

Calling – Key Topic #3 Does God Call People to Work and/or to Particular Kinds of Jobs? Does God Provide Guidance to People in Their Work and if so How?

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Introduction – Calling in Contemporary Society

Calling language is still common in both religious and secular sources as this spectrum of examples shows:

- Baylor University advertises through the mouth of a new college student: “I got calls from UNC Emory and George Washington. But I found my call at Baylor.” This raises the question “What does God call us to and how?”¹
- In another Baylor ad an M.Div student is quoted as saying “I wanted to become a CEO, but then God called me to something greater....I sensed God was calling me to full-time ministry.” This raises the question “What is the value of ‘secular’ work and is paid church ministry greater or more sacred?”²
- An article entitled “The Case for Kids” asks are women who have children merely “breeders”? Or is having children the call of all women able to do so?³
- The back-cover blurb of Max Lucado’s book *He Chose the Nails*⁴ says “Max Lucado has a blessed calling:

Denalyn calls him Honey. Jenna, Andrea, and Sara call him Dad.

The members of the Oak Hills Church of Christ in San Antonia call him their preacher. And God calls him His.” This raises questions of our calling to spouse and family, God’s people in ministry, and God himself – all through the ways we are addressed, named or called by our most significant others.

- The caption in a recent ad for a mobile phone with vibrator read “I can feel when somebody is calling me. It’s not supernatural, it’s technological.”⁵ How do we experience God’s call in a cacophonous, technological world of thousands of calls?

This collection of “calling” quotes raises the question where do our concepts of calling come from and what does Scripture say about calling? This paper will start with the apostle Paul (and his great interpreter Luther) who is central to the debate about calling and closest to our post-resurrection situation, move to the gospels, then examine broader biblical, especially Old Testament themes of creation and

¹ *Christianity Today*, August 2006, 73

² *Christianity Today*, August 2006, 72.

³ *Christianity Today*, August 2006, “Case for Kids.”, 26-31. Thanks to Scott Harrower for these illustrations in his unpublished Ridley College essay “Great Expectations: What does God expect from us?”, 1.

⁴ Lucado, Max, *He Chose the Nails* (Nashville: Word, 2000).

⁵ Cited without source by Ian Barns, “Living Christianly in a world of technology”, Part I, *Zadok Papers* S144, Autumn, 2006, 2

providence. We will then seek to synthesize and balance the scriptural material through connecting calling to the doctrine of the Trinity. We will finally apply this scriptural and doctrinal material to the question of vocational guidance – does God call us to particular work and if so how?

Call in Paul and Luther

A helpful preliminary definition of calling is “*the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, ...do ...and have is invested with a special devotion, dynamism, and direction lived out as a response to his summons and service.*”⁶ But what does calling or vocation (from Latin – *vocatio* - "to call") mean in Scripture?

Our common use of the concept of calling to a particular social or work role dates back to the early 16th century when Martin Luther interpreted "calling" this way in 1 Cor. 7:20 rather than in the millennium-long traditional sense of calling to the priesthood or monastery. The monastic tradition exalted the “perfect” contemplative, Mary-like life of poverty, chastity and obedience (to the church) over the “permitted” active,⁷ Martha-like life (Lk 10:38-42) of secular work, marriage and obedience to the State, making an eternal principle out of a particular incident. Os Guinness calls this the “Catholic Distortion.”⁸

But many today say Luther incorrectly translated the Greek term *klesei* in 1 Cor. 7:20 as “vocation” or “calling,” in the sense of occupation or station in life. This influenced the King James Version’s (KJV) literal English translation "Let every man abide in the calling wherein he was called." Luther's and the KJV’s view here of an individual calling to a social or work role contrasts with the general New Testament view of a Christians' common calling to conversion and corresponding Christ-like character or holiness (cf. Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2, 9, 1 Cor. 1:9, 26, 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph 4:1, 2 Tim. 1:9; 1 Pet. 1:15-16, 2:9, 1 Jn. 3:2-3). Thus the more liberal modern translation in the light of these verses: "Let each of you remain in the in which you were called" (NRSV, emphasis added).

To decide between these two views (i.e., of calling as occupation/station vs. calling as conversion/character) Paul's allusive summary statement in v. 20 (cf v.17 and 24) needs its context unpacked. The Greek and eschatologically dualistic (soul versus body and heaven versus earth) Corinthians question Paul about marriage and their desire to change to an apparently more spiritual, heavenly, unmarried status (7: 1, 25 cf. Mt 19:12 and Lk 10: 38-41). In response, Paul states his general principle that they should stay in the same social status/class and roles as when they were converted. After all, Christ called or converted them there.⁹

The broader context of 1 Corinthians shows the socially- and spiritually-restless Corinthians desiring upward spiritual and social mobility. Paul earlier showed how

⁶ Os Guinness, *The Call* (Nashville: Word, 1998), 29.

⁷ Eusebius, *The Proof of the Gospel*, ed. and trans. W.J. Ferrar (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), bk. 1, chap. 8, 48-49.

⁸ Os Guinness, *The Call* (Nashville: Word, 1998), 31-34.

⁹ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (NICNT) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 314.

their revolutionary status (calling) "in Christ" crucified (1 Cor. 1:4-7, 27-30) relativized all other status (calling) - racial (v. 24) or social (v. 26ff.).¹⁰

Fee points out that these "intertwined" senses of "calling" cause Paul to nearly jump, like Luther, to seeing "the setting in which one is called as 'calling' itself." But "at most 'calling' refers to the *circumstances* in which the calling took place."¹¹ The prepositions are key here. The difference is between calling *in* a situation when converted (Barrett and Volf) and calling *to* a situation (Luther).¹² Os Guinness captures the proper sense of our primary call: "First and foremost we are called to Someone (God), not something (such as motherhood, politics or teaching) or somewhere (such as the inner-city or Mongolia)."¹³

God's call to Christian conversion and conduct is not *equated* with these social spheres, but yet is closely *related* to them and sanctifies them in 1 Cor. 7:17ff. A secondary, related use of calling language for relational and work roles is still justified, as Fee notes:

Paul means that by calling a person within a given situation, that situation itself is taken up in the call and thus sanctified to him or her. Similarly, by saving a person *in* that setting, Christ thereby "assigned" it to him/her as his/her place of living out life in Christ Precisely because our lives are determined by God's call, not by our situation, we need to learn to continue there as those who are "before God" There let one serve the Lord, ... whether it be a mixed marriage, singleness, blue-or white-collar work, or socio-economic condition.¹⁴

¹⁰ Cf. Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Carlisle/Grand Rapids: Paternoster/Eerdmans, 1994), 163f.

¹¹ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (NICNT), 306f. Others take the next step "circumstances," = "setting" = "calling." D.J. Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), chap. 2 finds these verses clearly associate work and other ordinary roles - as "callings."

¹² Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 109f. citing C.K. Barrett, *First Corinthians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 169f. Contrast Luther's confusing paraphrase of v. 24 and its change from "to which" to "in which." "Remain in that calling *to which* you were called, that is, where you received the Gospel; and remain as you were when called If you are called in slavery, then remain in the slavery *in which* you were called" (*Luther's Works* ed. J. Pelikan vol. 28 (Philadelphia/St. Louis: Concordia and Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1955-76), 45-7. Cf. NIV v. 17 which without using "calling" refers to "the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and *to which* God has called him" and on v. 24 to remaining "in the situation God called him to." My italics.

¹³ Os Guinness, *The Call* (Nashville: Word, 1998), 31.

¹⁴ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (NICNT), 306f., 321f, cf. 314 and Guinness, *The Call*, 31. Fee does not necessarily see God calling people to become slaves for instance, but rather that once converted while in a certain social setting, even the worst like slavery, it becomes potentially a place of service and worship. However, if that potential is unable to be fulfilled and the opportunity of release from slavery becomes available, Paul encourages people to take it. See v.21. However, the NRSV translation of v. 21 seems to imply that Paul wants Christians to stay in their situation of slavery while inwardly free in Christ. Even if this is the best translation, this needs to be read in the light of Paul's non-dualist principle that our inward

Paul then illustrates his basic principle of “staying” put in one’s social situation and occupation through the ultimate unimportance of both circumcision (vv. 18, 19) and slavery/occupation (vv. 21-24 cf. Gal. 3:28) compared with salvation in Christ. Yet instead of the Corinthians’ view of the relational/occupational setting of one’s calling or conversion to Christ as mere stage scenery or scaffolding to be discarded as soon as possible, Paul sees it as potentially part of our primary calling to enact the drama of salvation. Like sacraments, callings are an outward, visible sign of inward, spiritual salvation.

For Paul, our relational and occupational settings are not accidental but providential. Staying in the situation you were in when called or converted potentially converts even the most unpromising situation into a place of service to God. But this is not a rigid law. Paul sees occupational or role change as undesirable in some cases e.g. selling oneself into slavery or changing racial identity (uncircumcision); and unnecessary but possible or desirable in others, if e.g., a slave-master or non-Christian spouse allows one’s freedom (v. 15, 21).

The Corinthians therefore need not abandon their social roles, nor *must* they stay in them. Paul’s explanation in v. 29-31 stresses the tension of Christian freedom in marriage and work in a fallen world, between the *now* and the *not yet* dimension of our call to the Kingdom: “the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; ... those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.” We are called to *stay* in our worldly situations or fallen creation but our fundamental allegiance and concern is called *away* towards the new creation.¹⁵

In understandable reaction to a millennium of monastic denial of created roles like marriage and work in their super-spiritual enthusiasm for the *away* part of the tension, and from his own Medieval conservatism, Luther stresses the *stay* (or creational) side. In equally understandable reaction to the later “Protestant Distortion”¹⁶ or “Protestant Work Ethic”, meaning the idolatrous elevation and secularization of work into our primary calling, even a “work” earning salvation, contrary to Luther,¹⁷ Volf stresses

mental and spiritual states are meant to be embodied externally in our social situations as far as possible (cf. Rom 12:1,2).

¹⁵ Cf. Vincent L. Wimbush, *Paul the Worldly Ascetic: Response to the World and self-Understanding according to 1 Corinthians 7* (Macon, GA: Mercer Uni. Press, 1987), 15ff., 21: “Remain” did not uphold the status quo. Instead it “relativize[d] the importance of all worldly conditions and relationships. Yet ..., even the ‘remaining’ is relativized”: those given the chance, e.g., slaves, v. 21 “can change their social condition or status without having their status with God affected.” “Remaining” counters the Corinthian catchcry of *refraining* - changing status or withdrawing from the world to a higher “pneumatic [spiritual] Christian existence.” Paul’s two digressions in v. 17-24 and 29-35 clarify his principle that worldly statuses are nothing before God. Therefore we are free to live *in* the world, but not *of* it, in “spiritual ... detachment or “inner-worldly asceticism” (*Worldly*, 70) “as if” according to v. 29-31. This is because the forms, structures, institutions and concerns of this world (*schema*) are not evil, but transient (*Worldly*, 33f.).

¹⁶ Os Guinness, *The Call* (Nashville: Word, 1998), 39 ff.

¹⁷ Donald R. Heiges, *The Christian’s Calling* rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 47-49 demonstrates the theological and structural primacy Luther gives to our calling to respond in the inner

the *away* (or new creational) side. This is not meant in an other-worldly way, but as the Spirit's transformation of social and work situations to allow gifts to flourish and more adequately reflect the new creation. Volf reminds us that we need both the creational (belonging) dimension *and* the new-creational (distancing) dimension.¹⁸ Paul is concerned that the Corinthians and we maintain our availability to God's kingdom and new creation but without abandoning the created roles it will preserve and perfect. While there is a tension between our roles in creation and in God's Kingdom (1 Cor 7:29-31), between being called to *stay* and being called *away*, the two are ultimately reconciled, for the Kingdom is "creation healed" (Hans Küng).¹⁹

Call in the Gospels

When we turn to the Gospels with this interpretive grid we see that contrary to the dominance of the monastic "Catholic Distortion" (that the highest calling is to the priesthood or monastery) and a Protestant form of the same distortion in terms of "full-time Christian ministry," Jesus' followers were not all called away from their occupations. Jesus' followers came from all walks of life and many stayed in them. We can see this by looking at three categories of Jesus's followers.

The first category, the disciples, included middle-class fishermen with their own boats and servants (Mark 1:16-20). They left their fishing businesses to follow Jesus, but also continued to fish as the occasion permitted (Matthew 17:27, John 21:23). Conversely, Levi was a wealthy tax collector, who appears to have given up his occupation (Luke 5:28). To answer Jesus' call and to follow Jesus he left behind relative wealth and security (Mt 4:18-22; Mk 1:14-20) as the rich young ruler failed to do (Mt 19:16-30).

A second category, stay-at-home supporters, followed Jesus closely and continuously, although they did not leave their homes to travel with him. They supported him and his disciples from their relatively well off positions.²⁰ These include Peter's mother-in-law (Mk 1:29-34), Lazarus (Jn 11) and his sisters Mary and Martha (Lk 10:38-42), wealthy men like Joseph of Arimathea (Lk 24:50-51), and the wealthy women "who

man in the context of the church to the gospel of grace and the heavenly kingdom over our calling or vocation to respond in the outer man in the context of our neighbour to the law's command to love and serve in the earthly kingdom. Heiges cites Luther's Small and Large Catechisms respectively in *The Book of Concord*, trans. and ed. T.G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), 345 and 419. However, he notes that for polemical reasons against the Roman Catholic Church, Luther had to "emphasize (even over-emphasize) the earthly callings of every Christian."

¹⁸ See Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), ch. 4 and Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 50-51. This also reflects the Old Testament's emphasis on the Judean exiles settling down in Babylon, by living and working alongside the Babylonians while praying for and "seeking the welfare ["shalom"] of the city" (Jer 29:4-7). It becomes a paradigm for New Testament Christians scattered or dispersed in the Gentile world. It is also an appropriate model today for God's scattered people called to work in the world in "exile" in Babylon. Cf. Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Carlisle/Grand Rapids: Paternoster/Eerdmans, 1994).

¹⁹ Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (London: Collins, 1975), 231..

²⁰ Martin Hengel, *Poverty and Riches in the Early Church* (London: SCM, 1963), 27.

provided for them [Jesus and his disciples] out of their resources" (Lk 8:3). This group include followers of Jesus who stayed in their occupations.

A third category, the crowds, included a wide range of people, less intimately and regularly connected to Jesus. Many were called to *stay* in their situation and testify to their salvation like the Gadarene demoniac after his healing (Mk.5:18-20; cf. 8: 26; Matt. 8:13; 9:6). Tax collectors like Zaccheus (Luke 19) were called away from greed but not away from their occupations. Consider Lk 3:10-14 on repentance within, not from, the occupations of soldiers and tax collectors.

In sum, Jesus called his followers to lives of redemptive sacrifice and celebrative delight. Perhaps the outer ring of followers, including especially Zacchaeus, is the best 'type' for professional people ... These 'righteous rich' committed their possessions and their positions in the world to the work of redemption in the fullest sense ... A poverty of spirit animated their delight, and this proved itself in free and effective actions of good will toward the poor and the powerless.²¹

A Broader Biblical, Creational and Providential Basis of Vocation

Luther's great rediscovery of "the priesthood of all believers" saw our primary calling to Christ as consecrating our secondary but significant social and occupational roles to Christian service. However, Luther's perhaps over-enthusiastic stress on calling to specific occupational roles, his static medieval stress on staying permanently within them, and later Protestant secularizing and individualizing of calling have led many to throw out the baby with the bathwater on the grounds that he misread 1 Cor. 7.

However we, like Luther, can derive a biblical theology of work deductively from broad biblical themes.²² For example, our first and foundational calling in Scripture is to image and reflect God's royal reign through the creation mandate, to "have dominion ...,be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:26-28 NRSV). As God's people we are called to anticipate and reflect the Kingdom of God in our domestic relations to each other as male and female and in caring dominion over creation. This involves reproductive and productive work for both men and women.

We image God through our work because the biblical God is the first worker. God is the one who effortlessly says "Let it be." Everything visible and invisible is "the work of his hands". He is the master craftsman - the potter (Isa 45:9, 64:8), the architect of the universe (Prov 8:22-31), the homemaker, the weaver who knits humans together in their mother's womb (Ps 139:13-16).²³

²¹ John Schneider, *Godly Materialism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 143-44.

²² Cf. M. Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 78.

²³ See Robert J. Banks, *God the Worker* (Sutherland, NSW: Albatross Books, 1992) for more.

Recently, some theologians, most notably Pope John Paul II, have depicted humans as “co-creators” with God.²⁴ This is true in the sense that our work (and rest) should be modelled on God’s creative work (and rest), “six days you shall labour and do all your work ... for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them . . .”, (Ex 20:9-11). However, our work is secondary and creaturely and does not complete God’s. The exclusive theological use of *barah*, to create, sets the original creative work of God apart from all possible human works.

Nonetheless, in Exodus 31:1-11 and 35:31-36:1 Bezalel and his fellow workers were filled with the Spirit in designing a sanctuary for the Ark of the Covenant. Some reject any general doctrine of creativity from such a specific reference to a sacred activity.²⁵ Nevertheless, in the light of the portrayal of the whole creation as God’s sanctuary in Genesis 1 and humans as God’s image set in the sanctuary as a sign and sacrament of God’s rule, creative activity is one way we externalise our identity and calling in God’s image. As Tolkien says somewhere, we are “sub-creators with God.”

The special and Spirit-filled callings of Bezalel and his colleagues and the Old Testament prophets (Ex 3, Isaiah 6, Jer 1:1-15) are universalised as God’s Spirit is poured out “on all flesh ... even on the male and female slaves” (Joel 28-29), the lowest of workers. In the New Testament we are all filled, gifted and called as part of God’s prophetic people, the new humanity in Christ (Acts 2:17-18, Eph 4:1-13

The Old Testament’s high view of creation, humanity and our creative calling to dominion under God (Ps 8) prepares the way for a powerful sense of God’s providential presence in our work. Robert Banks sees Luther linking "human work with God's ongoing providential work" in Ps 127 and 139, Prov 3:5-6 and Mt.6:25-34, 10:29-31. Banks says of Luther's providential extension of ecclesial vocation terminology that:

he has widened the notion of calling beyond its reference to evangelistic and pastoral responsibilities to cover all work that provides a service to others. As long as the special importance of the former is recognised, and the responsibility of all Christians to be involved in them,²⁶ Luther's more highly developed understanding of vocation is quite valid. It simply brings Paul's teaching on work into contact with broader biblical themes and through these develops it in a more systematic and practical way.²⁷

Philosopher Paul Helm agrees:

²⁴ John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*[*On Human Labor*] (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1981), section 25 where the term is not used but the concept of “Work as a Sharing in the Activity of the Creator” is.

²⁵ Alan Richardson, *The Biblical Doctrine of Work* (London: SCM, 1952), 17-18.

²⁶ Of course Banks recognized that literally speaking, Luther widened the notion of calling beyond the priesthood and monasticism, which Banks equates with evangelism and pastoral responsibilities in today’s Protestant churches. Banks’ reference to the “special importance” of “evangelistic and pastoral ministries” should be read not in any hierarchical sense but rather as universally applicable dimensions of the Great Commission and Great Commandment, respectively.

²⁷ R. J. Banks, “The Vocation of the Public Servant,” in his ed., *Private Values and Public Policy: The Ethics of Decision Making in Government Administration* (Homebush West, NSW: Lancer, 1983), 101. D. J. Schuurmann (*Vocation: Discerning our Callings in Life*, [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004], 33, n. 21) helpfully compares the doctrine of vocation and the doctrine of the Trinity. Both are not explicit but rather implicit and important in Scripture.

So a Christian has two callings. He is effectually called by grace, converted. In addition there is a call of a different kind, that which is provided by the network of circumstance, personal relations, past history, in which he is found when God's grace comes to him Here the biblical teaching about divine providence is presented in a particular and personal way.²⁸

As Harry Blamires notes:

The Christian doctrine of vocation ... follows indisputably from two propositions. The first, that God is everywhere active in human affairs and his will operative at all times. The second, that he is a rational God, fully aware that the world needs farmers and miners as well as priests and nuns The doctrine of Providence stresses the ceaseless and ubiquitous intrusion of God into human affairs. The doctrine of Vocation defines a prime mode of that intrusion.²⁹

Lee Hardy pictures Luther's perspective as "God's Providential Presence in the Work of our Hands."

Through the order of stations [social and occupational roles] God sees that the daily needs of humanity are met. Through the human pursuit of vocations across the array of earthly stations the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the sick are healed, the ignorant are enlightened and the weak are protected. That is, by working we actually participate in God's ongoing providence for the human race.³⁰

However, this had dangers through Luther's historical and polemical over-identification of God's providence with particular social structures and occupational roles. This sometimes led to a sense of vocational unchangeability and misuse of calling language to exploit those called by requiring long hours and paying low wages.

A Threefold, Trinitarian Calling

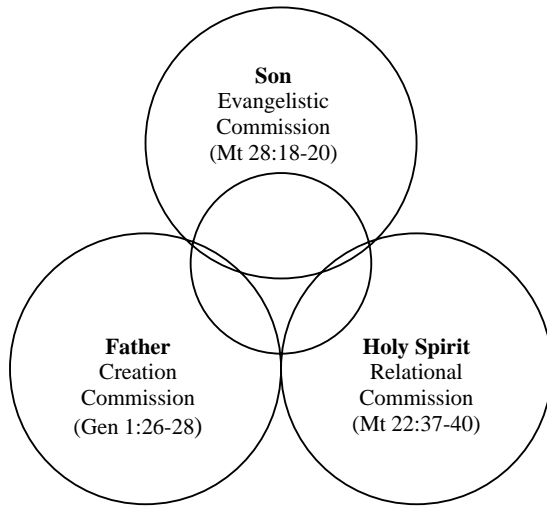
Luther's great breakthrough in recognizing ordinary callings nonetheless over-emphasized God's work as Creator and providential maintainer of creation and our work of staying in our created roles and occupations. He separated this from God's work in Christ and the Spirit in his doctrine of God's Two Kingdoms - the worldly kingdom of God the Creator and the heavenly kingdom of Christ and the Spirit. This

²⁸ Paul Helm, *The Callings: The Gospel in the World* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 48:

²⁹ Harry Blamires, *The Will and the Way: A Study of Divine Providence and Vocation* (London: SPCK, 1957), 67.

³⁰ *The Fabric of this World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice and the Design of Human Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 45, 47.

split within God's triune work opened up his doctrine of vocation to later secularization.³¹

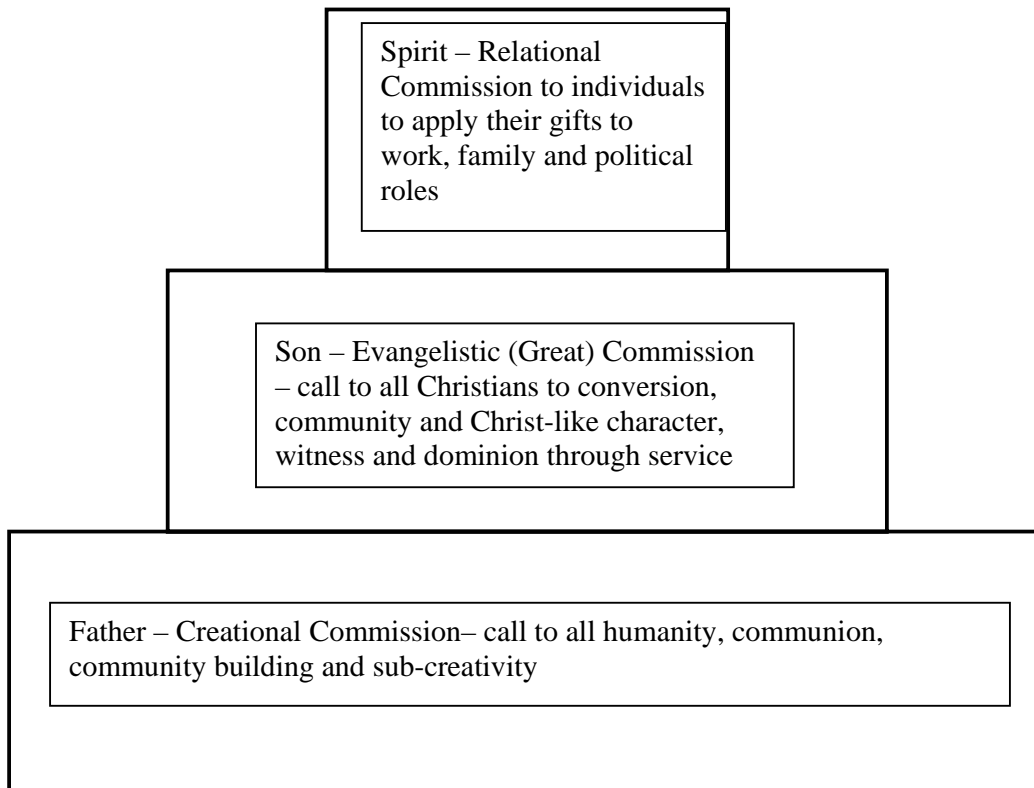


To gain a balanced and united understanding of our callings (including work) in the light of God's work, we will draw on the trinitarian summaries of God's work in the great orthodox creeds (Apostles and Nicene Creeds). Because we all have partial perceptions of God's work we need to be more thoroughly trinitarian instead of often practicing a unitarian (one person, e.g. God only as Creator) or binitarian (two person, e.g. God as only Jesus and the Spirit) theology playing favourites with the Trinity. Individuals, institutions and marketplace ministries often grasp one or two aspects of the Trinity's work that highlights their own work or calling. Some mainline liberal churches and groups focus more on work as just dominion over and care for creation (the Father), some Evangelicals focus on work as a means to evangelism (the Son), some Pentecostals focus on spiritual gifts, fruits and new creation (the Holy Spirit). A particular emphasis, gifting or calling is fine but it is divisive and competitive to claim ours is more essential as if the whole body of Christ is only one organ (1 Corinthians 12:14-31).

In classical trinitarian theology, the Father, Son and Spirit all cooperate in their work in the world. Yet each takes the lead at times in the trinitarian dance for their special part in salvation history. In creation, the Father is primary, yet the Word/Son is involved (Jn 1:1, Col 1:15-20, Heb 1:3 etc) as is the Spirit (Gen 1:2, Ps 104: 30). In reconciliation and evangelism, Christ is primary (Mt 28:20ff; 2 Cor 5:17-21). In the transformation and completion of our relationships to God (Rom 5:1-8, Mt 22:37-40), humanity (Gal 5, 1 Cor 12) and the earth (Rom 8:18-27), the Spirit is primary. But in all moments, they work together. Like the Trinity we should all bless one another's work if we are to have a properly balanced view of God's trinitarian work in creation, reconciliation and transformation. This is why we need a three-callings or -commissions theology.

³¹ Miroslav Volf, (*Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991], 105-9), Gordon R. Preece, (*The Viability of the Vocation Tradition* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1998] 61, 89-99) and Darrel Cosden (*The Heavenly Value of Earthly Work* [Milton Keynes, UK/Peabody, MA: Paternoster/Hendrickson, 2006], 45-48) while affirming of Luther's breakthrough to emphasise the universal call of all Christians to service in the world, all critique his dualistic and conservative Two Kingdoms framework.

Paul Stevens pictures this as a three-tiered wedding cake of callings. I will adapt this in a more explicitly trinitarian way.³² The foundational bottom layer of the creation commission is to all humans, to communion, community building and co- (or preferably sub-) creativity—Gen 1: 26-28, Ps 8). The second tier is the Great Commission—to all Christians, to conversion, community and Christ-like character, witness and dominion through service (Mt 28:18-20, Eph 4:1-13). The third and top layer is the Spirit’s personal or particular call to individuals to apply the relational commission or Great Commandment to work, family and political roles (1 Cor 7:17, 20, Eph 5: 21-6:9, Rom 13) using their unique gifts.



This trinitarian view of our callings in the context of the three commissions corrects the Medieval Catholic hierarchical distortion of only some Christians i.e. monastics and priests, having a Christian or personal calling. A Protestant echo of this has clergy and missionaries on top as working for Christ as pastors and evangelists,³³ caring professions like social workers and doctors next as having a personal, spiritual calling working for others in personal relationships, while business people, skilled workers, scientists, IT technicians, artists etc. who develop creation or matter come last.

Each of these trinitarian emphases has real strengths, but also weaknesses, when used exclusively. Their exclusive emphasis leaves us with an unbalanced, wobbly one or two-legged stool which cannot take the weight of our working lives and cause misunderstanding, disunity and competition in workplace ministry.

³² *The Other Six Days* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 73-74 borrowing Klaus Bockmuehl’s image.

³³ Os Guinness, *The Call*, (Nashville: Word, 1998), 31-43.

Firstly, Christians with a creational/cultural commission emphasis (frequently coming from mainline or liberal traditions) rightly stress the biblical wisdom tradition that we are creatures first, then Christians, and stress our positive relationship to the world of nature and culture. They have made great contributions to science, culture and social justice. As just one example of many, Professor Graeme Clark, inventor of the bionic ear, consciously imitated God's creative design of a shell he found on a beach to thread electrodes to stimulate hearing in the similarly spiral-shaped human ear.

Yet an exclusive or over-emphasis on God as Father and Creator can become easily secularised and lose a sense of evangelistic urgency and Christ's finality and uniqueness, thereby falling into a comfortable chaplaincy to secular, pluralistic societies and workplaces. This can also lead to a lack of sensing of the Spirit's intimate and intrusive involvement in life and work in creation.

The modern secularised and individualised Protestant ethic distortion often depicts calling as just an individual career, forgetting the divine Caller and Gifter and other relational priorities. A thoroughly trinitarian approach to calling does not anchor it to a static, deistic view of nature, but sees the Son and the Spirit thoroughly involved with the Father in calling us to co-operate in the work of creation and re-creation.

Secondly, Christians with an Evangelistic/Great Commission emphasis (frequently coming from Evangelical traditions, as does the author) are rightly Christ-centred and urgently evangelistic, emphasizing the Great Commission. But many in this camp leave out the realm of our relationship with creation and the earth in blessing, dominion and stewardship (Genesis 1:26-28, Gen 2 and Ps 8). Too often they forget that Christ is also the creator as John 1, Colossians 1:15-20 and the first chapter of almost every NT book shows. They stress the urgency of training more so-called "fulltime Christian workers" for kingdom work and see ordinary or secular work as worthwhile only to put food on the table and money in the plate for the support of support those who do the more important work of evangelism. They fail to recognise that exercising responsible dominion through work is also kingdom work. Dominion or ruling is what kings do. Ruling creation is worthwhile in itself not merely as a means to evangelism. It is worship of the King of all creation (Rom 12:1, 2).

When people over-emphasize Son-work in this manner, they may identify real Christians with clergy and missionaries who are called *away* from ordinary, creation work by Christ's call to evangelistic or Kingdom work. I recently heard a well-known, gifted preacher in a prominent US church make a throw-away remark about the dirty, smelly fishing trade Jesus called his disciples from. The distaste smacked of a man of letters, a pastor (like myself) who works with words and people, not creation or things. The loss of the creation commission has detrimental pastoral effects on Christians who are not primarily or directly people-workers or evangelistic workers. They often feel like third-class believers because they are not evangelists at work.

As an antidote to such an over-emphasis on Christ's call to evangelise, I love the story that former Institute of Christian Studies lecturer Calvin Seerveld tells about his Dutch father, who was a fishmonger. One day a woman asked for some fish. His

father sprang into action and speedily and skilfully gutted and scaled it. The pleased customer said “I can see that you haven’t missed your calling.”³⁴

Recently, I ate swordfish in a fine Gloucester (Massachusetts) restaurant while watching a fishing boat unloading its catch. I also saw a wonderful monument there to those thousands “who go out to the sea in ships” (Ps 107:23) and who risked and lost their lives. I then read the book and saw the movie *The Perfect Storm* about many of them. I vowed never to take the fish I eat or the people who catch and prepare it for granted again. There is a difficult, but still divine calling of exercising respectful dominion over the sea.

Because the three persons of the Trinity work co-operatively, not competitively, we need to re-link the creation and evangelistic commissions. The creation commission’s go forth and ‘fill the earth’ (Genesis 1:28 to Adam, cf. Genesis 9:7 to Noah, Genesis 12:1-3 to Abram) is behind the Great Commission’s ‘go’ into the world (Matthew 28:18-20 or ‘as you go’ about your daily work and life (Matthew 10:7). When Jesus says ‘all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me’ he claims dominion over all creation as the true, ultimate human³⁵ and shows us how he exercises this authority through his miracles and parables, cross and resurrection. He is “the servant King” who calls us to rule creation through love and service. “Making disciples” is making people who reflect God’s rule over every corner of creation in their various callings of life and work. As former Dutch Prime Minister, theologian and journalist Abraham Kuypers said: “There is not one square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out, ‘This is mine! This belongs to me!’”

Thirdly, those who emphasise the relational commission (frequently coming from Pentecostal traditions) rightly remind us of the importance of the Holy Spirit’s presence, calling, gifting, empowering and healing, anticipating the Kingdom’s coming. People are gifted by God’s Spirit (Eph. 4:1-13; Rom. 12:3-8) for specific tasks for others’ good (1 Cor. 14:12). The Spirit also applies the relational commission of love for God and others to our particular relational roles and responsibilities. The Holy Spirit provides the fruit of Christlike character (Gal 5:22-26) that carries over into and is developed in our life and work callings.

The Holy Spirit’s calling of all God’s gifted people makes everyone 24/7 servants or full-time ministers (1 Cor 12:5), whether consciously or unconsciously. Even Nero’s Roman state is called God’s “minister” or “servant” (Romans 13:4). We are all *kleros* or “called” (from which “clergy” derives), and all are *laos* or “people” (from which “laity” or “God’s people” derives).³⁶ Given the Spirit’s pouring out upon all believers at Pentecost (Acts 2:4, 17-18), we need to rediscover the calling of all believers, teaching/pastoring, prophetically challenging and wisely ruling/managing God’s people and creation (Jer 18:18). To affirm these gifts and callings of God’s people we need to develop forms of recognition of lay vocation in society through regular lay or marketplace commissioning services.

³⁴ Cited in R. Paul Stevens, *Doing God’s Business* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 20-21.

³⁵ H.W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 164-65.

³⁶ Clement’s First letter to the Corinthians (c. AD 96) has the first use of the clergy-laity distinction.

However, those who over-stress the Spirit's work can forget that the Spirit is the Spirit of the Word/Christ and of the Creator.³⁷ Thus they rightly pray for spiritual healing in church, but not often for the work of doctors and nurses³⁸ or architects, builders and craftspersons (Ex 35:2-3; 1 Chron. 28:11-12) in the workplace who also have God's creative gifts. But gifts of administration, craftsmanship, mercy, evangelism, political leadership and counsel etc overflow the church to bless the workplace. Volf, who comes from a Pentecostal background, argues against the traditional "additive" or top-up model of new supernatural and extraordinary spiritual gifts being added to our ordinary created talents, in favour of a more biblical, "interaction" model that sees the integral relationship between created and re-created gifts, both coming from God's creative and re-creative Spirit.³⁹

A recent debate in *LayNet* magazine revealed the difficulty many preachers and people have in associating the Spirit-centered, relational commission and the Son-centered Great Commission with the Father-centered, creational commission. A bishop wondered how a truck driver could possibly have any sense of calling, not being a professional people-person like a doctor, nurse or social worker who is supposed to love others according to the Great Commandment. Perhaps this bishop believes that driving a truck can't involve any kind of God-given gifting. However, philosopher-priest-carpenter Armand Larive notes how the Bible portrays God's Spirit as giving wisdom and skill for executing manual tasks. Consider Exodus 35:30-1 "The LORD has chosen Bezalel son of Uri... and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge (*hokmah*) in all kinds of crafts." Larive observes that Bezalel and the other craftsman exercise *hokmah*, "taking and respectfully using what the created order will allow. A goldsmith knows the malleability of his material, a farmer knows the seasons, a sailor develops an eye for the seasons and stars. It would apply also to the way a truck driver can back a big rig into a narrow alley. Such a driver has *hokmah*."⁴⁰ This is an expression of the creation commission of having responsible dominion over the earth or material reality, but the Creator Spirit (Gen 1:2, Ps 104) gives the ability to do so.

While truck driving can no doubt have many monotonous elements, it also involves skill and responsibility for safety. Recently I was moving home and was shocked to find large interstate semi-trailer arrive at my new apartment block which has a 3 ton limit on trucks entering. I warned the driver about the limit, but he insisted he knew what he was doing. With many people watching and me pretending to have nothing to do with it, I watched as the truck got stuck half-way around a very tight bend. I had images of it being permanently stuck, blocking the apartment access forever. Fortunately, while lacking wisdom for trying it in the first place, the truck-driver had the great skill to reverse the semi out, something I, who has trouble reversing a tiny

³⁷ See Gen 1:2, Ps 104, Isa 32, Ez 36-37, Rom 8 and C.J.H. Wright, *Knowing the Holy Spirit Through the Old Testament* (Oxford: Monarch, 2006), esp. 13-39.

³⁸ As Ecclesiasticus or Sirach 38:1-15 tells us. According to the Sixth of the 39 articles of the Church of England this apocryphal book is "read for example of life and instruction of manners," not to "establish any doctrine."

³⁹ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 102-5, 111-22 esp. 112. For all the great positive contributions he has made to workplace ministry I find that Os Hillman's *The 9to5 Window* (Ventura CA: Regal, 2005) chs. 8-12 still has an additive model of gifting stressing the supernatural gifts.

⁴⁰ "Vocational Fulfillment," *LayNet* (Winter 2005), 4-5 in response to Loren Mead, "Perceiving Vocation at the Margins," *LayNet* (Fall 2005) who quoted the bishop.

trailer, could only marvel at. I thanked God in a silent prayer for this man's dominion over machinery and matter. He had *hokmah*, at least over his truck.

Such work exercising dominion over material creation can be not only a matter of skill but of loving care. As the Australian cartoonist Michael Leunig said:

I watched a man making a pavement in Melbourne in a busy city street: the concrete was poured and he had his little trowel and there was traffic roaring around, there were cranes and machines going, and this man was on his hands and knees lovingly making a beautiful little corner on the kerb. That's a sort of love That man's job is important and he's a bit of a hero for doing it like that.... Love involves that as much as it involves what happens between people. It's about one's relationship between oneself and the world and its people and its creatures and its plants, its ideas.⁴¹

What Leunig calls heroic and important, Christians can see as God's calling.

Vocational Guidance: Does God Guide People into their Work and if so How?

How does a biblical view of calling apply to an individual's gifting from God? As we will see, this may or may not neatly fit a person's paid work and primary use of time, particularly in developing economies. Is vocational choice just a middle-class luxury when most people are stuck with whatever job is available (if any)? Is there a single particular calling God has for us and is it for life? These are questions of vocational guidance for which we propose some basic principles based on our preceding understanding of calling.

1. We need to first focus on God's cosmic purpose or calling to the Kingdom.

This operates on a far broader canvas than the debilitating deterministic and individualistic "dot" or "bullseye" approach of "what job is God's will for me" or "what marriage partner is God's will for me?" as if there is only one job or one possible spouse.⁴² This bigger biblical canvas for callings puts such questions in second place to our primary calling to follow Christ and "seek first his Kingdom and his justice" (Mt 6:33). Then our other basic needs will be met as well. As Robert Banks notes, "The criterion for choice and change of calling then becomes: Does it point in the direction of the Kingdom?"⁴³ Further, our calling to God's Kingdom community, not pursuing an individualistic career, sets self-fulfilment in the threefold context of service to God, loving one another and caring for God's creation. Self-fulfilment is not something to anxiously seek but more a pleasant by-product of this network of right relationships or *shalom*.

Particular, individual callings or questions of God's "will" for work, marriage etc are significant but not ultimately significant, in contrast to the ultimate significance of Christ's work and God's will for the world's salvation (1 Tim 2:4) and God's ethical will. Within these will we have great freedom to prayerfully and wisely choose (if we have a choice) optimal opportunities for ministry, knowing that a mistake will not cancel our salvation. This way provides a balanced Christian response between the

⁴¹ Caroline Jones, *An Authentic Life* (Sydney: ABC Books, 1998), 2-3.

⁴² See Garry Friesen, *Decision Making and the Will of God* (Portland OR: Multnomah, 1980), Part 2.

⁴³ *Faith Goes to Work: Reflections from the Marketplace*, (Bethesda: Alban Institute, 1992), 167.

anxiety –inducing bullseye view inspired by heavenly voices or signs and a secularised rationalism that collapses calling into just a job or career that we rationally calculate. As Os Guinness noted earlier, more important than the “what” or “where” of guidance is the “who” of our guiding Shepherd Jesus (Jn 10:11-15) and who we become in Christ, not what we do.

2. “*Freedom in limitation.*” In a time of such surfeit of choice for western middle-classes and “the options generation”⁴⁴ we need a perspective on these choices that takes account of God’s long-term providence in our lives within the specific limits each of us faces.. The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth writes wisely of “freedom in limitation.” God calls us providentially to serve him through the liberating limitations of our place in history, stage of life, gifts and opportunities. “These are the creaturely carriers and media of the voice of God Himself.”⁴⁵ Despite the crippling consumerist illusion of infinite choice we are finite creatures, bound to time and place. Like Esther in exile under the Persians, protecting her people from genocide, God may have raised us up “for such a time as this” (Esth. 4:14).

3. *A Hard Call.* What of those with little choice in extremely challenging situations? Can difficult, gruelling work, which are sometimes a human necessity, be a calling? Take for example Graeme Marriott’s story of his callings as a father of three children and foreman at CBM Waste Management.

We are a small ... company. We were into recycling but it’s not that profitable. Our attention turns to waste disposal. My job is to run the place: I organise and do some paper work. We do garbage and recycling.... There’s three guys, and we start at 3 am....I drive the compactor for half the run, and I run at the back of the truck for the other half. I’ve been doing this for six years. I process the recycling every day. ... It’s heavy manual work. There is lifting, lots of noise especially when you’re processing. Running ... steep streets is physically demanding particularly in the summer You’ve got to get going early, and that is disruptive to family life. You work all days, all weather, even public holidays. As an essential service you can’t have time off. I like the challenge of the physical aspect: how fast and efficient can we get?

But it’s pretty mindless – smashing bottles, running behind a truck.... People ask me about my work and some see me as a bum. In some way it is an end of the road job. But it is essential and people rely on you. If we went on strike, and waste started to build up, it would be a health risk. ... Recycling is more important these days, and I’m respected a bit. My daughter’s school asked me to speak to the children about recycling. These recycling issues affect us all so my role is important. I know that even if it’s sometimes hard to say God has called me to do my job.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Hugh Mackay. *Generations: Baby Boomers, their Parents & their Children* (Pan MacMillan Australia, 1997) **referring to** the then 15-30 year olds.

⁴⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, ET 1961), 634-6.

⁴⁶ “Head, Hands and Heart 1,” *Lookout* <http://www.achea.edu.au/~studfac>

Graeme has a gruelling job, but he makes the most of it, sharing the difficult aspects around, and he takes his responsibility seriously as something from the hand of God.

4. *The Need is not Necessarily the Call.* Many years ago as an adolescent I visited my cousin the night she died in hospital from a brain tumour. She was delirious and I was overwhelmed with compassion at such desperate need and wanted to be a doctor. But I was not gifted at maths and science and eventually channelled my compassion towards pastoral ministry where I was more suited and less likely to kill somebody, unless they mistook the Dr in front of my name for a medical doctor.

There are many needs and our finitude means we can only be in one place at one time so we need to pay primary attention to the needs of our “nearest” neighbours – not necessarily geographical – but those we have the gifts, resources and responsibility to meet. In this light Frederick Buechner writes: “The place God calls you to is where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”⁴⁷ God wants us each to be “a cheerful giver,” (2 Cor 9:7) aware that the gifts we can gladly give, are not our private possession, but God-given to be passed on to others.

The language of adding depth to our relational roles is also used by John Schuster.⁴⁸

Calls draw us into the depth level of whatever roles we may already have ... [They] turn the insurance policy peddlars into advisors of needed financial security, grocery store employees into health and nutrition suppliers, doctors into healers, secretaries into stewards, businesspeople into entrepreneurs, bureaucrats into civil servants, writers into dreamweavers, parents into co-creators of life.

While this may sound a bit grandiose, Schuster’s point is that awareness of God’s activity in and through our ordinary roles deepens our opportunities for extraordinary love and service.

5. *Community Discernment.* One of the major problems of the western approach to guidance is its individualism and unaccountability. We make up our own minds and say “Here I stand, I can do no other” like Luther, but without his qualification that “my conscience is captive to the word of God.” Those of a more Spirit oriented bent often hear the voices they want to hear. Luther said to them “I don’t care if you swallow the Holy Spirit feathers and all” you must convince me by Scripture, tradition and sound reason. Each of these for Luther, through the rational interpretation of Scripture in the church present and past, is a communal process. The Spirit speaks but more often to us than just me. In Acts we hear of the Holy Spirit’s guidance when Paul and Barnabas were sent on mission by the church at Antioch (Acts 13:2-3) and when the Gentiles were accepted into the then largely Jewish church without onerous Jewish laws - “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). Such corporate discernment, wrestling with one another and in mutual

⁴⁷ *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC* (Harper SanFrancisco: rev.ed , 1993) under “Calling.”

⁴⁸ *Answering Your Call: A Guide for Living Your Deepest Purpose* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., San Francisco, 2003), no p.

accountability, is a good model for our vocational discernment though there is obviously individual liberty and responsibility also.

Archbishop William Temple was right that to choose a career on selfish or individualistic grounds, without a true sense of calling, confirmed corporately, is “probably the greatest single sin any young person can commit, for it is the deliberate withdrawal from allegiance to God of the greatest part of time and strength.”⁴⁹ But the fault is as much if not more that of the Church which has left people to their own devices, without resources of corporate discernment and vocational guidance, unless they are considering ordained ministry.

6. *Called to be More – and Less*. Gregory Jones cites Gail Godwin’s *Evensong* which has a character affirm the vocation of a female Episcopal priest by saying “something’s your vocation if it keeps making more of you.”⁵⁰ It’s more than just a job but part of a “faithful, flourishing life.” While the language of passion is all-pervasive today, vocation includes, but is more than passion in the emotional sense. It is the commitment and disciplined practice of a focus for life rather than a nibbling approach to food or a channel-surfing approach to media. It is this that “keeps making more of you.” In this way vocations or callings are connected to long-term, holistic covenants in relation to our role responsibilities to our nearest neighbours as husbands and wives, parents and children, bosses and workers, rulers and citizens.

As Jones balances Godwin: “Conversely, we ought to avoid those vocations that are likely to make “less” of us, especially if in them we are likely to be ‘shrivelled’ by one or another form of sin. We can be made ‘less’ by our own temptations, by a particular mismatch between what we are doing and the gifts we have been given by God, by contingent events that overwhelm the possibilities of continuing a specific vocation, or by the corrupting practices or institutions that currently shape our vocation.”⁵¹ Godwin’s phrase helps orient us toward vocations that encourage a flourishing of life. But that phrase ‘more of you’ can be co-opted by a seductive culture of self-fulfillment... Godwin’s phrase needs to be placed next to Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s claim in *The Cost of Discipleship* that when Christ calls [someone] he bids him come and die. Bonhoeffer’s precocious gifts did not reach their full maturity, but he left us an example of someone who fulfilled his fundamental calling by following Christ, even to death. May we have the courage to die daily too in our own callings..

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49 Cited unsourced in Os Guinness, *The Call* (Nashville: Word, 1998) 47.

50 E. Gregory Jones, *Everyday Matters* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 42 citing *Evensong* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000), no page given.

51 E. Gregory Jones, *Everyday Matters* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 42 citing *Evensong* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000), no page given.