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“Calling or Career:” Toward a Theology of Vocation

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In the Restoration tradition, especially as manifested among churches of Christ, we have given little thought to the concept of vocation. The reasons for this may be several; two seem obvious. Although we are heavily indebted to and accepted wholeheartedly the Protestant work ethic, we avoided the notion of vocation, especially when linked with the language of “calling.” Since historically “calling” implied an external “urging” apart from the written word of God and rational consciousness, the concept made us nervous. Such talk harbored dangerous tendencies toward Baptist theology (and perhaps worse) Pentecostalism. Further, to a significant extent, vocation is first and foremost rooted in two major areas of Scripture considered secondary (if not tertiary) in importance for us – the Old Testament and the Gospels. Because of this, we have given little discussion to the importance of calling and vocation for the Christian life. To a large extent, we often assumed calling was reserved for only a select few (e.g., the apostle Paul, the ancient prophets) and was discontinued with the advent of the written Scriptures.

A Biblical Theology of Vocation

We live in a world and culture increasingly given to utilitarianism. We recognize it in our ethical decisions; on our college campuses we find it prominently displayed, if not celebrated, in our promotional materials and our career advising. Current (and prospective) students regularly ask questions about their future. A significant, if not overwhelming, portion of these questions involve matters of job satisfaction and security, extrinsic and

intrinsic benefits, working conditions, advancement, long-range implications and consequences of various careers, etc. Colleges typically respond with language in kind. We pepper our vocabulary with language of marketability, success, upward mobility, advantageous positioning, etc. Students want careers that will provide them a meaningful future and sense of security; parents often want confirmation that their hard-earned investment in higher education will not have been (financially) wasted. Such desires are neither inherently wrong nor a reflection of narrow self-centeredness. However, if this is the sole vision of life and the future, such thinking becomes highly problematic. Left unexamined, we soon find ourselves justifying greed as “opportunity,” selfish accumulation as “success,” and duplicity as “political expediency.”

In contrast, vocation is first and foremost a Christian concept. It derives from the Latin term *vocare* (*n. vocatio*) “to call.” It presumes a Christian worldview. By definition, the concept of vocation assumes that we live in a world that is created rather than simply the result of spectacular chance. Creation presumes a Creator; more specifically, vocation presumes a sovereign Creator who desires to have a relationship with his creation, especially his creation manifested in human form. Because of this, human life has purpose and meaning. Vocation addresses one element of the purpose and meaning of human life. In contrast to the opening paragraph that presumes a world with humanity at the center, vocation presumes a world with God at the center and humanity in relationship to that God.

A biblical theology of vocation roots itself in two primary biblical concepts: creation and incarnation. The first roots itself largely in the Old Testament materials; the second roots itself in the New Testament materials. In the Old Testament, humans, as a part of God’s magnificent creation, receive life that is given meaning and purpose. In the New Testament, humanity finds God’s intent for human life embodied in the gift of his own Son, Jesus the Christ.

Vocation – an Old Testament View

Vocation is implicitly, if not explicitly, addressed in the opening chapters of Genesis. In Genesis 1-2 we encounter two panels of God's creative activity. The first chapter observes in telescopic fashion the expanse of the universe (and the place and role of humanity therein). The second chapter focuses in microscopic fashion upon the specific tasks and nature of human life within God's world.

Genesis 1 clarifies human identity – we are created in the image of God! As *imago Dei*, our lives have purpose and meaning. Inexplicably, but wonderfully, the Sovereign Lord of the universe has created us in his image and empowered us with the task of overseeing the rest of the created order. As *imago Dei*, we reflect and embody God's royal sovereignty. God entrusts us with the attentive oversight and careful management of his creation.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." (Genesis 1:26)

Genesis 2 addresses explicitly the concept of vocation. Having planted a lush garden, God creates a human and entrusts that human with the care and oversight of the garden. Clearly one aspect of meaningful human life involves our work. In Genesis 2, Adam is given meaningful (and manageable) work. He is to "till and keep" the garden. Created in the image of God, he is able to reflect the divine purpose in his life through his judicious care for this garden. In this garden God provides ample and abundant resources for his creatures. Adam's life has meaning and purpose. On the one hand, God provides for Adam those elements necessary for meaningful life. On the other hand, God articulates a vision of life for Adam that looks outward rather than inward. Because God is caring for Adam, Adam is able to direct his attention to the care of others. Tragically, we find humanity quickly distorting God's intent for human life and turning its vision inward. When humanity determines to become its own god (Genesis 3), we are introduced to a new concept – the distinction

between meaningful (and manageable) work and meaningless (and futile) work. Expelled from the garden, Adam now recognizes the impossibility of the task before him – he must “till and keep” the whole earth.

Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, “You shall not eat of it,” cursed is the ground because of you: in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return. (Genesis 3:17)

Just as God provides humanity with a theology of work, so he also provides it with a theology of time. Since a significant portion of the time given us by God involves our work, it is imperative that we have a clear understanding of time. In ancient Israel, a theology of time was articulated most clearly in the practice of the Sabbath. The Sabbath grounds itself in God’s two most fundamental realities – God as Creator and God as Redeemer. Integral to the creative activity of God, Sabbath observance pronounces a worldview that proclaims God’s control and care of his universe. Each Sabbath Israel proclaims through her rest that the world is safely in God’s hands and will not disintegrate with the cessation of human activity. Conversely, human work fittingly culminates weekly in grateful acknowledgement of God’s sovereign oversight of his created order (Exodus 20:8-11).

The Sabbath is also rooted in the theology of God as Redeemer. Through her observance of the Sabbath, Israel reminds herself that her weekly freedom from work is the result of a Divine Redeemer who overthrew the despotic forces of Egypt and liberated her for meaningful life. The futility of work as slaves has been replaced by meaningful vocation in the Promised Land. Through her weekly observance of the Sabbath, all Israel ceases from toil, employer as well as employee, so that God’s deliverance in the Exodus may be remembered (Deuteronomy 5:12-15). The importance of recognizing the interrelatedness of work and time appears powerfully in Exodus 34:7:

Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even in plowing time and in harvest time you shall rest.

The Sabbath is a weekly reminder that human life consists of work and rest, or time devoted to providing for family and self, and time reserved for worship of God and care for the less fortunate.

In the Old Testament, vocation is central to Israel's identity as a people and a community. With the call of Abraham, God began the task of creating for himself a people with a particular vocation. This community of faith was defined quintessentially by its relationship to the Creator / Redeemer and its vocation in the world.

Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." (Exodus 19:3-6)

This passage captures eloquently the vocation of Israel. Like Genesis 1, Israel's identity is intimately tied to her relationship with God. However, whereas Genesis 1 links human identity to God as Creator (thus, humanity is in the image of God), Exodus 19 links Israel's identity to God as Redeemer (thus, God's people are liberated slaves). This community of believers finds its proper identity in its grateful response to a God who entered Egypt and toppled the oppressive powers that chose to enslave those unable to protect themselves. God's beneficent care for Israel as a powerful mother eagle protecting her eaglet gives this people its fundamental identity. However, salvation is never an end in itself. Rather, God delivers his people for a specific purpose (task). God has called this people for something special – they have a unique vocation. The God who holds the whole universe in his hands has chosen this people to be a *kingdom of priests, a holy nation.*” The language could not be more stark. Israel's *unique* (holy) vocation is to be a kingdom...of priests! Linking these two terms jars the imagination. Kingdom connotes power and rule; priests connote service!

These liberated slaves, created in the image of God and partaking of royal status, are called by God to serve the world (rather than rule).

From another perspective, the enigmatic book of Ecclesiastes eloquently articulates for us the dangers inherent in work (“toil”) divorced from a vision of a transcendent God. In Ecclesiastes 4, the sage sketches the grim contours of a society given to the pursuit of acquisition and accumulation. Qoheleth’s society, driven by greed, envy, competition, and dominance, manifests oppression and violence. Concern *for* the neighbor has been vanquished by the all-consuming drive to *outdo* the neighbor! In contrast, Qoheleth presents a view of work that finds meaning in community and concern for the other.¹

The Old Testament concept of vocation was as radical then as now. In a world given to self-absorption, human self-interest, and an overwhelming human tendency to define oneself independently of any other (a tendency that creates anxiety about the meaning of life and a purposeful future), the Old Testament presents us with a view of humanity decidedly different. The Old Testament defines human life quintessentially in relation to God. The world we inhabit reflects the loving imprint of a Creator fundamentally for us, a Creator who longs to be in relationship with us. Since God acts with intent and purpose, human life necessarily has intent and purpose. As Creator, God has provided meaning for us and a purposive future through several avenues, not the least of which is vocation. God wills to bless our lives with meaningful activity; unfortunately human arrogance and exploitation threaten to deny our lives meaning and purpose. In response, God intervenes as Redeemer to counter the despots of the world who would threaten our future. God creates community and

¹ W. Brown (Ecclesiastes [Louisville: WJKP, 2000] 50) captures Qoheleth’s vision of vocation well: In today’s market-driven economy, the exclusive focus on profit invariably reduces work to a mere job – Qoheleth’s oppressive “toil” – and a job is no vocation. With such a focus, the job itself becomes meaningless, except for the compensation one receives. More pernicious is the economic value placed on a person’s job, which invariably determines the social and ethical value of that person...For the sage, work is redeemed both by community and by its very nature as an exercise of human dignity...Meaningful work...is a gift and a vocation...The secret for Qoheleth lies in recognizing that one works not for self-gain but for the thrill of applying one’s gifts and talents for the sake of another without any self-driven expectations of the results.

gives that community a vocation – service. Such a vision of vocation transforms our view of life and our future. We now envision our calling (vocation) not primarily against the backdrop of our own self, but in view of the other. Confident and able to “rest” in the conviction that God is for us and wills to give meaning to our lives, we are free to turn outward and serve, rather than engage in endless and futile acts of self-absorption. Our world and future are transformed; our work no longer enslaves us; it now becomes a daily act expressing our liberation!

Vocation – a New Testament View

The Old Testament roots vocation in the twin concepts of creation and redemption. The New Testament locates vocation theologically in the incarnation. However, we have not moved far from the Old Testament themes of creation and redemption, since “*in Jesus Christ there is a new creation*” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Theologically, in Christ incarnate God re-issues his vision of time and work for humanity. Jesus embodies God’s original intent for humankind. In the incarnate one we see the ultimate meaningful life – a life blending perfectly work and rest, time given in service to others and worship to God. Jesus the Christ embodies the truly transformed life.

As incarnate Son of the Creator and Redeemer, Jesus’ own articulation of his vocation takes prime place in importance. Significantly, Jesus articulates his own sense of vocation and purpose in life within a scene consumed by self-interest and self-promotion. Ironically, while on his way to Jerusalem to give his life for humanity, Jesus’ own followers argue about their “vocation” in the coming kingdom of God. Sadly, their vision of their vocation and task in the coming kingdom reflects the ethical values of their day, values not dissimilar to our contemporary values. They talk in terms of self-promotion and appropriate reward for work rendered. They are consumed with what honor, benefits, and security will come to them for the successful accomplishment of their tasks. In that context, Jesus responds:

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42-45)

In a world given to career opportunism and material advancement, Jesus articulates a vision of human life genuinely reflective of God's original intent in creation and re-claimed in his decisive act of redemption in the Exodus. Such a pronouncement calls us to capture anew a vision of vocation as God intended it, a vision that is nothing less than a vision of what it means to be truly human. Appropriating this vision transforms our understanding of time and work, and our understanding of ourselves in relationship to God and our neighbor (the other).

The apostle Paul helps us flesh out the particulars of vocation. Simply put, human life as reflected in the life of Jesus Christ becomes our model for human life. Paul states this forcefully in Philippians 2:5-11. To paraphrase, Paul calls the Philippians to "have the mind of Jesus Christ among themselves, a mind that relinquished equality with God and took the form of a servant." This vision of vocation epitomizes life as God intended, life that looks outward (to the other) and upward (to God), life that eschews self-concern for concern for the other, life that is not only liberated, but also liberating. Such a life has ultimate meaning and purpose.

Vocation as a Christian concept takes center stage against this backdrop. Living in a new creation frees us to let God redefine our concepts of work, time, and our very identity. Our work as vocation is no longer simply a means to an end. It no longer turns primarily on our abilities and capabilities. Our work is not simply a never-ending struggle to "get ahead" and succeed at all costs. Rather, our work becomes one manifestation of our relationship with the Lord of the universe who has become incarnate in his son Jesus Christ. The assertion becomes indisputable: a God who chooses to become incarnate for us also chooses to invest our work with meaning and purpose. In our vocations we are now freed to emulate

the incarnate one who chose not to exercise his right to equality with God, but chose the life of a servant. We are freed to serve and care for the other. We are freed from the anxiety of relying solely upon our own abilities, an anxiety that creates fierce (and often) debilitating competitive work environments. Rather, we recognize that the God we serve has chosen us and promises to empower us to serve and to work. To use the language of the New Testament, he has “gifted” us so that we might realize our true purpose as his creatures.

Just as our concept of vocation is transformed, so is our concept of time. Like the Old Testament Sabbath, time is no longer solely in our hands. Rather, our time is a gift from God and to be used for his glory. The New Testament captures the radical difference in how time is understood:

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.” Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.” As it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin. (James 4:13-17)

Two worldviews could not be more clearly contrasted. One worldview bespeaks the language of careerism and self-centered opportunism; the other worldview bespeaks the language of vocation and faith.

Transformation of our concepts of work (as vocation) and of time (as a gift from God) results in a very different work environment. Decisions reflect a different set of assumptions and priorities; behaviors reflect a different set of ethical values. Perhaps we can envision the different worldviews best by reading a familiar New Testament passage against the backdrop of two strikingly different “work environments:”

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then

peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. (James 3:13-18)

Read against the backdrop of “career” vs. “vocation,” both approaches to life “produce.” However, what each ultimately produces is dramatically different.

Finally, understanding our work as vocation seen against the backdrop of the incarnate Son of God transforms our self-identity and our understanding of our future. Just as ancient Israel discovered her identity rooted in her unique relationship with God, so early followers of Jesus realized their identity as children of God called to be a kingdom of priests (1 Peter 2:9-10). Through this democratization (viz., the priesthood of all believers), all followers of the One who “came not to be served, but to serve,” found their vocation to be one of service. Whatever the specific manifestation of vocation, the theological base remained the same. Life as work had meaning and purpose because it was work given in service to the other. Life as vocation creates an environment for the creation of community, for the prominence of self-interest and its attendant activities recede in the light of the One who chose to give his life for the betterment of others. Such a notion was as radical then as now. However, this view of life transforms human life, for in it we find the seeds of reconciliation that produce peace (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Vocation and the Restoration Tradition²

Although the theological language of vocation may be less than prominent in our heritage, the concept and practice of vocation has not. Two of our early heroes, Barton W. Stone and David Lipscomb, embodied the biblical theology of vocation just articulated. Hearing a call to the vocation of preaching as a very young man, Barton W. Stone abandoned plans for a law career and committed himself to a life of poverty in the interest of advancing the Kingdom of God. As an itinerant evangelist, Stone could not rely on the support of

² For this section I am indebted to Professor Richard Hughes. Professor Hughes and I co-authored a document similar to this for a grant proposal for the Lilly Foundation. This section comes from the section written by Prof. Hughes.

individual congregations for which he might have preached on a regular basis. Instead, he had to rely on the meager income produced by his small Kentucky farm. He later recalled,

Having now no support from the congregations, and having emancipated my slaves, I turned my attention . . . cheerfully, though awkwardly, to labor on my little farm. . . . I had no money to hire laborers, and often on my return home [from a preaching tour], I found the weeds were getting ahead of my corn. I had often to labor at night while others were asleep, to redeem my lost time.³

Stone combined this cheerful sense of vocational call with a commitment to minister especially to the poor and the dispossessed. He advised his followers “to avoid extravagant attire, to care for widows and orphans, to minister to the poor and the hungry, and to free their slaves.”⁴ He summed up his life’s orientation when he affirmed in 1842, “No Christian lives for himself [but] like an obedient servant, he says, Lord what wilt thou have me to do? And when that will is known, he flies to do [it], not regarding how great the sacrifice of wealth, ease, or reputation.”⁵ Two themes are particularly important in Stone’s theology of vocation: (a) an effort to discern the divine will for his life and (b) a willingness to abandon self for the sake of others as he attempted to live out that calling.

David Lipscomb, the most influential leader among Churches of Christ in the late nineteenth century, embraced a theology of vocation similar to that of Stone. Lipscomb inherited substantial means from a moderately wealthy father. In effect, however, he turned his back on what others might call “the good life” and embraced a theology of vocation that focused on the needs of the poor and the dispossessed. He viewed the church as “the special legacy of God to the poor of the earth” and, like Stone, he sought to cultivate “a full surrender

³ John Rogers, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone* (Cincinnati, 1847) 50.

⁴ Richard Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 108.

⁵ Barton Stone, “Christian Expositor,” *Christian Messenger* 12 (July 1842) 272.

of the soul, mind, and body up to God,” leading to “the spirit of self-denial, of self-sacrifice, the forbearance [*sic*] and long suffering, [and] the doing good for evil.”⁶

One finds an especially notable example of these commitments when a cholera epidemic struck Lipscomb’s hometown of Nashville, Tennessee in 1873. During the month of June alone, almost 500 people died. Blacks were especially hard hit. Many who had the means to flee the city did so. Lipscomb was not well and had every reason to escape the plague by retiring to his farm at Bell’s Bend, outside the city. Lipscomb believed, however, that his vocation in the kingdom of God required him to go into houses where the plague had struck, to clean and feed the victims, and to do everything in his power to help restore their health. He urged members of Churches of Christ in Nashville to follow suit. “It is a time that should call out the full courage and energy of the church in looking after the needy,” he wrote. “Every individual, white or black, that dies from neglect and want of proper food and nursing, is a reproach to the professors of the Christian religion in the vicinity of Nashville.”⁷

Conclusion

Viewing our future as vocation will surely be transformational. It was for ancient Israel; it was for the early followers of Jesus. Viewing our lives and our futures in the hands of a God who creates and redeems because he desires to be in relationship with us cannot help but change us. G. Meilaender captures the sense well:

Do you want to know what is your vocation? Then the first question to ask is not, “What do I want to do with my life?” It is not as if I first come to know myself and then choose a vocation that fulfills and satisfies me. For it is only by hearing and answering the divine summons, by participating in my calling, that I can come to know who I am. We are not who we think we are; we are who God calls us to be.⁸

⁶ David Lipscomb, *Gospel Advocate* 8 (February 27, 1866) 141; and *Civil Government* (Nashville, 1889) 133.

⁷ Lipscomb, “The Cholera,” *Gospel Advocate* 15 (June 26, 1873) 619.

⁸ G. Meilaender, Divine Summons: Working in the Horizon of God’s call,” *Christian Century* (November 1, 2000) 1112.

Viewing our vocation and our time against the backdrop of One who became like us, so that he might reconcile us to the Creator of the universe and Redeemer of human life, cannot help but transform us. With our future and our work safely in the hands of the Lord of all, we experience true freedom. We are free to think creatively about how we might best utilize those gifts God has entrusted to us. We are free to choose careers that best promote human dignity and nourish the spirit. We are free to create work environments that celebrate reconciliation and peace. We are ultimately free to experience true freedom, the freedom that comes from “having the mind of Christ.”⁹ In a society prone to repeatedly turning in upon itself, releasing graduates into the marketplace who think in terms of vocation rather than career will be an act of radical courage.

⁹ Meilaender (1113-1114) is again helpful at this point. He notes that we are freed from the enslaving desire of greatness, achievement, and accomplishment. We are set free not to abandon the ordinary for some presumed great quest, but so that we might enter more deeply into the ordinary and transform it through the blessings derived from our calling.