

Rethinking Work as Vocation: From Protestant Advice to Gospel Corrective

By Scott Waalkes

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When our liberal arts graduates move back home to live with their parents, we cringe a little. We cringe because many graduates have student loan debt. We cringe because even clerical and retail service positions require a Bachelor's degree these days.¹ We cringe because our sluggish economy is creating fewer entry-level positions for broadly educated young people. We cringe because a meaningful vocation (by which we often mean career) seems like a luxury and an impossibility for many. We cringe because the proverbial humanities major working at Starbucks and living with Mom and Dad captures a loss of confidence in Christian higher education circles. If we are to regain confidence in our mission, we need to rethink our advice to students.

Christian higher education has long been wedded to the ideal of liberal education as a gateway to finding one's deeper calling and serving the advancement of Kingdom purposes. We claim that education is more than preparation for a job; it is about formation of the whole person. Therefore, we aim not just to impart knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will make our students successful workers but to shape the character of our students for life. Thus, we advise students in the liberal arts to do what they love in areas where they can exercise their gifts, hoping that, incidentally, they may be paid to do it. We also quietly hope that this paid employment will be compatible with the Christian mission of our institutions. We prefer that our students find a career related to their major field of study that will not only garner prestige but also influence the world for the better. Drawing on the classic Protestant teaching about vocation, we view careers related to our educational mission as "callings."² We therefore also tend

The classic Protestant teaching about work has led evangelicals to view work as a vocation. In changing economic times, however, **Scott Waalkes** argues that we should rethink the classic teaching. He analyzes three "ideal type" views of vocation: a Reformational view, focused on "stations" or divine commands; a mystical view, focused on inner meaning; and a contemporary cultural view that combines the first two views to focus on meaningful careers. By contrast, a gospel view – focused on the call to discipleship, the imitation of Jesus, and the mission of God – corrects these views in several ways. Mr. Waalkes is Professor of International Politics at Malone University.

to scorn work that is not part of a major-related career. When a graduated history major recently made my burrito at Chipotle, I cringed.

In light of longer-term economic trends, we need to distinguish sharply between Christian vocation, careers, and jobs.³ Equating work with vocation puts us out of step with the economies of post-industrial countries where “flexible work” undercuts long-term commitments and careers.⁴ Neither employers nor employees expect or demand long-term loyalty. The discourse of work-as-vocation also fails to practice hospitality. For one thing, it excludes the many people in our societies – the retired, the young, the disabled, the stay-at-home parents, prisoners, and the unemployed – who do not have paid employment. These non-employed people, for instance, currently make up 55% of the United States’ population.⁵ Furthermore, our talk of lifelong, meaningful work as a calling sounds smug when compared with the plight of the poor, who work merely to eat. If a job or career is a primary place to find a calling, then we have little to say to a majority of our population, including the unemployed or underemployed, stay-at-home parents, and those who are institutionalized (whether the disabled, prisoners, or the aged).

Most critically, confusing work with vocation can also inflate the Christian doctrine of vocation to sanctify careers as somehow more worthy than daily drudgery. After researching theories of vocation, A. J. Conyers says that he was “struck by the fact that most modern books about vocation were actually about

¹Catherine Rampell, “It Takes a B.A. to Find a Job as a File Clerk,” *New York Times*, February 19, 2013.

²Among many others, some recent and representative works include Donald W. Griesinger, “The Theology of Work and the Work of Christian Scholars,” *Christian Scholar's Review* 39 (Spring 2010): 291–304; Matthew Walkout, “Teaching Vocation and (Other) Unsafe Scientific Practices,” *Christian Scholar's Review* 38 (Winter 2009): 259–282; Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of this World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990); R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999); Gerald L. Sittser, *The Will of God as a Way of Life: Finding and Following the Will of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 63–108; Douglas J. Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004); Amy L. Sherman, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011); Tom Nelson, *Work Matters: Connecting Sunday Worship to Monday Work* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011); Ben Witherington, III, *Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011); Timothy J. Keller, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting our Work to God's Work* (New York: Dutton, 2012); Steven R. Garber, *Visions of Vocation: Common Grace for the Common Good* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

³Interestingly, psychologists find that people tend to use similar categories to describe their view of work. See Amy Wrzesniewski, Clark McCauley, Paul Rozin, and Barry Schwartz, “Jobs, Careers, and Callings: People's Relations to Their Work,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 31 (1997): 21–33. Thanks to Matt Phelps for alerting me to this article.

⁴Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998).

⁵Calculation of the total number of employed persons as of January 2013 (according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics), which was 143,322,000, divided by the total population of the United States as of the end of December 2012 (according to the Census Bureau), which was 313,914,040.

'work.'⁶ Drawing on this Protestant discourse about work-as-vocation, we have little to say to our graduates who land clerical or service jobs but still manage to pay the bills. Are they somehow lesser if their work is not in a prestigious career with chances for advancement? Are they changing the world less than their peers who are rising in the corporate world, in government, in academia, in health care, or in non-profits? Should we be ashamed if they do not work? Paul says those who are unwilling to work should not eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10). However, what if our graduates are willing but the economy is weak? If they work in retail after graduating, do they lack a calling?

It is high time to unpack problems in Protestant discourse about work as a calling. For convenience, we will review three "ideal types" in that discourse.⁷ First, Luther and Calvin both focused on "stations" where laypeople were called to serve just as much as those called to the religious life. For the Reformers, daily obedience in occupational and family duties was a calling. Second, mystics like the Quakers focused on the inward light, the personal call of Jesus, and one's personal gifts. Fulfillment was found when one discerned the call of the divine within. Contemporary views of work in North American middle-class circles essentially blend the Reformed and mystical emphases, forming a third distinct approach. Like the Reformed, they emphasize the importance of meaningful roles in established institutions. Like mystical traditions, they focus on the internal, the subjective, and the spiritual life. What unites the three views, however, is their focus on the "secondary calling" of occupations as a place to experience great fulfillment.⁸ Vocation, for them, is a career that yields personal joy in the exercise of personal gifts.

By contrast, a view rooted in the Gospels focuses on vocation as the primary calling to discipleship, correcting weaknesses in the other views. Without such a correction, we are in danger of misleading our students and aligning ourselves with contemporary glorifications of work. Our institutions therefore need to heed the Gospels' call to radical discipleship and challenge our students to go beyond contemporary culture and "live for the kingdom" (to borrow N. T. Wright's phrase).⁹ To say this positively, we must listen for the voice of Jesus calling us to follow him – a voice that always pulls us beyond our current career and toward the mission of God, toward finding our identity in Jesus and the advancing Kingdom

⁶A. J. Conyers, *The Listening Heart: Vocation and the Crisis of Modern Culture* (Dallas, TX: Spence Publishing, 2006), 16.

⁷Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (Glencoe, IL: Free Press 1949), 90–106. In other words, these are abstract distillations of the logic of these positions – composite sketches which no one thinker may accept as characterizing their position in all of its nuances. But these are more than "straw men" to knock down. They each have textual evidence supporting them and a consistent logic.

⁸Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville, TN: Word, 1998), 31. Stevens, *The Other Six Days*, 72–104, distinguishes between a personal vocation (what Guinness calls "secondary"), a Christian vocation, and a human vocation.

⁹N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 207–211.

first. We need to move beyond the "outside-in" orientation of the Reformers, the "inside-out" view of the mystics, and the external-internal matching of contemporary career counselors. Their advice all needs to be leavened with gospel yeast.

Outside-in: Reformation-era Views of Calling Focus on External Authorities and Activity

Differences over the interpretation of a word in 1 Corinthians 7:20 offer a nice entry into Luther's and Calvin's distinctive views of calling. The King James Translation reflects Luther's novel reading of the Greek: "Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called." Both Luther and Calvin believed that the Greek word for calling in this verse – *klesis* – should be understood as a calling to a social role or job and not as the calling to conversion and discipleship in Christ.

The traditional interpretation of this verse had held that a calling was always a word from God, a divine directive to act anew while trusting God. Calling was not associated with employment but with responding directly to a divine messenger.¹⁰ By translating *klesis* using the German word *Beruf*, Luther conveys his teaching that one's everyday "occupation" or "station" was the place where one experienced the calling of God.¹¹ This emphasis on daily work and the value of natural relationships among laypeople was a startling emphasis in the sixteenth century. Before Luther, medieval monasticism held that only some were called to the religious life, but now Luther, an ex-Augustinian monk, contends that "the menial housework of a manservant or maidservant is often more acceptable to God than all the fastings and others works of a monk or priest, because the monk or priest lacks faith."¹² Until Luther, only these priests, monks, or nuns had vocations.

Reflecting this tradition of interpretation, the New Jerusalem Bible interprets this same verse quite differently. Instead of the King James Version's advice to remain in your calling, it translates the Greek as "everyone should stay in whatever state he was in when he was called." In the context of the larger passage, we should add, the "state" that Paul is talking about is whether one is circumcised or uncircumcised – not one's occupation or social role.¹³ And "the call" is understood to be the call to conversion.

Nonetheless, Luther starts later Christians down the path of thinking that

¹⁰Thus calling was "the same as elsewhere in the Pauline writings – indeed, in the whole of the Bible: the traditional summons to faith, obedience, and salvation." Gary D. Badcock, *The Way of Life: A Theology of Christian Vocation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 6–7.

¹¹Karlfried Froehlich, "Luther on Vocation," in *Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 122–123; Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 1–10.

¹²Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, trans. A. T. W. Steinhauser, in *Three Treatises*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1970), 203. Also see Froehlich, "Luther on Vocation," 121.

¹³Badcock, *Way of Life*, 8.

everyone had a *Beruf* – a station, social role, estate, or occupation that gave one a holy calling from God.¹⁴ Your mission to serve God could be found in obeying Christ in your *Beruf*, your job or career or social position. In his commentary on 1 Corinthians 7:20, John Calvin similarly emphasizes the call of God to a “lawful mode of life.”¹⁵ He says that the apostle Paul “exhorts, that every one stick by his trade, as the old proverb goes.”¹⁶ Work within your lawful limits. Stick to your trade, and stay at your post, since your post is established by God. Like Luther, Calvin reads the “calling” in 1 Corinthians 7:20 as a legitimate social station or trade. The teaching is familiar to many Protestants. We do not need to become full-time ministers in the church to have a calling; we merely need to work to serve God in our various spheres, attending to the natural, God-given norms within them. Paul’s advice to slaves in Colossians is applied to all lay Christians: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord” (Col 3:23). If we work to the glory of God in our positions, we are living out our calling.

We must admit that Luther’s and Calvin’s interpretation ushered in a liberating notion of “the priesthood of all believers.” In context, this teaching glorified the labor of ordinary mothers, fathers, peasants, and clerks. In his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin wrote that “a man of obscure station will lead a private life ungrudgingly so as not to leave the rank in which he has been placed by God.”¹⁷ If you are persuaded that your burdens are a calling from God, then you will be consoled “that 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.”¹⁸ By lifting and exalting ordinary labor, the Reformers initiate a tremendous “affirmation of everyday life” (to use philosopher Charles Taylor’s apt phrase), that inspired so many English and American Puritans.¹⁹ Work hard at your humble job, and you will honor God. Industriousness is near to godliness.

The Puritans thus moved a long way from the ancient Greeks, who saw household labor and family matters as far inferior to the life of leisurely contemplation.²⁰

¹⁴See the extensive exegetical discussion in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 600–607. Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 109–110, highlights Luther’s translation and interpretation problems in 1 Corinthians 7:20. Also see Stevens, *The Other Six Days*, 78. Luther’s view of 1 Corinthians 7:20 is shared by none of the authorities cited in *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament, Vol. VII: 1–2 Corinthians*, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 67.

¹⁵John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 248.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 249. See also Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 154.

¹⁷John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), Book III, chapter 10, section 6, p. 724.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 724.

¹⁹Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 211–233.

²⁰Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (NY: Anchor Books, 1959), 53–59, 138–139; Josef Pieper, *Leisure, The Basis of Culture*, trans. Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Books,

Now, all Christian laypeople – even women and servants, who were less-than-fully-human to Aristotle – were liberated to live out their faith.²¹ A humble servant working to the glory of God now offered a pleasing sacrifice to God.²² However, in line with this affirmation, the active life began to be valued over the contemplative life.²³ Whereas Aristotle and Aquinas found contemplation of the divine being to be the highest good, Calvin's followers found obedient action to divine commands or natural laws to be the highest good. We can therefore understand why the sociologist Max Weber famously pointed to Calvinism as a source of the "Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism" (even if we might quibble with some of the details of his analysis).²⁴ Both Calvin and Luther transformed the work of ordinary laypeople by proclaiming it valuable as Christian service. By doing so, they unleashed a liberating impulse of the modern era.

However, their teaching was later abused in an "attempt to exalt work."²⁵ For Calvin, callings were synonymous with "all kinds of living or estates which God has established and founded in His Word."²⁶ "Remaining in your calling," then, could be understood as staying in your occupation, one of the many external, natural, legal, and social "stations" in which you found yourself embedded.²⁷ The natural order of society guides us into spaces where we are to respond to the voice of God. God's creation thus provides an authority structure rooted in creation or natural law and governed by common grace, authorizing our callings and providing boundaries for them.²⁸

2009), 19–41.

²¹Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. T. A. Sinclair (New York: Penguin, 1981), I.13.1260a 13–14, p. 95.

²²Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 155, citing Calvin's sermon on 1 Corinthians 10:31–11:1.

²³Arendt, *Human Condition*, 7–17, 289–294, 320–325. This contrast is quite clear in Calvin's interpretation of the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10. In the text, Jesus commends Mary as the one who chose "what is better" (Luke 10:42). The traditional interpretation to this point – including ancient authorities such as Augustine, Ambrose, and John Cassian as well as their medieval successors – held Jesus' praise of Mary as evidence for the superiority of the contemplative, monastic life over the active life of ordinary labor. In his commentary on this passage, Calvin emphatically rejects this view. For the traditional view, see *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament III: Luke*, ed. Arthur C. Just (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 182–183. For Calvin's view, see Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine*, 155; and John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. II, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 141–145.

²⁴Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribner, 1958).

²⁵Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 496.

²⁶John Calvin, *Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines*, trans. Benjamin Wirt Farley (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982), 276.

²⁷Schuurman, *Vocation*, 5. Schuurman argues that this emphasis on social roles distinguished Luther from both late medieval Catholics and early sixteenth-century Anabaptists. Catholics limited vocations to clergy and monastics, while Anabaptists rejected social roles that were coercive.

²⁸For vivid examples equating vocations with authority structures, see Gene Edward Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), 137–141.

Thus we can see unintended consequences lurking here. First, equating social stations with callings could baptize unjust social, political, and economic structures as part of God's will. This reduces Christian faith to practicing interpersonal ethics within these unjust structures, without challenging them.²⁹ Decent people are often trapped in systems perpetuating injustice to themselves or others. Put simply, it is problematic to tell those suffering in – or perpetuating – situations of injustice that they should stay in their places.³⁰ It is an exaggeration to say with John Howard Yoder that “the natural effect of this vision of authority structures being anchored in the structures of ‘creation’ is of course conservative and patriarchal.”³¹ But it takes little imagination to see how such teaching can justify abusive relationships, tyranny, slavery, apartheid, or sweatshops – among other practices. We can put this problem in more formal theological terms. Calvin's teaching especially relies on a “natural theology” – rooted in alleged universal laws of nature accessible to all – that can support a deep impulse to conserve existing social structures.³² If authority structures like slavery or the assembly line are rooted in Creation, then overturning them looks like a challenge to the authority of God. Submission to authority becomes “obedience to a divine order.”³³ If nothing else, the traditional teaching could condone overwork and condemn rest or “unproductive” activities. Productivity can even substitute for faithfulness.

Second, then, a natural theology approach focused on the common good opens us to the dangers of secularity, making it entirely possible to carry out our work without any explicit attention to the distinctly cross-centered work of Jesus Christ, without any explicit grounding in the distinct person of Jesus, or without any participation in the body of Christ. If being a Christian can be reduced to working hard for the glory of God, then the Christian content of the faith disappears. In the traditional view, it might be entirely possible to seek excellence in one's career without worshiping and abiding in the Spirit.³⁴ But Jesus came, in part, to unsettle natural arrangements, not merely to affirm them. He asks for total allegiance, to “take up your cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). If he had only

²⁹Schuurman, *Vocation*, 83–116; Lee Camp, *Mere Discipleship: Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 194–197.

³⁰Paul's advice in Colossians 3:23, after all, is to slaves: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.” An uncritical hermeneutic would suggest that the Bible encourages slaves to work hard and therefore condones slavery.

³¹John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), 26.

³²John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 8–9.

³³Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, 499.

³⁴Stevens, *The Other Six Days*, 121, accuses Luther of “secularizing all the callings.” It would be fairer to say that his two kingdoms theology opened the door to later secularizing of non-church callings. As a corrective, Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 107–109, incorporates the Spirit and eschatology. Also see James K. A. Smith, “Naturalizing ‘Shalom’: Confessions of a Kuyperian Secularist,” *Comment* (June 28, 2013), <<http://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/3993/naturalizing-shalom-confessions-of-a-kuyperian-secularist/>>.

come to teach us to be nice to our families and work hard in our jobs, he would not have been crucified. The radical "upside-down" grace of God transfigured and redeemed fallen nature.³⁵ But the religious and political authorities returned the favor by crucifying him. Surely this disjuncture between divine and human authority should call into question our view of human authority structures as grounded solely in Creation and common grace.

Nonetheless, not all Reformed thinkers follow Calvin this far on vocation. The Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth, who disavowed natural theology, describes his own theology of calling in part of his massive *Church Dogmatics*.³⁶ Barth sharply distinguishes between the primary calling of the "divine summons" and the secondary vocation residing in our pragmatic situation. For Barth, the "command of God" always comes from outside us as a "new thing."³⁷ And this command always takes precedence over the ethical imperatives within our social roles. Faith always trumps our station or occupation.

Nevertheless, Barth shares Luther's and Calvin's notions that the source of authority for a calling comes from an external source. Luther and Calvin want us to do our duty in our station and glorify God as a result. Barth wants us to hear God's voice. Either way, though, the call remains outside us. But mystical traditions like the Friends tradition remind us of the need to attend to the voice within each person.

Inside-Out: Mystical Views of Calling Attend to Internal Spiritual Dynamics and Personal Gifts

Historian Eugene McCarragher traces a history of American management theorists who regularly used mystical and spiritual language to describe how managers and workers needed to align their souls and spirits with the mission of the corporation.³⁸ The late twentieth century also saw a turn toward making work "a form of therapy."³⁹ This therapeutic turn sought "to humanize the corporation and, in so doing, to make it more productive."⁴⁰ This move parallels a Christian tradition of spirituality most clearly articulated in the Quaker or Friends tradition.⁴¹

³⁵Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1978).

³⁶Barth, *Church Dogmatics III:4*, 595–599, 645, 647; and Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 141–242.

³⁷Barth, *Church Dogmatics III:4*, 645, 647.

³⁸Eugene McCarragher, "Me, Myself, and Inc.: 'Social Selfhood,' Corporate Humanism, and Religious Longing in American Management Theory, 1908–1956," in *Figures in the Carpet: Finding the Human Person in the American Past*, ed. Wilfred E. McClay (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

³⁹Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Touchstone, 1985), 123–128.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 124.

⁴¹The charismatic and Pentecostal traditions parallel this emphasis, with special attention

Overly external expressions of Christian duty were anathema to the early Quakers. They suspected the Church of England hierarchy, educated clergy, rituals of worship, repetition of the sacraments, and the recitations of Psalms and creeds.⁴² Instead of relying on outward practices, the Friends instead relied on the Spirit to guide individuals and unite their meetings. Institutions were suspect, but individuals aflame with passion for Christ were allowed to testify openly during meetings.

Likewise, a strong emphasis on the inwardness of private faith marks the Quaker view of vocations. The leading of the Spirit is key. Traditionally, the Friends trusted the Spirit to prompt what they called "leadings, openings, or concerns."⁴³ Friends pastor Jack Kirk contends that "concerns" begin in love of God but also spring from our prayer life and from Friends worship.⁴⁴ Furthermore, he argues that concerns must be tested through prayer, Scripture, and attention to the way of the cross. In addition, these concerns should yield a "deep sense of inward peace," should be checked with one's community, and should follow ways that open (as God leads the way).⁴⁵ A careful, quiet, and prayerful process of discernment helps the individual move toward pursuit of the concern, but the origin of calling remains internal.

The Quaker educator Parker Palmer eloquently states the inward side of a calling. Palmer was raised on "the idea," as he put it, "that vocation, or calling, comes from a voice external to ourselves, a voice of moral demand that asks us to become someone we are not yet – someone different, someone better, someone just beyond our reach."⁴⁶ Palmer continues, "That concept of vocation is rooted in a deep distrust of selfhood, in the belief that the sinful self will always be 'selfish' unless corrected by external forces of virtue."⁴⁷ Palmer says that this view made him feel "inadequate," "exhausted," and full of "guilt."⁴⁸ In his book *Let Your Life Speak*, he describes his journey of discovering vocation "not as a goal to be achieved but as a gift to be received."⁴⁹ He realized, as he puts it, that "vocation does not come from a voice 'out there' calling me to become something I am not

to God's leadings in specific circumstances. In line with these traditions, Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, develops a Spirit-focused theology of work based on charisms – or gifts. For a more recent version, see Miroslav Volf, "God at Work," *Word and World* 25 (Fall 2005): 381–393. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

⁴²Hugh Barbour and J. William Frost, *The Quakers* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1988), 4–5, 63.

⁴³Jack Kirk, *Kindling A Life of Concern: Spirit-Led Quaker Action*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 404 (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 2009): 29, note 2. Also see Patience A. Schenck, *Answering the Call to Heal the World*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 383 (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 2006): 5–6.

⁴⁴Kirk, *Kindling A Life of Concern*, 1–11.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 11–16, quotation at 14.

⁴⁶Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 10.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

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."⁵⁰

Palmer's own journey took him to a long sabbatical with the Pendle Hill Quaker community in Pennsylvania, where he discovered, among other things, that he could not stay (as he says) "at my post" doing community organizing and teaching at Georgetown University, both of which made him miserable.⁵¹ He needed to step away before he could discover his calling to promote change in educational institutions from the outside. Discovering the truth of our own vocation, concludes Palmer, is part of "the authentic vocation of every human being," as he writes, to cultivate "the truth that was seeded in the earth when each of us arrived here formed in the image of God."⁵²

The strengths of this view are obvious compared to the Reformed emphasis on the external side of faith-in-action. A healthy emphasis on internal leadings and gifts can help one discover a meaningful role that truly matches one's own gifts and abilities. Careful spiritual work – grounded in silence, reflection, prayer, and community – can help a person find herself and her true mission. Attention to one's internal life allows one to discern whether one is well suited to the roles in which one could serve. If we do not know the truth about ourselves, we will be shackled. If we are not personally invested in what we do, we will suffer. If we work at something for which we have few gifts, we will struggle. "Every journey" toward vocation, writes Palmer, "honestly undertaken, stands a chance of taking us toward the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need."⁵³ While Palmer's emphasis is on "honestly undertaking" a "journey" of self-discovery, the emphasis in the contemporary American view of work, at least among well-placed cultural elites, is on finding the place where the exercise of our gifts meets social needs. But this focus on matching happiness with external work – combining Quaker with Reformed emphases – also threatens to lead us and our students astray.

The Contemporary American Middle-Class View of Work Blends Puritan and Quaker Views

Drawing on both the Puritan tradition and a Quaker-like spirituality, the contemporary American view of work, at least among upwardly mobile and university-educated people, treats a calling as identical to a career. The ideal for one's work and career is to "do what you love" and use one's gifts for social good.⁵⁴

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., 36.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴For a sharp critique of "do what you love" advice, see Miya Tokumitsu, "In the Name of Love," *Jacobin* 13 (January 2014), <<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/01/in-the-name-of-love/>> (accessed January 17, 2014).

Presumably God has endowed one with these gifts, but it is not clear that God is necessary in this way of thinking. Vocation thus becomes completely secular, devoid of Christian content. "Calling" simply "describes the passion some find in their work more than it does the faith that one is performing a divinely appointed task."⁵⁵ Vocation, for many English speakers, just means a fulfilling career.

In fact, use of the word "vocation" as a synonym for a meaningful career is common in everyday usage among secular audiences. A recent example appears in a column by *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, about a young man who chose to work on Wall Street in order to amass as much money as possible for a charity he supported. As Brooks put it, cautioning against this young man's choice,

When most people pick a vocation [by which Brooks really meant occupation or career], they don't only want one that will be externally useful. They want one that they will enjoy, and that will make them a better person. They want to find that place, as the novelist Frederick Buechner put it, "where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."⁵⁶

Like Parker Palmer, Buechner famously counseled readers to seek a job, career, or occupation that is personally meaningful and that also makes the world a better place.⁵⁷ Working for money alone is not enough. We need to do what we love, what taps our gifts, what gives us joy, and what helps meet the needs of others.

This advice blends a Reformed-like understanding of institutions with a Quaker-like spirituality of meaning: we should find a career that does the world good, but we should also find internal joy in that career. Still, some nagging questions remain: How is this advice distinctly centered on Jesus Christ, if at all? Is it enough to trust the norms of common grace in our often-flawed systems and sin-laden workplaces? Does the redemption brought by Christ change how Christians engage the fallen world of real workplaces? How is this advice any different or any better than career advice proffered by non-Christians?

After all, the advice to find the meeting place of one's "deep hunger" and the "world's deep need" is identical to the clichés of many mainstream self-help authors and commencement speakers. They tell young people about to enter the workforce to do what they love – and be true to themselves – and serve others – and discover their gifts; the money will follow.⁵⁸ Such advice has also achieved the status of folk wisdom among career counselors and spiritual advisers. For example, Richard Bolles, author of the most popular job-hunting book in the United States, *What Color is Your Parachute?*, counsels job-seekers to undergo intensive self-examination in order to find their unique personal capacities and motivating passions while also counseling them on the external nature of the workforce.⁵⁹ The spiritual writer Thomas Moore describes work as "discovering

⁵⁵Russell Muirhead, *Just Work* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 113.

⁵⁶David Brooks, "The Way to Produce a Person," *New York Times*, June 4, 2013.

⁵⁷Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (New York: HarperOne, 1993), 95.

⁵⁸Marsha Sinetar, *Do What You Love, the Money Will Follow: Discovering Your Right Livelihood* (New York: Dell, 1987).

⁵⁹Richard Bolles, *How to Find Your Mission in Life* (San Francisco: Ten Speed Press, 2005).

what you were born to do."⁶⁰ The creators of *Strengths Finder 2.0* counsel people to use their "personalized development guide to align your job and goals with your natural talents."⁶¹ A young social entrepreneur counsels young people that their job search is "Not About Finding a Job, It's About Creating a Life."⁶² The founder of Tom's Shoes, Blake Mycoskie, advises young people to "start something that matters."⁶³ High-tech, hip, and Silicon Valley employers like Google all seek to create workplaces of serendipity, joy, and social mission. They embody the American Dream for workplaces: a match of corporate social good and personal happiness for the worker.

However, this contemporary American folk wisdom, which we commonly dispense to our students, contains three major weaknesses. First, we forget that human labor is also under the curse.⁶⁴ Like the Reformers and their Puritan successors, we expect work to transform the world for the better by meeting the needs of others. Like the Quakers, we also put a great deal of pressure on the workplace, which is often dysfunctional, to be the site of inner meaning and fulfillment. Instead of taking the rather realistic view that work is often drudgery and toil aimed at providing for our necessary material survival, North Americans tend to view work as a lofty way to help others and be blessed at the same time. We have lost sight of the wisdom embodied in the Greek poet Hesiod's *Works and Days*, and in Genesis 3, both of which frankly view work as a burden. Sometimes work is a job, just a way to pay the bills, not a vehicle for giving meaning to your entire life. Jobs, rather than careers, are a reality for many people. We risk raising our students' hopes about work too much. We need to give them permission to talk frankly about jobs.

Second, we may be training students to be narcissistic and elitist. As a result, they may fail to thrive in difficult workplaces or disdain blue-collar peers who are unable to work in jobs that they love.⁶⁵ If our graduates only want to do work that is fun or meaningful, that taps their gifts, that clearly benefits others, or that advances some larger mission, they may sound pampered and coddled in their workplaces. Sometimes, somebody just has to fix the copier or empty the garbage, whether or not they are good at it. It may not tap your gifts, but someone has to do it, and therefore someone gets paid to do it. Our classic liberal arts emphasis on the reflective life, while admirable, runs the risk of producing young people who will only do work that appears meaningful and who disdain mere toil in favor of "cognitive work."⁶⁶ It also runs the risk of implying that young people

⁶⁰Thomas Moore, *A Life at Work: The Joy of Discovering What You Were Born to Do* (New York: Broadway Books, 2008).

⁶¹Tom Rath, *Strengths Finder 2.0* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007), vi.

⁶²James Marshall Reilly, *Shake the World: It's Not About Finding a Job, It's About Creating a Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

⁶³Blake Mycoskie, *Start Something That Matters* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2011).

⁶⁴This is the central theme of the intra-Reformed critique by Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, 495–510.

⁶⁵Tokumitsu, "In the Name of Love."

⁶⁶Matthew B. Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* (New York:

who fail to enter careers with upward mobility, and who merely work to earn a living, are failures.

Third, when students do land in a career matching Buechner's or Palmer's ideals, such ideals can easily lead them to treat their career as an idol.⁶⁷ As such, service to career could overtake devotion to God and to the calling to follow Jesus and make disciples. We evangelicals tend to share the modern world's idolatrous equation of work and identity, making *homo faber* – man the maker – as the measure of worth and productivity the measure of value.⁶⁸ We, too, ask new acquaintances, "What do you?" to figure out who they are and where they fit in status hierarchies. To use Os Guinness' terms, we thus fall prey to the "Protestant distortion."⁶⁹ We make secular work the primary space in which calling and identity are exercised, without reference to God. We are thus in danger of encouraging our students to live for their work, when they should be living for God's purposes.

Something is missing. A distinctively Christian approach to work and calling is more than matching your internal gifts with the right external setting. After all, the mainstream advice to "do what you love while helping make the world a better place" would have surprised the monks in the ancient Egyptian desert. One of their collected sayings suggests that "doing what you love" is a recipe for problems. It goes like this: "A brother asked an old man, 'What shall I do, for I am troubled about manual work? I love making ropes and I cannot make them.' The old man said that Abba Sisoës used to say, 'You should not do work which gives you satisfaction.'⁷⁰ That last line of ancient monastic advice is worth repeating and re-emphasizing: "You should not do work which gives you satisfaction."

Abba Sisoës' advice is the exact opposite of Buechner's standard – to work at the intersection of "your deep gladness" and "the world's deep hunger."⁷¹ He and the Calvinists would be appalled at the inefficiency and waste of a monk not making ropes when that work taps his natural gifts and abilities and could benefit others. This is also the exact opposite of Palmer's standard to find a place where "our deep gladness meets the world's deep need."⁷² The Abba's ancient wisdom sounds like a recipe for deep unhappiness, to avoid work that makes you happy. But it raises some important questions: What if self-perceived happiness is not the goal? What if giving up rope-making is what Jesus calls you to do for the

Penguin, 2009).

⁶⁷Keller, *Every Good Endeavor*, 129–138, addresses this concern but shifts the discussion to idols in different cultures and does not bring gospel texts to bear on work as an idol.

⁶⁸Arendt, *Human Condition*, 133–139.

⁶⁹Guinness, *The Call*, 39–43.

⁷⁰*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, ed. and trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 220. Thanks to Keith Starkenburg for first drawing this saying, and its contrast with Palmer, to my attention.

⁷¹Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, 95. Sherman, *Kingdom Calling*, 108, finds a "sweet spot" in the overlap of "God's priorities," "my passions and gifts," and "the world's needs." But God also calls us to tame our passions and develop new gifts.

⁷²Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, 36.

ascetic transformation of your body and soul, or for the purposes of serving the Christian community? What if your mission in life is to serve the mission of God through the drudgery of mundane work that will one day be redeemed? What if sacrificing your own deepest and dearest desires to do satisfying work allows you to gain back deeper and dearer things that you did not even know you wanted? What if serving others through self-sacrifice ends up uniting you with God? These questions point us toward the corrective, clarion call of the Gospels.

Calling as Following Jesus: The Gospel Call to Missional Discipleship First

The ancient monastic wisdom finds a contemporary expression in a gospel-centered view of vocation, which asserts that Christians find their primary calling in response to the invitation of Jesus to take up their cross and follow him until the reign of God is fully manifested in time. Christians, on this view, are called to love and follow Christ, to suffer if necessary, and to make disciples. The call is to join the mission of God in redeeming humanity and all of Creation.

A re-interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:20 – Paul’s advice to “remain where you were when you were called” – helps sharpen the contrast. The early Anabaptist Hans Hut – forerunner of the Hutterites – responds to the Lutheran interpretation mentioned earlier, but sarcastically:

So now everyone is saying that each should “remain in his occupation.” If that is so, why did not Peter remain a fisherman or Matthew a tax collector? Why did Christ tell the rich young ruler to sell all that he had and give to the poor? If it is right that our preachers want to have so much wealth, then it must be right for their followers! O Zacchaeus! Why did you so foolishly give away your wealth? You could have followed the example of our preachers and still be [sic] a good Christian.⁷³

Hut points us toward a more accurate reading of Paul’s advice. The “calling” of Christ, according to Gary Badcock, is better understood as “nothing less than to love God and one’s neighbor...to live the Christian life.”⁷⁴ We must therefore always say that our “work can be understood as a vocation only in a derivative and secondary sense.”⁷⁵ We may even be called to abandon our work in order to follow Jesus. As Conyers puts it, “The biblical picture of the ‘call’ is quite as likely to entail someone leaving their work as it is to taking up work, and twice

⁷³Hans Hut, “On the Mystery of Baptism. Baptism as Symbol and as Essence, the Beginning of a True Christian Life. John 5,” in *Early Anabaptist Spirituality: Selected Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel Lichty (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 74–75. Thanks to Gerald J. Mast, *Go to Church, Change the World: Christian Community as Calling* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2012), 84, for first drawing this text to my attention. I am indebted to Mast’s book for clarifying much of this last section. In addition, Virgil Vogt, *The Christian Calling* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1961), lays out a Mennonite perspective on calling with great clarity.

⁷⁴Badcock, *Way of Life*, 10.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 9.

as likely to involve leaving as it is to taking up respectable public employment.⁷⁶ Abraham, Moses, Jonah, Jesus, the disciples, and Paul – all were called to leave their positions when following the calling of God.

With Os Guinness, we need to distinguish between our primary calling to follow Christ and our secondary callings to live out the primary calling in all of our lives, including (but not limited to) our work.⁷⁷ The point is that we must understand our work and all of our relationships first and foremost in response to the call of Jesus to follow him and “fish for people” (Matt 4:19). The calling for Christians is always first to conversion, lifelong service as a disciple, and the carrying out of the Great Commission.⁷⁸ Secondly, our many stations and worldly occupations – whether as a Starbucks barista or a career scientist – are where we carry out service and seek to make disciples of others. Theologian Gary Badcock captures the gospel idiom of calling quite well. He argues that a calling

does not stem from a non-specific sense of the rhythm of nature or from unfettered exploration of the inner self. It stems instead from an encounter with the holy, with God, with the transcendent source of all human hopes and possibilities – and more specifically, from the source as encountered in Jesus Christ and in the church as his worshiping community. This is why a vocation is always to be understood in terms of bearing the cross: it is something we share with Christ in some small measure, a part of his mission in the world, something that requires a death to self for the sake of God and other people. It is not primarily about self-discovery or self-fulfillment at all, but about finding one’s life by losing it for Christ’s sake – that is to say, for the sake of his mission, for the sake of the kingdom of God.⁷⁹

Put simply, we should focus the language of vocation on the primary call to follow Christ, while using “stations” to describe the social and economic roles we occupy.⁸⁰

By responding to the Gospels’ invitations, following Jesus, and becoming a disciple, Christians practice a kind of monasticism in everyday life. Everyday monks must withdraw from those occupations that might hinder their discipleship – notably those sectors that would conflict most directly with the ethics of Jesus – while abiding in humble work that sustains their families and communities as they continue to practice a discipleship of the cross.⁸¹ All Christians, however, are called to be “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9) – to constitute a church whose every activity mediates God to the world.⁸² As with monks, humble work and constant prayer go hand in hand. Yes, the old Benedictine phrase *ora et labora*, pray and work, now applies to all. But the life

⁷⁶Conyers, *Listening Heart*, 16.

⁷⁷Os Guinness, *The Call*, 31.

⁷⁸Vogt, *The Christian Calling*, 1, writes that “a Christian is expected to let the mission of the church be the governing consideration as he makes the important decisions of life” (emphasis in original).

⁷⁹Badcock, *Way of Life*, 72–73.

⁸⁰For this distinction between the Christian calling and stations, see Mast, *Go to Church, Change the World*.

⁸¹See *Ibid.*, 71–77, on “uncoupling” from the world.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 139, 155.

of prayer and discipleship always comes first and informs our work and careers, which always come second. *Ora* comes before, during, and after *labora*.

Conclusion: How the Gospels Correct the Classic Protestant View⁸³

We can conclude with four specific gospel correctives to contemporary, mainstream views of calling. Each of these can help us advise students in an age of crisis. First, we should maintain the Reformed emphasis on living out callings in ordinary domestic life but acknowledge the prevalence of sin. We can still affirm the priesthood of all believers, the participation of all believers in the work of God. However, a gospel view is quite frankly realistic in saying that secular workplaces, societies, economies, and states can be deeply broken and potentially oppressive. Whereas Calvin and many of his followers argue that government and other social institutions are structures rooted in God-given "creational norms," others suggest that these are providential provisions of God to restrain evil after the Fall.⁸⁴ Institutions like our financial system or governments are human institutions, not structures deeply rooted in God's creating activity. They are not especially blessed. They are tolerable, but they are not the primary vehicles of the mission of God. That mission is carried out primarily through the Church.⁸⁵ The "powers and principalities" of this world are fallen, even if still within God's sovereign reign.⁸⁶

This pessimistic view about the world, ironically, is helpful in advising students about to enter the workforce.⁸⁷ Corrupted social structures are more of a surprise if you are expecting to find the natural law or grace at work within them, but less of one if you recognize that fallen humans run fallen institutions. Receiving such advice about calling, students could never accuse us of idealizing the workplace if we teach them that it can be a broken place, sometimes with little evidence of goodness at work in it. A reader of the gospels is not shocked that

⁸³An earlier draft called this an Anabaptist corrective, but a gospel corrective is a more inclusive term that points us back to foundational texts rather than one particular religious tradition. Authors outside that tradition also recognize the thrust of the Gospels. Furthermore, as a member of a church in the Reformed tradition, I am also sensitive to Richard Mouw's caution against trotting out Anabaptist perspectives as a "corrective." See Richard Mouw, "Reflections on My Encounter with the Anabaptist-Mennonite Tradition," in *Engaging Anabaptism: Conversations with a Radical Tradition*, ed. John D. Roth (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001). To cite just one example of a non-Anabaptist who helps us recover the gospels, see N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: Harper One, 2012).

⁸⁴Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 201–202.

⁸⁵John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1964), 13.

⁸⁶Yoder, *Politics of Jesus*, 134–161; Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

⁸⁷Conversely, we do our students a long-term disservice if we only fire them up with idealism about how they can "change the world" while underestimating the difficulty of the task. See James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

relationships can be abusive, that workplaces can be oppressive, that global capitalism can run amok, or that the government can be deeply enmeshed in warfare and surveillance. A gospel understanding of social structures and relationships helps a young person to discern those that are problematic, to work against them when possible, and to disengage when necessary to obey God rather than humans (Acts 5:29). We can help students see that "jobs" and "careers" are not dirty words for Christians.⁸⁸ In a world of ever-shifting economic forces, careers may be too much to expect anyway. We navigate as best we can in a fallen world, seeking first the Kingdom in all things.

For those who have career options, however, we can also offer gospel standards for discernment. To put it simply, if you become a Wall Street banker or a member of the military it will be harder to practice economic sharing or loving your enemy, both of which Jesus teaches.⁸⁹ Discernment and practical judgment means that some Christians can handle these roles without forsaking their faith, while others cannot. But, in contrast to the broad Reformed emphasis on any calling being sacred, the burden is on those who would enter realms that are ethically questionable in a given cultural context.

Second, a gospel vision of the "upside-down Kingdom" helps motivate students to work against injustice within their workplaces by placing them in a larger narrative: not just a narrative of gradual (and rarely seen) "redemption" or vague (and always distant) "renewal" but of disruptive, surprising justice centered on the cross and empty tomb.⁹⁰ If God's mission is to redeem humanity, there are certainly many places outside the church where it is possible to extend that mission, at least by analogy. Gospel readers have a compelling and deeply rooted reason to engage in social justice work. That work points to the redemptive work of God breaking into human time, disrupting natural norms with status-reversing practices. God-in-Jesus enacted these practices through a humble birth in Bethlehem, a modest life in Nazareth, a meek march on a donkey on Palm Sunday, the washing of feet on Maundy Thursday, a crown of thorns and crucifixion on Good Friday, and the display of scars after the Resurrection. All of these gestures of self-giving love began redeeming the world and reversing normal, hierarchical power relationships. By analogy, Christians participate with Jesus in vocations that seek to bring justice in an unjust world through self-sacrificial service and utter humility. As a result, says Jacques Ellul, when we enter the workplace, we enter "a disorder which...has in fact been set up by man, so that the moment we

⁸⁸Thanks to Greg Miller for this apt sentence.

⁸⁹For a slightly different, Lutheran perspective that supports Christian presence in the military but not on Wall Street, see Gene Edward Veith, "Which Vocations Should Be Off Limits to Christians?" *The Gospel Coalition* (March 22, 2012): <<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/03/22/which-vocations-should-be-off-limits-to-christians/>>.

⁹⁰Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*. By contrast, see Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision for Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 103–133.

try to express our vocation in it we upset things and call them into question."⁹¹ Christian university graduates living out their calling will take up a cross. They will call workplaces into question through their humble self-sacrifice.

This is a lofty vision, but students who embrace it can take this kind of vision to work. However, that could inevitably breed tension when they enter the disorder of the world. How can they live in a deliberately cross-centered, self-sacrificial way at work? Brian Walsh embraces this tension with some pithy advice: "A Christian can hold any job. But if they act as Christians, they will simply need to be ready to be fired within a few weeks."⁹² Living for the poorest and weakest may inevitably offend some employers. But getting fired for standing up for truth and justice could be another way of bearing the cross in the hope of Resurrection. Job loss is hardly the last word in God's economy. We can encourage our graduates to live and work for justice with courage and conviction – always under the symbol of the cross, the ultimate example of seeming failure becoming a triumph.

Third, a gospel emphasis on community can help counter the subjective individualism of mainstream American spirituality. The Quaker tradition, like evangelicalism, emphasizes this personal dimension of faith. As Friends pastor Jack Kirk puts it, "The called person has crossed the threshold to faith and made an irrevocable commitment ... to the person of the Living Christ, not to an ideology or a program, but to Christ, the one who can satisfy the restless longings of our hearts."⁹³ However, the emphasis on inwardness, on our hearts, could lead us into the danger of seeking personal fulfillment and spiritual edification rather than focusing on a Spirit-empowered mission of self-giving service to others framed by communities of fellow believers.⁹⁴ We need to advise our students to join such communities and accept discipline as freedom from a selfish focus. Such communities can help re-orient them toward living as disciples committed to advancing the mission of God.

Fourth, a gospel view can help our students avoid the modern world's idolatrous equation of work and identity. "There is no profession or career in this world which is worthy of the dignity and transcendent importance attached to the holy calling which God has given to His people," writes one Anabaptist.⁹⁵ Defining calling more broadly – as the primary call to participate in God's work of redeeming the world through self-giving love – can encompass any secondary stations or occupations, even ones that appear shameful or menial in our society. Professors tend to advise students to advance in careers related to the majors we teach in, ideally by going to graduate school in our discipline. We in higher edu-

⁹¹Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, 510.

⁹²Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw, *Jesus for President: Politics for Ordinary Radicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 242.

⁹³Kirk, *Kindling a Life of Concern*, 21–22.

⁹⁴Thanks to Paul Anderson for clarifying that this concern applies more to contemporary Hicksite branches of the Friends than to the earlier Friends.

⁹⁵Vogt, *The Christian Calling*, 29–30.

cation also admire those who “make it” in a profession or arena of public life by relocating to positions of power – especially those who can contribute financially to our mission. But we sometimes struggle to advise well modest students who want to stay in their local area, get married to a local person, commit to their local community, and raise a local family. Are they falling out of God’s will by not maximizing the exercise of their academic gifts in major-related employment? Are they unfaithful to their calling? If those humble local stations allow them to contribute to the divine mission, I think not.

Sometimes, like the early disciples or Paul, Christians are even called to give up their posts and to leave power. Throughout Scripture, after all, God works through the small, weak, and powerless. Christians claim to serve a King who says that “anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all” (Mark 9:35), who says that “whoever wants to be first must be slave of all” (Mark 10:44), and who says that “even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve” (Mark 10:45a). And this King not only says these words, but also gives his life as a “ransom for many” (Mark 10:45b). A vocation is a calling to emulate this Caller. Everything else is just a station along the Way.³⁶

³⁶An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Friends Association for Higher Education Conference in June 2013, where I received helpful feedback. Thanks to Greg Miller, Bekah Waalkes, and an anonymous reviewer for incisive comments on previous drafts.

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