivan Ilych*, depicts a man who makes an idol of his work and faces a night that comes sooner than expected.

For Jews and Christians, the sabbath imposes a divinely-ordained limit upon human work. God rested on the seventh day of creation; God commands us to do the same. But if the sabbath is thus devoted to leisure, its center is worship. Fittingly, Meilaender closes his book with the reminder that all work must be grounded in and give way to worship. The reflection of Anglican theologian Kenneth Kirk proves especially memorable here. One might ask: “Shouldn’t worship give way to acts of charity?” Kirk responds that true charity is impossible without humility, and worship (in which we gather before the Creator with gratitude and praise) is a school of humility, as long as we approach it as a holy end in itself. Both leisure (in its root sense of receptive wonder and contemplation) and worship provide a foretaste of the ultimate end to which we are called: resting, actively and eternally, in God’s love.

Of the three books, Meilaender’s best lends itself to a more leisurely pace: its excerpts can be read randomly and reflectively. Together these books provide a tool-chest for anyone who wishes to think through the relation between God’s calling and our daily tasks.



PAUL J. CONTINO

is Associate Professor of Great Books and Associate Director of the Center for Faith and Learning at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California.

Discerning God's Call

BY AMY CASTELLO

Our Christian vocation should permeate our lives, shape all of our choices, and not be something we think about only when we face major decisions. Three recent books can help us discern God's guidance throughout our lives.

As she concluded her story, Denise sobbed, "But what am I going to do?" She was finishing her final semester as a pre-med student with top grades and a high MCAT score when she realized that she did not want to be a doctor. She was terrified of disappointing her parents, professors, and friends, but she was more terrified of choosing a career that was wrong for her.

Denise's story is not all that uncommon. Over the years that I served as College Minister, I had countless conversations with students trying to figure out what they wanted to do with the rest of their lives. For many students, the most frightening aspect of their quest was wondering where God was in the midst of all their confusion. What was God's will for their lives? Was God's will different from their will? Most of us, whatever our stage in life, have felt the pressure of making decisions and wondering if our choices were pleasing to God.

As Christians, we talk about discerning God's will for our lives. Our *vocation*, or calling, should permeate our lives, shape all of our choices, and not be something we think about only when we face major decisions. Three recent books can help us discern God's guidance throughout our lives.

In *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002, 192 pp., \$15.00), Bruce K. Waltke challenges us to reassess the common choice of words, "finding God's will," because it suggests we can magically open the mind of the Almighty and know exactly what choice God would have us make. Waltke points out that this desire to search out the mind of God to get the right decision is really a form of divination, an idea prevalent in pagan religions.

The first part of *Finding the Will of God* explains the meaning of God's will and how it is often misinterpreted by pagan notions, and the second part outlines a program for God's guidance. Waltke does a thorough job of discussing both the various methods pagans used to divine the wills of their gods and how God's people in the Old Testament sought the will of God. It's fascinating to read about all the customs God offered Israel for finding guidance, but when we think about applying some of these methods to our life, it seems absurd. Can you imagine asking your pastor to employ the Urim and Thummin to determine God's will for you in a particular situation? (It's not clear exactly what Urim and Thummin were, but most scholars believe the priests carried two sticks with them, one black and the other white, which they would shake or toss to decide on a yes or no answer to a situation.) Or how much faith would you put in the practice of casting lots? If you are deciding whether to take a new job and move your family, would you draw straws to determine God's will? Even though these examples seem foreign to us now, Waltke warns that our methods of finding God's will, "like promise boxes and seeking signs," are often strikingly similar to those of the Old Testament. He asserts that we should no longer use these methods because we have been given "access to God through Jesus Christ and guidance from God through the Holy Spirit" (p. 12).

The second part of the book serves as a good refresher for Christians about what it means to be in relationship with God. We are reminded that if we want to experience God's guidance in our lives we need to read Scripture, develop a heart for God, seek wise counsel, look for God's providence, use common sense, and acknowledge divine intervention. The information on each of these points about God's guidance is helpful, but I found it ironic that after spending the first part of the book pointing out the fallacies in "finding the will of God" by pagan methods, Waltke then goes on to insist that we must follow his program of guidance in the exact order given. "[God] offers us clear guidance for living our lives to please Him. We must learn the concept of following God's program of guidance," Waltke says, for God has given "His saints a prioritized sequence" which begins with Holy Scripture (p. 59). Despite this somewhat rigid program, *Finding the Will of God* offers a useful perspective on discerning God's will in our lives and gives readers food for thought regarding their own understanding of God's will.

Gene Edward Veith, Jr. offers a much broader perspective of our Christian vocation in *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002, 176 pp., \$14.99). His book is based on concepts he found in Gustaf Wingren's *Luther on Vocation*. "For Luther, vocation, as with everything else in his theology, is not so much a matter of what *we* do," Veith writes, "rather, it is a matter of what *God* does in and

through us" (p. 9). Unlike Waltke, he is not so much interested in helping us discern God's will for our lives, but in helping us see that inherent in our accepting Christ is a call to live out our God-given vocation in every aspect of our lives. We now claim citizenship in two of God's kingdoms: earthly and spiritual. In the spiritual kingdom, Christ serves us; and in the earthly kingdom, we serve our neighbors. Veith claims, "The purpose of vocation is to love and serve one's neighbor. This is the test, the criterion, and the guide for how to live out each and every vocation anyone can be called to: How does my calling serve my neighbor?" (pp. 39-40). A major difference in the way *God at Work* portrays vocation and the way most Christians think of it is that for Veith each person has multiple vocations in the different realms of life. The workplace is only one of the places where we have a vocation, but some other areas include family, church, and society. Another challenge found in *God at Work* is the idea that "vocation is not self-chosen"; instead, we are called to our vocations (p. 50). The foundation of this belief is based on our faith experience. God calls us into faith; God first chose us and then we choose God. We are called to our vocations based on the circumstances into which we are placed by God. For instance, we did not choose our family, so our vocation in our family was chosen for us. How we choose to live out our vocation within our family is up to us, but here again God chose first. Veith takes this idea further by stating, "Even your wants—your desires, your dreams, your choices—are a function of who you are. That is to say, God—making use of your family and your culture—created you as you are" (p. 52). The doctrine of vocation deals with the mysteries of how God creates each individual to be unique and gives each person talents that are used at every stage of life. No vocation is greater than any other vocation. This broad idea of vocation arose during the Reformation when the notion of the "priesthood of all believers" stressed that all work was a sacred calling.

Though several chapters of *God at Work* which review some vocations (such as worker, citizen, and church member) tend to be a little tedious, they do help clarify how the doctrine of vocation applies to our lives. In his conclusion Veith helps us to understand why broadening our view of vocation is important: living out our faith in the everydayness of life is how others will ultimately come to know Christ. God is present in all the ordinary things we do; being aware of God's call on our lives helps us be more intentional about serving our neighbors in whatever way we are called.

Hearing with the Heart: A Gentle Guide to Discerning God's Will for Your Life (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002, 272 pp., \$19.95) by Debra Farrington offers us a more practical, hands-on approach to understanding God's will. This beautifully formatted book is a primer for those who are interested in practicing discernment, a guide to help us listen to God. Farrington explains that *to discern* is more than simply understanding or making a

decision. The term comes from a Latin word that means “to separate apart,” so when discerning, we are “separating apart” those options before us while taking into account God’s will for us. The book is divided into three parts: the first gives a background in Scripture and church history for the discipline of discernment; the second offers tools for discernment; and the third section deals specifically with how to discern God’s will during

A common theme in these vastly different books is that discernment of God’s desires for us is integrally related to our relationship with God. If we want to know God’s will, we must know God. They also wisely agree that living out our vocation is not a clear-cut process.

the crossroads of one’s life. Interspersed throughout her text are wonderfully insightful quotes from a variety of people and sources.

Farrington employs the image of “God as water,” borrowed from contemporary theologian Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, to say that God is pervasively present to everything, “God flows in and around all that exists” (p. 7). Our primary goal in the task of discernment is to learn to

be as present to God as God is to us. This is, of course, a lofty goal—one that most Christians struggle with for a good part of their journeys with God. Farrington reassures us that it is normal to face barriers when trying to draw closer to God, and she thoroughly explores the various obstacles we face when pursuing a discerning heart.

Hearing with the Heart reminds us that developing a hearing heart is not necessarily an easy process; it is about opening ourselves more and more to the presence of God in all areas of our lives. The tools for discernment described in the second part are a wonderful resource for doing this. One tool Farrington encourages us to use is silence, for we can truly listen to God only when we are still and allow God to speak to our hearts. To those who are uncomfortable at first with the stillness, she offers helpful advice on how to listen in the silence. Another tool is to discover our spiritual gifts. We often have trouble naming our gifts, but this book offers a very practical way to list our gifts and skills in order to be more discerning in our lives.

Anyone facing a specific vocational decision will find the third section of *Hearing with the Heart* helpful; it provides an almost step-by-step guide to hearing God while we are at the crossroads of life. Farrington reviews the guidelines for using reason and imagination to listen for God which are in Saint Ignatius’ *The Spiritual Exercises* (p. 143). Some of the steps discussed by

Ignatius include clarifying the question or central issue for discernment, remaining open and objective, praying to God, and using our imagination with God. For sorting through the major issues in our lives, Farrington recommends from the Quaker tradition a less familiar practice, forming a Clearness Committee. A group is gathered for the sole purpose of listening to a person's issue and helping them seek God's voice. The committee does not offer advice, but listens to God with the person. This practice is based on the assumption that in community we are better able to hear the voice of God.

A common theme in these vastly different books is that discernment of God's desires for us is integrally related to our relationship with God. We cannot expect to know God's will unless we are willing to give time and energy to being with God. This simple idea grounds each of these texts: if we want to know God's will, we must know God. They also wisely agree that living out our vocation is not a clear-cut process, and might appreciate Anne Lamott's description of her pastor's experience in praying for direction: "We in our faith work stumble along toward where we think we're supposed to go, bumbling along, and here is what's so amazing—we end up getting exactly where we're supposed to be."[†]

Both Waltke and Farrington deliver practical methods for hearing God in the cacophony of our lives. Veith presents a Christian worldview that stretches beyond the one held by many churchgoers: God is at work in every aspect of our life, and what we do in every area of our life matters because it is a product of living out our vocations and serving our neighbor so God's love will be known by all. Each book is written in an accessible style and will encourage us to be serious about living out our vocations as children of God.

NOTE

[†] Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1999), 84.



AMY CASTELLO

is a freelance writer and former Minister of Congregational Life at Seventh and James Baptist Church in Waco, Texas.

Editors



ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

General Editor

Bob Kruschwitz is Director of The Center for Christian Ethics and Professor of Philosophy at Baylor University. He convenes the editorial team to plan the themes for the issues of *Christian Reflection*, then he commissions the lead articles and supervises the formation of each issue. Bob holds the PhD in philosophy from the University of Texas at Austin and the BA from Georgetown College. You may contact him at 254-710-3774 or at Robert_Kruschwitz@baylor.edu.



HEIDI J. HORNİK

Art Editor

Heidi Hornik is Associate Professor of Art History and Director of the Martin Museum at Baylor University. She selects and writes analysis of the artwork for *Christian Reflection*. With the MA and PhD in Art History from The Pennsylvania State University and the BA from Cornell University, her special interest is art of the Italian Renaissance. With Mikeal C. Parsons, she co-edited *Interpreting Christian Art* and co-authored *Illuminating Luke: The Infancy Narrative in Italian Renaissance Painting*. Contact her at 254-710-4548 or at Heidi_Hornik@baylor.edu.



NORMAN WIRZBA

Review Editor

Norman Wirzba is Associate Professor and Chair of the Philosophy Department at Georgetown College. He designs and edits the book review articles in *Christian Reflection*. Norman holds the MA and PhD in philosophy from Loyola University of Chicago, the MA in religion from Yale University, and the BA from the University of Lethbridge, Alberta. His research interests include the intersection of Christian theology and environmental ethics. You may contact him at 502-863-8204 or at Norman_Wirzba@georgetowncollege.edu.



TERRY W. YORK

Worship Editor

Terry York is Associate Professor of Christian Ministry and Church Music at Baylor University. He writes hymns and commissions music and worship materials for *Christian Reflection*. Terry earned the MCM and DMA from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and the BA in music from California Baptist University. He has served as Minister of Music and Associate Pastor in churches in California, Arizona, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. He was Project Coordinator for *The Baptist Hymnal* (1991), which has five of his hymns, including "Worthy of Worship." You may contact him at 254-710-6992 or at Terry_York@baylor.edu.

Contributors

JILL PELAEZ BAUMGAERTNER

Dean of Humanities and Theological Studies, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL

HOWARD E. BUTT, JR.

President of H. E. Butt Foundation, Kerrville, TX

AMY CASTELLO

Freelance writer and former Minister of Congregational Life, Seventh and James Baptist Church, Waco, TX

PAUL J. CONTINO

Associate Professor of Great Books and Associate Director of the Center for Faith and Learning, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA

A. J. CONYERS

Professor of Theology, George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University

LEE HARDY

Professor of Philosophy, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI

HEIDI J. HORNICK

Associate Professor of Art History, Baylor University

AL HSU

Associate Editor of General Books, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL

ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

Director, Center for Christian Ethics, Baylor University

TODD L. LAKE

Dean of University Ministries, Baylor University

KYLE MATTHEWS

Songwriter and recording artist, Nashville, TN

ELIZABETH NEWMAN

Professor of Theology and Ethics, Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, VA

GORDON T. SMITH

President of Overseas Council Canada and former Dean and Associate Professor of Spiritual Theology, Regent College, Vancouver, BC