

Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of this World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work*  
Chapter Three: Work, Life, and Vocational Choice:  
Investing Yourself in the Divine Economy

Introduction:

- How do I choose a vocation?
- What if I am presently stuck in a job in which I experience not sense of vocation?
- What if I am in a job and context where accepted practices and operating procedures seriously erode moral integrity?
- What if I am in a job situation in which its demands have taken over my entire life and provide little in return except an empty promise of happiness via worldly success and material abundance?

### **Making the Match: Career Choice**

1. How does the Christian theology of work as a divine calling bear upon the problem of “choosing a vocation”? But in light of the biblical doctrine of calling, there is something odd about the phrase “choosing a vocation” for two reasons:
  - a. In the NT, the primary if not exclusive meaning of the word call or vocation is the call of the gospel, pure and simple, to repentance and faith (Acts 2: 38), into fellowship with Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1: 9), out of darkness into light (1 Pet. 2: 9), to be holy (1 Pet. 1: 15), and to be a saint (Rom.1: 7). Hence, in the NT, a vocation or calling is not to be chosen, but responded to, it’s not a call to a career, but to sainthood. Yet as saints, we are called to serve and love our neighbors with the gifts God has given us. God’s calls us therefore to be certain kinds of persons (saints) and to do certain kinds of things (service). Hence, the Puritans distinguished between the general and particular callings:
    - 2.) The general calling is to be a Christian disciple and manifest the virtues of this calling (Gal. 5: 22-3).
    - 3.) The particular calling is a call to a specific occupation, both in the church and in society.

Hence, the idea of choosing a vocation really means choosing a particular OCCUPATION in which we will exercise our gifts and

thereby fulfill our calling or vocation. What we choose is an occupation were our vocations can be expressed.

- b. Vocation is a wider concept than occupation, even a paid one (jobs, careers, and occupations do not equal a vocation). You do not need a paid occupation to have a vocation; at any given time we may have several vocations, and only one of them be expressed in a paid occupation.
- 1.) We may have a number of vocations as a result of social and historical circumstances which we have not chosen (N.B., the existential concepts of “facticity” and “thrownness”).
  - 2.) Even a paid occupation may not be a matter of choice and for most people it never has been. Freedom of choice, opportunity, and variety are relatively novel social phenomenons.
2. Guidelines for the responsible choice of an occupation have not been thoroughly worked out by the Christian community since such choices are relatively new, and because of the hangover that work is a secular pursuit and not religiously or spiritually significant.
  3. But the Reformers and Puritans of the 16th and 17th centuries worked out some of these principles on two premises, (1) that all of life including work was to be lived to the glory of God, and (2) that educational and occupational opportunities were increasing in a changing society.
  4. Hence, they defined work in this way: the social place where people can exercise their God-given gifts in the service of others as needy interdependent individuals.

“The main end of our lives . . . is to serve God in the serving of men in the works of our callings.” A person’s vocation is “a certain kind of life, ordained and imposed on men by God, for the common good.” William Perkins, *Treatise on the Vocations or Callings of Men*.

The main purpose of labor is a matter of “obeying God and doing good to others.” Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory*.
  5. Hence, two practical aspects arise from this definition of work: giftedness and the exercise of those gifts for the sake of others.
  6. The first step in making an occupational choice is ascertaining the gifts God has bestowed. How does one discover one’s gifts? By reflecting autobiographically on the past in terms of work and by remaining open to increasing self knowledge which is crucial for occupational decision-making.

What have I done and done well?  
What kind of skills did I make use of?  
What kind of knowledge did I acquire?  
What kinds of objects did I work with?  
In what capacity was I relating to others?  
Was I in a position with freedom and responsibility?  
Was I in a highly structured situation with activities restricted?

7. Some experimentation may be required in the process of career choice; career decisions are rarely irrevocable. Also, vocational counseling and testing may help as well, though they are not the last word. Also, seek the advice of others who know you well and who will be deadly honest. It may require a dose of humility in pursuing a task that is not recognized in society (mechanic, garbage collector, etc.).
8. There are variety of obstacles to making a good career choice in addition to lack of self-knowledge. Many poor reasons and errant motives serve as the false basis for career choice: salary, social prestige, envy, family expectations, reactions to one's culture and community.
9. Pinpointing gifts and talents may not be specific enough to choose an occupation for such gifts and talents may be useful in a variety of fields. Hence, God may narrow the field in two ways.
  1. God can give us a concern for others', say, health, emotions, and spirituality, natural or cultural environment.
  2. God can endow us with lively interests that lead us to cultivate skills that can be used in service to others.
10. The discovery of God's particular calling on your life and the help you need regarding occupation choice is not found necessarily in seeking out signs and wonders, but being attentive to who you are and where you are, taking into serious consideration divine providence: "To Him it is no accident that you are what you are here and now, an accident with which He must come to terms. He Himself places you where you are." Emil Brunner
11. Occasionally, God does call people to do what they are outstandingly unqualified to do and disinclined to do (Moses, Jonah, Paul), and for special miraculous purposes. As a rule, people do those things for which they are qualified, and in which they are interested.

### **Finding the Fit: Job Placement**

12. The second step in vocational decision making is ascertaining where our abilities and skills can be put at the disposal of those who need them. We must decide not only what to do, but where and how to do it-- "obedient existence in the chosen sphere." K. Barth
13. Selfish motives stand in the way of making a good decision here, esp. monetary considerations. Can we assume that those careers promising the highest pay are at the same time the ones that best serve our neighbor in need? "It frequently happens that great, or very great remuneration is had for performance of some task of lesser or doubtful utility." Pope John XXIII. There are such things as "illusory services". Yves Simon. Clearly some jobs are to be preferred over others; while they may be permissible, they are not expedient (say, producing diamond studded eyebrow pencils or prescription eyeglasses).
14. One must take into consideration the social content of one's work: am I in my job making a positive contribution to the human community; am I helping to meet legitimate human needs; am I somehow enhancing or promoting what is true, noble, and worthy in human life?
15. Note: good works can be performed out of bad motives (business person is friendly only for the sake of a future sale), and people can engage in bad works with the best intentions (copy writer for an ad firm whose main client is the tobacco industry).
16. The process of career choice should involve not only an inventory of talents together with moral self examination of motives and attitudes, but also a serious evaluation of various types of work according to its social value (high paid plastic surgeon vs. family practitioner in depressed rural area? high paid corporate lawyer or legal counsel of disadvantaged denied legal representation?).
17. The ultimate criteria for job choice is not salary, security, status, or satisfaction, but SERVICE. Christians should "choose those employments which yield the greatest advantage to their neighbor." J. Calvin
18. The vocational focus of one's life need not necessarily correspond to one's paid occupation. The most important calling we have in life may not be one that we get paid for (bi-vocational ministries as an example). Similarly, paid employment of one's professional skills may make it possible to volunteer one's professional skills where there is much need but no remuneration provided (short term medical missions as an example).
19. It is increasingly difficult indeed to associate one's job (for money) with one's calling or vocation. The present socio-economic system has led to the "de-vocationalization" of human work. Jacques Ellul has refused to see any

connection between work and vocation. Work in fact is the expression of the fallenness of mankind, the polar opposite of Luther's view. In both cases, Luther would not seek to change society because it represents the creativity and order of God; Ellul would not seek to change things because work is not service to God. However, the reformed view calls neither for acquiescence nor revolution, but patient reform.

### **Balancing Commitments: Work and Vocation**

20. There is a need to recover the broad, Lutheran sense of the concept of vocation. ML understood vocation to include any and everything that brings one into relation to other people: as worker, spouse, parent, citizen, etc. The Puritans seemed to narrow the concept down to paid employments or to jobs, and even considered such activity as secular and in competition with the true heavenly vocation. Work is only one aspect of one's vocation: work, family, leisure, education, politics, church must be placed under the rubric of vocation.
21. How can one gain vocational integration with so many duties to fulfill? What are the consequences when the virtue of hard work becomes the vice of workaholism?

### **Reformed Monasticism: The Work of Prayer**

22. Included in our callings is the chief calling to be a Christian, and to take on the virtues associated with a follower of Christ. This will probably be a "mixed life" of activity and contemplation (prayer, meditation, Scripture study, Eucharist) as this was exemplified in the ministry of our Lord. There should be a careful balance between the two.
23. Might one still be called the monastic life today? Both Luther and Calvin allowed for a reformed kind of monastic vocation. ML specified three conditions: (1) vows are not to be taken as a way to righteousness or make satisfaction for sin; (2) vows are to be taken in the spirit of freedom, not as a higher law for the achievement of spiritual perfection; (3) vows are to be taken up like any other vocation like farming or trade. Calvin added his own qualifications, esp. how the monastic vocation can be a form of service to one's neighbor. Two ways are important: (1) to provide a spiritual training ground for those headed for active service in the Church; (2) to serve as a model of piety incumbent on all believers.