



CALLING

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Over the past 25 years I have interviewed hundreds of people in the process of conducting vocational profiles. My favorite initial question is, “If you could do anything you wanted to do, you had unlimited time (to get further training), unlimited money, and you couldn’t fail, what would you do?” I have had many fascinating answers to that question. One common thread through most of them is the desire to make a difference in life. One woman even confessed that her greatest fear was that her life would not make a difference. You have been created by God in His image. You have great worth. You have been given gifts. Those gifts were not given in vain. They are not for nothing. They are meant to contribute to something. They are to make a difference in someone’s life, in your family, in your church, in your community, in your state, in your nation, or in the world. Some will contribute in smaller ways and others in larger ways according to the gifts and vision each is given by God (Matt. 25:14-30). The problem is that many people don’t see themselves as significant and do not have a vision for how God wants them to make a difference in the world through their unique gifts.

CRISIS IN CALLING: NO ONE TO CALL

In secular culture there are numerous books on the topics of vocation and calling. The problem is that from an atheist perspective, there is no God to definitely call you to a higher life. You (in this worldview) are not responsible to respond to

anyone but yourself. Similarly in the New Age movement, the “All is One” philosophy leads to the idea that there are no real distinctions in the world – between good and evil, between you and a chair, between you and the trees outside, between you and another person, or between you and God. Again (in this worldview), there is no one there to call. By contrast in the biblical worldview, you are responsible to someone, to an audience of One. You are called out of your own self-centeredness to love and serve God and others in specific ways. However, many of those who are believers don’t have a sense that this is so.

FAILURE OF THE CHURCH

The evangelical church has largely failed to address this need. There is a tendency to focus on issues pertaining to salvation, evangelism, or basic personal discipleship (Bible reading, prayer, fellowship, etc.). But there is little or no specific teaching on what most people do 40, 60, or 80 hours a week. When I read the following quote from William Diehl’s book *Christianity and Real Life*, it jumps off the page at me:

I am now a sales manager for a major steel company. In the almost thirty years of my professional career, my church has never once suggested that there be any type of accounting of my on-the-job ministry to others. My church has never once offered to improve those skills which could make me a better lay minister, nor has it ever asked if I need any kind of support in what I was doing. There has never been an inquiry into the types of ethical decisions I must face, or whether I seek to communicate my faith to my co-workers. I have never been in a congregation where there was any type of public affirmation of a ministry in my career. In short, I must conclude that my church really doesn’t have the least interest in whether or how I minister in my daily work.¹

Although I have been part of a number of excellent evangelical churches I would have to sadly agree with Diehl’s comment. Most churches do nothing along these lines, and even these who do acknowledge the importance of work and equipping the congregation for it fall far short of what needs to be done. For instance, I have never seen a church address ethical issues at work (in politics, business, medicine, education, media, the arts, etc.). I also have never seen a public affirmation of ministry in and through a career, such as the laying on of hands or other commissioning for the tasks at hand. I have never been in a church that would systematically discern the gifts of all church members and work to use those gifts wisely in the church and in their jobs.

At best, I have seen occasional mention of these themes on Labor Day and addressed with intern groups or in adult education classes, but not to the whole congregation. People are being equipped for personal life but not for public life.

LOSS OF THE WORK ETHIC

Work is often seen as a necessary evil. There is a song about working nine to five. There is a restaurant called TGIF (Thank God it’s Friday). The receptionist at my building always says “Happy Friday” on the

last day of the work week.ⁱⁱ I don't hear "Thank God it's Monday" (the title of another William Diehl book) or "Happy Monday."

I also see many young people that are idealists with unrealistic expectations about their success in a future career. There has been much discussion about a "mid-life crisis." Now on the internet people are commenting on a "quarter-life crisis."ⁱⁱⁱ The crisis is coming earlier than before. Students who have been the best and brightest in high school and college feel bogged-down in their careers. Their high expectations are dashed. Success has not come as quickly as hoped.

THEOLOGY OF WORK

I think that a central reason for these various problems or crises is a failure to develop a thorough biblical theology of work.^{iv} People have generally failed to grasp the purpose for which they were created. In Genesis 1:26-28 (called the cultural mandate), men and women who are made in the image of God are called to exercise rulership (or dominion) over the whole creation. Another way of articulating this call is to say that we are all called to creativity. Only God can make something out of nothing. But we are called to make something out of something. We can take a tree and make a table, clay and make a statue, metal and make a musical instrument, etc. God is the king. We are the vice-regents. God is the creator. We are sub-creators (some prefer co-creators). We are created to work using our unique gifts in creative ways to shape the world (culture or community around us).

Dorothy Sayers argued that *it is more true to say that we live to work than it is true to say that we work to live*. Of course, we need to work to provide for ourselves and for our families. We do need to make a living. But we shouldn't miss the central point (in the midst of our hectic work) that we are created to work. Sayers also argues that *it is more true to say that we play to work than it is true to say that we work to play*.^v Our culture emphasizes that we work for the weekend, for the vacation, or for retirement (and endless rounds of golf). A biblical perspective would emphasize the need for rest (and play) in order to refresh ourselves so we can work more effectively throughout our lives (even in "retirement").

The Fall has significantly impacted our work. Because of the Fall, our work will be more difficult. It is now by the "sweat of our brow" that we will labor. Furthermore, the work of our blood, sweat, and tears will be made even more difficult by "thorns and thistles" that get in our way (Genesis 3:17-19). Resistance will come not only from the outside, but also from inside us. Vices such as sloth, pride, greed, envy, and anger impede our progress. Sloth, in particular makes it hard for us to turn on the ignition, to motivate ourselves to work and to finish the job.

The Gospel was given not only to save our souls but also to restore us more and more into who we were created to be. We were created to respond to God (personally), others (corporately), and the creation (cosmically). Now, as a result of the Fall, our "response-ability" is diminished or lost. The Fall impacts us in all three dimensions. Redemption works to restore all three. Yet the Gospel many preach is limited to personal sin (Fall) and personal redemption. Redemption is also corporate (the Church – the Body of Christ) and cosmic (leading to a restoration of all things – Acts 3:21). If we emphasize that redemption works to restore everything the Fall has impacted, we would have a theology that could transform all of life.

That complete redemption includes the restoration of a new heaven and a new earth (Rev. 21). Interestingly, there are two Greek words for “new” used in the New Testament. One is *neos* (meaning totally new) and the other is *kainos* (renewed). In almost every passage where the New Testament authors use the word “new,” the Greek word is *kainos* (renewed). We work toward a redeemed heaven and earth that has some continuity with the one we have now.

Not only is there continuity between the present land and the new heavens and new earth, but the Bible implies that the best things we create will be there. Twice in Rev. 21 it says that the “glory” of the nations will be manifest in our final state (Rev 21:24,26). This seems to mean the best of the products (or creativity) that different ethnic groups produce on earth will also be made in heaven.^{vi} Al Wolters argues that “God doesn’t make junk and he does not junk what he has made.”^{vii} Perhaps that applies to the best of our cultural creativity. Work continues from the creation through the new heavens and new earth (minus the blood, sweat, tears, thorns, and thistles). In heaven, we will sing a “new song” (Rev. 5:9). Creativity continues. C.S. Lewis sees our eternal state as a great ongoing adventure. At the very end of *The Last Battle*, Lewis says:

All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.^{viii}

Think of the infinitely creative God coming up with infinite adventures for all eternity. It is not a stretch to anticipate human creativity being part of that “Great Adventure.”

GENERAL CALLING

The primary meaning of calling in Scripture is a general one – that we are called out of an old way of life to a new one. Romans talks of the “calling of Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1:6), of us being “called as saints” (Rom. 1:7), “according to his purposes” (Rom. 8:28), and as part of the whole golden chain of salvation from foreknowledge to glorification – “whom he called, he justified” (Rom. 8:30). You find similar references in other epistles. For instance, I Peter 2:9 talks about us being “called...out of darkness into His marvelous light.” There are numerous other references to calling throughout the New Testament, used in this general sense.

PARTICULAR CALLING

There is only one use of calling in a particular sense (I Cor. 7:17-24). Even then it does not apply to a type of job but to a kind of state or condition (slavery or circumcision). In I Cor. 7:20 and 24 it repeats the refrain, “let each man remain in that *calling* in which he was called.” Paul argues that if someone is uncircumcised, he should not become circumcised. If you are a slave, “Do not worry about it; but if you are able to be free, rather do that” (v. 21). When someone becomes a new believer, they often feel that they need to make a radical change, giving up previous hobbies, sports, or possessions they used to pursue. If

there were sinful patterns, they need to be changed, but if the hobby, sport, or profession is good, it need not be abandoned but can be pursued to the glory of God. For instance, one young man was a top-flight tennis player ranked on a state level. Tennis had been his life, and when he came to Christ he felt he had to forsake his previous idolatrous passion for tennis. Perhaps he had to do so, but I would rather that he redirect this passion as Eric Lidell did in *Chariots of Fire*. Eric told his sister that God had made him fast and that he felt His pleasure when he ran. He would go to China as a missionary, but he wanted to first give glory to God in the Olympics.^{ix}

Calvin in his comments on I Cor. 7:20 argues against this “thoughtless eagerness” or “restlessness” that makes new believers precipitously change their course:

This is the principle from which other things follow: each should be content with his calling, and persist in it, and not be eager to change to something else. In the Scriptures, calling is a lawful way of life, for it is connected with God, who actually calls us... At this point someone is asking if Paul wishes to impose something on people, for what he says may seem to suggest that each one is tied to his calling, and must not give it up. To that I would reply that it is not the intention of the apostle, for he only wishes to correct the *thoughtless eagerness* which impels some to change their situation without proper reason – perhaps they are moved by a wrong belief, or some other influence. Therefore, he does not lay down that each person must remain in a certain way of life once he has adapted it, but on the other hand he condemns the restlessness which prevents individuals from remaining contentedly as they are.^x

So this particular use of calling refers to our state or condition of life, which Paul warns not to overzealously change unless absolutely necessary. Even though this particular calling does not speak specifically to your job, it is important to note that the general call is sufficient to underline that all areas of our lives should be faithful to our Lord.

IMPLICATIONS OF CALLING

We can see that the primary emphasis of Scripture is on the general call. We are called to a new way of life and to faithfulness to our Lord. This means being faithful in our relationship to God, our families, our church, our nation (as a citizen), and our work. If we are called to be faithful in all these areas, then our pursuit of one sphere is not to cancel out another sphere. For instance, the pursuit of your work is not to usurp time from God, your spouse, your children, your place in the Body of Christ, and your responsibilities as a citizen (among other things – to vote). Similarly your devotion to church activities and involvement is not to compromise your family work, or time with God, and so on. God has made us in his image to have an intimate relationship with Him, intimacy with others, an appropriate identity as a man or woman, a job that corresponds to the way we were made, a place in the body of Christ that utilizes our gifts, and opportunity for appropriate sleep, exercise, and nutrition. If we act against the way we are made, it's like putting water in our car's gas tank. It will run fitfully or stop altogether. The more we are faithful to him, the more wholeness we will experience. The less faithful to him, the more disintegration we will experience.

It is worthwhile to periodically step back from our lives and ask ourselves, where our real priorities are, as exemplified in how we are actually using our time. When we are faithful to what God has called us to be we will experience meaning, significance, and wholeness, in our lives. If our priorities are askew, we will not.

A sense of calling can give us a perspective on what we do. Whether we succeed or fail, if we are faithful we can sustain our motivation. For instance, William Wilberforce's fight for the abolition of slavery took about thirty years. Early on, he had a call to pursue two great objectives: the abolition of slavery and the reformation of manners (morality) in England. He didn't know how hard it would be when he started. He had to endure constant vilification, many failures, struggles with health, opposition from enemies and supposed friends. He continued on towards the goal and eventual success because he knew what God had called him to do. It didn't matter whether he succeeded or failed; he knew what he was called to do.

Calling can keep us from compromise. Sometimes there is a temptation to compromise. It may come in bold letters or in a more subtle fashion. Perhaps in a business situation the temptation will come from those higher up, that if you want to become a partner (or similar status) you need to do things as "we always do" – in a way, not entirely honest. Just as the promise of advancement is introduced, you have a choice about how you will respond. C.S. Lewis, in a classic essay "The Inner Ring," says the following about the subtlety of this temptation:

And you will be drawn in, not by desire for gain or ease, but simply because at that moment, when the cup was so near your lips, you cannot bear to be thrust back again into the cold outer world. It would be so terrible to see the other man's face – that genial, confidential, delightfully sophisticated face – turn suddenly cold and contemptuous, to know that you had been tried for the Inner Ring and rejected. That first small compromise then could lead to a bigger and bigger one.^{xi}

I have a friend who became a whistleblower. He worked for a state government and found out that some workers were being treated in a way that was not right. He talked to others about the situation and he was warned that exposing the issue would lead him to lose his job and worse. He was nearing retirement. He decided because of his faith in Christ to do what was right. The issue hit the front page of the paper, and fortunately the state governor took his side. The workers threw him a party, and he had a chance to share his faith. He has been asked to speak at colleges on Business Ethics. In this case, he came out on top, but it could have ended differently. But what was most important to him was faithfulness to Christ – faithfulness to calling, not compromise.

We are called to be good stewards of our gifts. If you look at I Corinthians 12: 8-10, 28, Romans 12:6-8, and Ephesians 4:11-13, you will find various lists of gifts to be used in the Body of Christ. We are called to know what our gifts are and use them vigorously for his kingdom. We are to use the same gifts in the world with respect to our work. Our "natural" gifts are our "created" gifts – given to us by God. The Holy Spirit works to bring these gifts towards their full potential. The Fall has withered, misdirected, or twisted our gifts and the Spirit can redirect them to benefit both the church and the world. The Fall can blind us to the very nature of the gifts we have. We need the Spirit's help and the help of others to gain clarity on how to best invest what God has given in order to get the best return. Many people are in jobs that don't fit them. In their book *Finding a Job You Can Love*, Ralph Mattson and Arthur Miller estimate that 50-80% of working Americans have jobs that don't fit their desires and abilities.^{xiii} Vocational counseling could help a great deal.

Don't expect a "perfect" use of your gifts. We live in a world that is far from perfect. It is often difficult to find a job (even if you do all the study or training necessary) that fully fits your gifts. Even if you could find the "perfect" job, you would find that it wasn't perfect because you are fallen and the people around you are fallen. Although you shouldn't expect perfection, you should strive to be good stewards of the gifts you were given.

We often need to take the lower place and wait for God to extrude us into the higher place. In Luke 14:7-11, when Jesus notices that guests are picking places of honor at a meal, he tells a parable.

“When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, and he who invited you both shall come and say to you, ‘Give place to this man,’ and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who invited you comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher,’ then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. For everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted.”

Note that it is better to take the lower place and wait for the appropriate time to be moved to the higher place. It is hard, especially for gifted young people, to start at a lower place in a job. Often they are impatient to use their gifts more fully. If, however, they are faithful in little things, they will prove worthy of greater responsibility. Francis Schaeffer has a classic sermon where he argues that in the lower place is actually more peace and quiet and opportunity to spend time with the Lord. If you reach the highest position you are weighed down with many cares, concerns, as well as a very demanding schedule that leaves you little time to rest and reflect on what you are doing. Schaeffer said it is better to stay in the lower place until the Lord sees you are prepared for the demands of the higher place. He will then “extrude” you to that higher responsibility (just as toothpaste is extruded out of a tube). You don't have to be passive when opportunity comes, but it is important to realize the importance of being prepared (or paying your dues).

God has made people for every position in the Body and every position on the corporate flowchart. In the hundreds of vocational profiles I have done, I have found some interesting cases. Some people (relatively few) are made to be CEOs. Some are best as the second in command. Some are made to be inventors (with a short attention span). Others love managing all the details of an organization. I interviewed one man whose greatest desire was to be janitor of the local school and make those floors shine. Another wanted to help the boss succeed and loved being a support person. Some love to be up front, to star, and others want to be out of the spotlight. It is imperative to know what you are made for and not to desire, envy, or covet another's position. Few are made to be Billy Graham, Chuck Colson, or Ravi Zacharias. But you can find your place and delight in it.

A recovery of calling is essential for the church and the nation. In 1985, a classic book was written by Robert Bellah called *Habits of the Heart*. Bellah and his team interviewed many people throughout America about why they were committed to friends, spouses, community, and political life. They found that people had a great difficulty articulating why they were committed other than for their own selfish interests. The language of commitment to others was lacking. Bellah finished the book maintaining that there was a desperate need for our nation to recover the idea of calling. We are called out of our own autonomous, self-centered existence

in order to love God and others. We need to ask (like John Kennedy), “Ask not what another can do for you, but ask what you can do for another.” We live before an Audience of One and are called by him to give our lives for others.

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ⁱ Diehl, William. *Christianity and Real Life*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1976), v.

ⁱⁱ I understand the sentiment and am glad to rest on the weekend, but I am also glad to go to work Monday.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quarterlifecrisis.com: A one-stop info-shop for recent grads and beyond, accessed July 13, 2012, <http://www.quarterlifecrisis.com/> (accessed July 13, 2012).

^{iv} Hugh Whelchel has written an excellent survey of this issue, *How Then Shall We Work?* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2012).

^v Dorothy Sayers, “Why Work?” in *Creed or Chaos?*, (Merrimack, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1999).

^{vi} Who knows what might make the cut – Beethoven’s First Symphony, Lamborghini, soccer, golf, etc.

^{vii} Al Wolters, *Creation Regained* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 57.

^{viii} C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (New York: HarperCollins, 1956), 228.

^{ix} Joel Woodruff, “Eric Liddell: Muscular Discipline and Olympic Champion,” *C.S. Lewis Institute*, 2012, accessed July 13, 2012, http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/Profile_In_Faith_Eric_Liddell_page7.

^x John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, ed. John Fraser and David Torrence (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 153.

^{xi} C.S. Lewis, “The Inner Ring” (speech presented to King’s College, University of London on December 14, 1944).

^{xii} Ralph Mattson and Arthur Miller, *Finding a Job You Can Love* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1999).