

Christian Vocation: The Meaning of Your Life

by William Boekestein

“...Called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28, NKJV)

A few months ago I made a pastoral visit to an unmarried couple who were living together in our city. After letting me in, the man motioned for me to sit down on the floor, where his girlfriend was sitting in the middle of a bare apartment. It was mid-afternoon but they were both in their pajamas. Their hair was disheveled. They both looked fairly bewildered and defeated. For about an hour we sat on the floor surrounded by ashtrays, prescription bottles and stacks of clothes; and talked about life. They explained that all they did each day was smoke cigarettes and watch the one movie they had on their thirteen inch T.V. Towards the end of our time together, I gently asked the woman. “Do you believe that God created you to live for a purpose?” After a long, thoughtful drag on her cigarette, she responded honestly, “Sir, if we have a purpose, we have *no idea* what it is?”

How sad it is, to live without an awareness of God’s *grand* purpose for our lives. But many of us do just that. Perhaps your life doesn’t resemble that of the individuals I have just mentioned, but many of us don’t always have a clear sense of what our purpose is. Some of us live to hear others laugh at our jokes. Some of us live for the weekend. Some of us live to pay off a mortgage. Some of us live for retirement.

The fact is, we were meant to live according to a grand purpose. In order to promote a vision for living according to a purpose I would like to focus on one word: *vocation*.

Understanding Vocation

The word “vocation” is another way to talk about “calling.” Both of those words, vocation and calling, refer to the unique way in which God has chosen you to fit in to his great plan. To have a vocation means also to be acutely *aware* that *you* have been called by God to live with a purpose. Paul says that Christians are “...called according to God’s purpose” (Romans 8:28).

The fact is, everyone fits somewhere in the plan of God. But the beauty of being a Christian is that you have the confidence of *knowing* that you personally fit into this great plan. Those of you who have not submitted to the Lordship of Christ may have wondered why you lack this sense of purpose. The reality is, you will only come to know your vocation as you seek the Lord in Christ. You see, there is a connection between what is known as the *effectual* call and the call to a vocation. When God effectually calls a man or woman (by changing their heart) he also gives them a vocation. He essentially says, “Now you’re working for me.”

Say an unbelieving carpenter gets converted to Christ by God’s effectual call. Prior to conversion, he was working for himself. But now he is able to do the same work but with a different master and a different motive. He is now owned by God and works for his glory.

One of the first people to work out this concept of vocation was John Calvin (whose 500th birthday is being celebrated this year; 1509-1564). Prior to Calvin, only so called “religious workers” were thought to have a calling. Men were *called* to the ministry, and that was it. But Calvin emphasizes several points that alter this way of thinking.

First of all, he reminds us that all of life is religious. We are all religious workers because all of our actions are expressions of our incurably religious hearts. You only live one life. You don’t live a secular life *and* sacred life but one *religious* life. God calls us as

whole people.

Secondly, Calvin taught that the gospel is for all of life. When Christ saves a man he saves his whole person. He cleanses his mind, renews his heart and activates his hands. If you have experienced the changing power of the gospel then the way you look at all of life will change.

Thirdly, work itself has an inherent dignity. God created work in the Garden of Eden after having laid down a pattern of work in his creation. Work is not a necessary evil; it is an institution of God. In fact, vocation is illustrated clearly in pre-fall Paradise. In the garden, Adam was to take his particular abilities and apply them to a particular plot of ground; the goal being, to make bare ground flourish (Genesis 2:15). Vocation is taking your skills and applying them to the plot of life that God has given you.

Each of us has a vocation. The plots of our lives vary but our purpose is one and the same: To bring the principles of God's kingdom to bear in every area of life. If this is so, the next logical question is, "How do I find *my* vocation?"

Finding a Vocation

Allow me to propose three levels of questions that each of us should be asking as we strive to find *our* vocation.

Level One Question: Am I living for God's glory?

This level-one question is like having a master plan. The question suggests that whatever choices we make about our future must be made self-consciously to promote the honor of Christ. The idea of a master plan is helpful because it applies to everyone no matter which direction you are headed.

After our school years, most of us head in one of three directions. Some go to college. Some enter right away into a career (or some kind of volunteer work). Others immediately begin a family. The point is, each of us make huge choices, each of which *could* be legitimate provided they are made to promote the kingdom of God. But that's the big question! "Am I doing this for the honor of God?" If the answer is either "no" or "I don't know" then you are not thinking vocationally.

Level Two Question: What is the greatest thing I can do for God?

This question *seems* to contradict the basic point of vocation, that all legitimate work should be viewed as a vocation. But what we mean here is that all vocations are not equal for every person. To say this is not to speak down on certain callings. It is simply recognizing that there is an ordering to life. Paul says this in I Corinthians 12. After listing a number of good gifts he tells the Corinthians to "...*Earnestly desire the greater gifts*" (vs. 31). Calvin, commenting on this passage says Christians must "apply themselves the more diligently to those things which are most conducive to edification."

Calvin said something else that may shock those of us who tend to have a low view of government. He said that being a magistrate was "by far the most honorable of all callings in the whole life of mortal man" (*Institutes*, 4.20.4) He said that because a magistrate has the potential to wield great influence for the sake of Christ.

When Jabez prayed that the Lord would enlarge his territory (I Chronicles 4:10) he is at least praying for greater opportunities to bring glory to God through his life. I would not dare to make a list of the greatest vocations. But I would urge you to ask yourself the question.

God gives most of us freedom to choose a vocation. This is something we should take seriously. In taking this freedom seriously, one of the first questions we should ask is, "What is the *greatest* thing I can do for God?"

Level Three Questions:

Then there are a host of tertiary questions that should be asked when trying to find our own place to glorify God in this world.

Where do my strengths lie? You cannot do all things equally. We must choose, as best we are able, to do something that we can do well.

Where are the needs great? Where are the problems worse? Where are the workers few?

How will this vocation affect my walk with God? How close would I be to a church in which I could give and take nourishment? Where are the temptations manageable? With whom would I work?

How honest is the work I'm thinking of doing? How necessary and how healthy are the goods or services I would help provide? At the risk of offending anyone here I won't mention certain common professions that upon further thought are not simply appropriate for Christians.

How smoothly could I combine my proposed career with family? The societal pressures today to "put off" family are intense, especially upon young women. But family issues are critically important to vocational living. Both men and women need to seriously consider how certain career choices may hinder them from being the husbands and wives that God may be calling them to be. Similarly, consider if your career path will prohibit you from being a nurturer and an educator to the children that God may give. Will you be able to faithfully care for aging parents if this job works out?

You will have to answer these questions, but you need to start by asking them. Unfortunately, most people don't ask difficult questions about decisions that will chart out much of the rest of their lives.

Living My Vocation

Finally, if we understand vocation and have at least thought about how we are to find our vocations we still need to know how to live out the calling that God has given us. How do we do this?

With a kingdom focus.

All of the vocations that we could have are actually sub-vocations. Our chief calling is to walk rightly before the face of God as a citizen of his kingdom. Christian vocation is having a kingdom perspective in your labors.

Working with a kingdom focus expresses the idea that you have been given a task by God. God has loaned each of us talents that are not for ourselves. We must use our talents to build up the kingdom of God, not our own kingdoms.

By thinking transformationally

Don't think status quo on the job. Isn't it amazing that Adam was called to be a cultivator in perfect garden. How do you improve upon perfection? Obviously that's not a problem that we deal with here. There is much room for transformational thinking and acting in our vocations.

By working Christianly.

It is not a matter of how good a vocation you have but how faithfully you pursue it. The sobering reality is that for most of us, our *work* will not last but the *way* we work will last forever. The process of our work is at least as important as the product.

With an eye to the common good.

In the redeemed life occupations must serve the commonwealth. This is not a socialistic, big-brother-knows-best idea. This is Christianity in action. Paul admonishes us to "*Let each of us please his neighbor for his good...*" (Romans 15:2). If we are working

only for ourselves (or even for our nuclear families) then we are not thinking vocationally.

By living holistically.

You need to discharge your vocation as if God is a savior of the whole man, because he is. The whole man must be devoted to God's cause; at church when we are transacting business, or engaging in political or social activities of any sort. No sphere of life may be excluded. Life as a whole must be God-directed.

Conclusion

Why is all of this so important? The chief answer is this: As soon as Christians stop thinking and acting vocationally, Christianity will cease to make a meaningful impact upon this world. Some have suggested that this has already happened. If the church *is* anemic and powerless in this world it is not because we lack programs or congregations but because Christians within the church are not living as if they are called according to a purpose. Louis Berkhof has rightly said that, "...If all those who are now citizens of the Kingdom would actually obey its laws in every domain of life, the world would be so different that it would hardly be recognized."

When young people graduate from high school or college they often have the mindset that they are going to go out and change the world; and so they should. But the way in which we may change the world is not as glamorous as we might like. We will change the world one vocation at a time.

Our world is governed by God; so is your life. The only way your life will have true meaning is when you engage God's world the way you were designed to. Begin thinking vocationally, not only to avoid ending up like the couple in my opening illustration, but so that you can experience the fulfillment of seeing the Lordship of Christ applied to every area of life. This is truly living according to the purpose to which you have been called.