



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The Meaning of Vocation
(*Vocation*, pp. 11-19)

Suggested Article:

📖 Vocation Goes to the Movies
(*Vocation*, pp. 77-83)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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The Meaning of Vocation

To restore the original mystery and power of “vocation,” it must 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 in being distracted from the goal.

Prayer

O God, we have identified ourselves too closely with our jobs and responsibilities, forgetting that we are much more in your sight. Restore to us our sense of place and purpose in your grand design, through obedience to your commands. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Colossians 1:9-14

Responsive Reading (Ephesians 2:1, 4-10)

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived.

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.

By grace you have been saved.

God raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Reflection

We often misunderstand “vocation,” or God’s call to human beings, in two very different ways. We may think only ministers receive a call from God; or, in reaction to this, we may recognize that God calls everyone, but reduce their calling to merely a job or career. Neither view is adequate to the biblical concept of call.

God’s primary call – to enter the kingdom of God in faithful obedience – will transform our entire lives, including (though not limited to) our daily work. This biblical idea grates against our modern individualist self-image in several ways:

- ▶ *We do not simply “choose” our course of action, but respond to an external summons.* Our freedom, then, is not “an inner-directed impulse, but the use of the will to respond to an unforeseen and perhaps unknown reality,” Conyers writes.
- ▶ *Often a vocation is against our will.* God may call us to do something that we neither want to do nor are well prepared to do by ourselves. This contrasts to the modern advice to “think for ourselves” and “without the guidance of others,” to guide our lives by personal reasoned choices.
- ▶ *Our calling usually faces stiff resistance from others and hardships that must be overcome.* Conyers observes that it is surprising, then, that “from the point of view of answering to the summons,



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the greatest danger appears not in this kind of resistance, but in the possibility of being *diverted* or *distracted* from the goal."

- ▶ *We often must struggle to obey God's call*, especially "to get the self out of the way in responding to a call," Baumgaertner writes. Our response "is not a duty or a sacrifice or a conscious effort to reflect the glory of God" in our work, but is a kind of surrender in "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."

A rich image of the meaning of vocation, Conyers concludes, is Jesus' raising of Lazarus. "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."

Study Questions

1. When, according to Conyers (pp. 11-12), did the religious and secular misunderstandings of Christian vocation—as a call only for clergy; or, as a call for everyone, but only to a job or career—arise in church history? How is each mistake "partly right" about the meaning of vocation?
2. Read about the calls of Abram (Genesis 12), Moses (Exodus 3:1-4:18), Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-9), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:4-10; 37:16-38:13), and Paul (Acts 7:54-8:3; 9:1-26). Which features of vocation—receiving a summons that is against one's will, facing hardships, or struggling to surrender and accept forgiveness—are prominent in each biblical story?
3. Has God called you to a specific task? Did the experience share some of the features of vocation highlighted in this study?
4. View a movie Baumgaertner discusses: *The Apostle*, *Dead Man Walking*, *Wise Blood*, or *The Mission*. What do you learn from the film about the nature of vocation?
5. Though we do not freely "choose" our Christian vocation, Baumgaertner insists that "vocation offers not the security of a known and familiar routine. It offers, instead, forgiveness hand-in-hand with a most *radical freedom*" (p. 83). In what sense are we radically free in our vocation?

Departing Hymn: "Come, My Way, My Truth, My Life"

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
such a way as gives us breath;
such a truth as ends all strife,
such a life as killeth death.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:
such a light as shows a feast,
such a feast as mends in length,
such a strength as makes his guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:
such a joy as none can move,
such a love as none can part,
such a heart as joys in love.

George Herbert (1593-1632)
Suggested Tune: THE CALL

The Meaning of Vocation

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	John 9:1-41
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (skim all)	Discuss John 9:1-41
Questions 1, 2, or 3	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the biblical idea of vocation, or call of God for human beings.
2. To explore some differences between this biblical idea and the common meanings of “vocation” today.
3. To discuss the way some contemporary films “get it right” about the nature of vocation.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Vocation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. Locate the tune, THE CALL, for “Come, My Way, My Truth, My Life” in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

“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

... 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” (*Vocation*, pp. 82-83).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Colossians 1:9-14 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

Ask members to define “vocation.” What are the common meanings today? (Perhaps they will say “a job or career that individuals choose after considering their interests and abilities.”) The scripture and responsive readings highlight the Apostle Paul’s understanding of vocation: God’s call is to everyone, and it begins with a rescue from spiritual darkness and forgiveness of sins. The credit goes to God: “we are what he has made us.” Use the four ways this biblical idea grates against the modern individualist self-image, to contrast the biblical meaning of vocation with the contemporary definitions that members mentioned.

Encourage members to further examine the four characteristics of the biblical view in light of some biblical stories of vocation and their personal experiences of call.

If you decide to extend the discussion to a second session, members might view one or more of the movies discussed in Baumgaertner's article.

Study Questions

1. The *religious misunderstanding* arose with the creation of monastic orders (in the third to sixth centuries) to combat the church's increasing accommodation to the surrounding culture. Conyers admires monasticism's sharp criticism of secular institutions: not every line of work can be "done for the Lord." The *secular misunderstanding* followed upon the Protestant Reformation, when Luther and Calvin rightly stressed that everyone could serve God through their good work. Unfortunately, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted, the Protestant view could limit vocation to a job and be used to justify all secular institutions uncritically.
2. Use the suggested passages to focus discussion, but encourage members to recall other pertinent events in the lives of these biblical figures. Abram faces hardships of travel, famine, confrontation with Egyptians, and quarrels with Lot over their limited resources. Prominent in the call of Moses is his fear and resistance to God's call; he lacks ability to confront Pharaoh and lead the people; he anticipates (and will face) many hardships. Isaiah is not only concerned to deal with the difficulties of God's call, but is very aware of his sinfulness. Jeremiah resists the calling for which he is unprepared; furthermore, he properly fears for his life—he will be abandoned by the King and almost killed by leaders who despise his prophecy. Paul's sinfulness is prominent in the account of his call; he endures the enmity of his former friends and the legitimate suspicions of his new brothers and sisters in Christ; he will face many hardships throughout his vocation.
3. Encourage members to share their personal experiences. Which elements of the biblical view—receiving a summons that was against their will, facing hardships, or struggling to surrender and accept forgiveness—are prominent in these experiences? Sometimes other people can help us to describe and better understand our experiences.
4. Baumgaertner sums up each movie in "Vocation Goes to the Movies" (pp. 77-83). "Sonny" Dewey (*The Apostle*) struggles with his own sinful anger; often he is tempted away from his calling. Sister Helen Prejean (*Dead Man Walking*) resists her vocation to minister to a death row prisoner; she faces resistance from a victim's family, and struggles with her sense of inadequacy. In his prideful self-image, Hazel Motes (*Wise Blood*) resists his vocation (in exaggerated, larger-than-life ways); only when he is a broken person seeking forgiveness, does he fulfill his calling. Father Gabriel (*The Mission*) overcomes many hardships; Mendoza struggles with his anger after he accepts a vocation against his will. Baumgaertner is least satisfied with *The Mission* because she thinks the characters are not complex enough.
5. The radical freedom is not to "choose" our vocation, but to respond to God's call with forms of ministry that employ the full range of our resourcefulness. Often God does not lay out the details of our ministry, but invites us to share in his creative redemption of the world. Ironically, we are most free when we respond in obedience. Members might describe how they or someone they know has experienced such freedom when they are confident that they are following God's call.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.