

THE DOCTRINE OF VOCATION: AM I CALLED TO THE SACRED
OR SECULAR LIFE?

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THE DOCTRINE OF VOCATION: AM I CALLED TO THE SACRED OR SECULAR LIFE?

One of the most common questions plaguing Christians in the Western church today is the question of vocation and calling. Indeed, according to a survey completed by Labouré, a Roman Catholic society dedicated to providing financial assistance to individuals pursuing religious vocation, of the 10,000 people currently discerning a vocation to the priesthood or religious life in the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, 42% have been blocked from pursuing their vocation due to outstanding debt or student loans.¹ For other career paths, the concern over vocation and calling is no different. A recent Gallup poll conducted in partnership with Western Governors University found that among 70,000 students surveyed, there was great concern to “not only to secure a good-paying job, but also to pursue a fulfilling career path, have a rewarding life and positively contribute to society.”² The same Gallup poll found that WGU students who “had a mentor during college who encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams,” had a 57% higher chance of having a career that is thriving “surpassing the national average by 18 percentage points.”³

As these two studies clearly show, concern over a good vocation and career is a high priority for many individuals in our society. Indeed, vocation and calling are at the center of who we are as human beings created in God’s image and who have been created to work and “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it...” (Gen 1:28, ESV). The goal of this paper will be to discuss and evaluate the subject of vocation, specifically in how it relates to the Christian who is attempting to discern their calling to either the sacred or secular life. With this

¹ Labouré. Accessed June 1, 2020, <https://rescuevocations.org/about/aspirant-demographics>.

² Scott Pulsipher, “Can Data Tell If Higher Ed Is Delivering on Its Promise?” Gallup (Blog), May 13, 2019, <https://www.gallup.com/education/251654/data-tell-higher-delivering-promise.aspx>.

³ Pulsipher, “Can Data Tell If Higher Ed Is Delivering on Its Promise?”

goal in mind, I will argue that the doctrine of vocation for the Christian does not come down to a separation of sacred and secular, but in fact are one and the same. This goal will be achieved in three specific ways; First, I will define the doctrine of vocation as well as define what is known as the general Christian call. Second, I will briefly consider the theology of vocation, drawing attention to specific biblical texts which will help clarify a proper biblical understanding of vocation. Third, attention will be given to the specific vocational call and if there is indeed a sacred and secular divide in the vocational life of the believer. With this method in mind, let us turn our attention to defining and understanding vocation.

Defining Vocation

Before any attempt can be made to answer the question of calling, especially as it relates to a calling to a specific career or way of life, a biblical understanding of what is meant by the term “vocation” is needed. To begin, it is helpful to define the term “vocation” itself. According to Merriam-Webster, vocation is defined in two separate ways. First, vocation is defined as “a summons or a strong inclination to a particular state or course of action, especially a divine call to the religious life.”⁴ It is this first definition that will be the one of the primary topics of our discussion throughout this paper, however a second definition is also offered which states, “the work in which a person is employed” and “the persons engaged in a particular occupation.”⁵

As a biblical understanding for vocation is sought, it is helpful to note that the second definition provided by Merriam-Webster is typically how current Western culture defines vocation. In his book on vocation Douglass Schuurman, professor of religion at St. Olaf College, notes that “the most common understanding of vocation today is the secularized one where

⁴ Merriam-Webster. Accessed June 2, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vocation>.

⁵ Merriam-Webster.

vocation refers to one's paid work."⁶ It should be noted, however, that this understanding of vocation is not wrong, it is simply the product of Western culture moving towards a more secularized society and away from a religious one. When understood in this light, Schuurman explains "'vocation' and 'vocational' are synonymous with 'career' and 'technical.'"⁷

That said, however, it is helpful to note that there is also a very distinct definition of vocation in religious life. Schuurman again is helpful here when he states "when 'vocation' does have religious connotations it usually refers to church-related activities."⁸ Indeed, as can be seen in the Labouré study noted above, the Roman Catholic Church has a clear distinction of the term "vocation" in relation to taking religious orders.⁹ In helping to make the distinction between Protestant and Roman Catholic thought, John Frame notes, "Protestantism has described these individual roles and goals as *vocations*... In the medieval period, Christians applied the term to positions in the church: priests, monks, and nuns. The Reformation broadened the term to include all believers..."¹⁰

This Reformation idea of broadening vocation to include all believers and not simply those committing to religious orders was continued in the New World through the ideals of the Puritans. According to Leland Ryken, the Puritans "spoke of two callings – a general calling and a particular calling."¹¹ For the Puritans, this particular calling bespoke of a blending of vocation as a calling from God as well as one's career or work. As Ryken notes, "a particular calling consists of the specific tasks and occupations that God places before a person in the course of

⁶ Douglas J. Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 1.

⁷ Schuurman, *Vocation*, 1.

⁸ Schuurman, *Vocation*, 1.

⁹ See "Holy Orders," in *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2012), 261-75.

¹⁰ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 312.

¹¹ Leland Ryken, "The Original Puritan Work Ethic," *Christianity Today*, accessed June 2, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-89/original-puritan-work-ethic>.

daily living. It focuses on, but is not limited to, the work that a person does for a livelihood.”¹² Continuing with the idea that the Puritan view was a blending of the definitions of vocation, Ryken states, “since God is the one who calls people to their work, the worker becomes a steward who serves God... the Puritan view that God calls all workers to their tasks in the world dignifies all legitimate kinds of work.”¹³ Now that we have a clear definition of vocation as it is understood in the Western mind, it is the Puritan understanding of a general call, or the Christian “call,” that deserves further consideration before an argument can be made for a particular career calling.

The Christian Call

While the term “vocation” is used in both secular and religious life, A.J. Conyers helpfully notes that the word vocation is “rooted in the Latin *vocatio*, meaning ‘call’”¹⁴ The term “calling” is one that is familiar in many churches and among Christians within the United States today. Although this term may be a familiar one, for Protestants the term “calling” has in many ways taken on the same secularized meaning that “vocation” has within Western culture. Unlike the secular culture, however, Schuurman states “the term ‘calling,’ synonymous with ‘vocation’ for much of the Protestant tradition, today seems less secularized and restricted to paid work than the term ‘vocation.’”¹⁵ Essentially, in the Protestant mind, “calling” refers to one’s career, one’s work, and one’s direction in life.

However, one may be better served to hold a more nuanced definition of calling much like the Puritans did. As noted above, the Puritans held to a general call and a particular call. Ryken states, “the general calling is the same for everyone and consists of a call to conversion

¹² Ryken, “The Original Puritan Work Ethic.”

¹³ Ryken, “The Original Puritan Work Ethic.”

¹⁴ A.J. Conyers, *The Listening Heart: Vocation and the Crisis of Modern Culture* (Dallas, TX: Spence Publishing, 2006), 12.

¹⁵ Schuurman, *Vocation*, 2.

and godliness.”¹⁶ German pastor, theologian, and activist Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood the need for the distinction between calling to a vocation and the call to faith. He stated, “in the encounter with Jesus Christ, man hears the call of God and in it the calling to life in the fellowship of Jesus Christ.”¹⁷ Stating it more profoundly in another work, Bonhoeffer said simply, “when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”¹⁸ Put simply, the general call is the calling of Christ on the individual for the purpose of salvation.

Is there a need for such a nuanced distinction between the Christian call to salvation and the call to a particular career or vocation? In a word, yes. The reason for the distinction here should be clear: every Christian is called by Christ to faith even though not every Christian is called to the same career. While the argument will be made below that there is no distinction for the believer between the sacred and secular, it is helpful to have a clear understanding between the general call to salvation and the particular call to vocation. However, before this argument can be made, a look at key biblical texts and a brief review of a theology of vocation is needed. It is to this topic that we now turn.

Theology of Vocation

As Christians, the best place with which to begin any consideration for our lives is the Scriptures themselves. It is our strong desire to know what God’s will for our lives are, what direction we should take when making decisions, and how to approach life altering choices. When it comes to the issue of choosing a career, our approach should be no different. Therefore, as we approach the Scriptures, we must first consider how God has “called” a person, people, or nation to himself.

¹⁶ Ryken, “The Original Puritan Work Ethic.”

¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1955), 250.

¹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 89.

In a brief survey of the Old Testament, it can be clearly seen that God calls individuals as well as a particular people group. As the late Henlee Barnette, professor of Christian ethics at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, states that in the Old Testament, “both the individual and the nation are called of God.”¹⁹ God calls Noah when he sees the wickedness of mankind spreading on the earth (Gen 6:8). God’s call of Abram was not only the call of an individual, but also for the express purpose of making a covenant with Abram and his descendants (Gen 12:1-3). Due to this covenant relationship with the descendants of Abraham, Barnette notes, “Israel collectively is called into a covenant relationship, which imposes upon the people the commandments of God.”²⁰ This same call is constantly extended to the people of Israel throughout the Old Testament. However, as Barnette helpfully reminds us, “the nation failed to keep the covenantal relationship and to participate obediently in God’s redemptive purpose in history.”²¹ This failure on the part of the nation of Israel leads ultimately to God’s promised new covenant noted in Jeremiah 31:31-34 which directs our attention to calling in the New Testament.

In the New Testament, calling has a similar connotation that it carries in the Old, but with a new caveat. Much like the Old Testament call to a covenantal relationship with God, the Christian also receives a closer understanding of a call to a particular way of life and a way of living. Barnette helpfully notes here that the Greek use of the words for “call” are similar to that of the Puritan “general call” noted above when he states, “they refer solely to the call of God to salvation.”²² A few examples of this salvific call can be seen in Rom 8:30, Eph 2:8-9, and 2 Tim 1:9. However, in the New Testament, there is also a new type of calling placed upon God’s covenant people, which falls within our discussion of vocation. This call has upon it the call of the community itself and how each Christian plays a vital role within the community. This is a

¹⁹ Henlee Barnette, *Has God Called You?* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1969), 13.

²⁰ Barnette, *Has God Called You?*, 13.

²¹ Barnette, *Has God Called You?*, 14.

²² Barnette, *Has God Called You?*, 15.

key distinction to understand before discussing whether there is a calling from God to the sacred or secular life, because it is in understanding this vital theological point that helps us in answering our primary question. Conyers states, “the idea of ‘vocation’ – of being ‘called’ is at first commonplace until one actually begins to think what an extraordinary thing is suggested by such language.”²³ Let us consider two particular areas in which the Christian individual receives a communal call in this new covenant life.

First, there is a specific call to a holy life. As has been discussed above, there was an individual and communal call in the Old Testament that has been carried over in the New in many ways. This communal call, however, is seen specifically in the church. Barnette helpfully notes, “since the old Israel failed to carry out God’s purpose in history, he called into being a new people for this mission.”²⁴ Barnette continues to helpfully explain that just as God needed individuals for various tasks in the old Israel, he also needs individuals in the new Israel. Therefore, we see Jesus calling individuals to follow him and to share within his mission and ministry. This, Barnette states, “is consistently a call to the Christian life.”²⁵ This Christian life is a life designed to be holy and to be lived out within the community of others who have been called to the holy, Christian life.

Second, there is a calling on all believers not only to a holy life, but to a royal priesthood. As the Apostle Peter states in 1 Pet 2:9, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light.” Again, Barnette is helpful here when he notes that this royal priesthood has two dimensions, one vertical and one horizontal. He states, “the aspect of the priesthood which relates directly to God is its vertical dimension. As a member of the royal priesthood... each Christian is a consecrated

²³ Conyers, *The Listening Heart*, 10.

²⁴ Barnette, *Has God Called You?*, 16.

²⁵ Barnette, *Has God Called You?*, 16.

priest,” whereas the horizontal dimension “involves being a minister to one’s neighbor...counseling with them... and witness to the gospel.”²⁶ This called, holy, Christian life is not only a life that is to be lived among other called, holy, Christian individuals, but in such a way where each Christian is to act as priest for one another. As can be clearly seen by this one simple verse, the Christian life is a communal life and one “with the vocation to ‘declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.’”²⁷

Through our discussion of the definition of vocation from both the secular and the sacred communities, as well as an understanding of a definition of the Christian call to salvation, we have been able to briefly touch on key biblical texts to help clarify vocation from a biblical perspective. Now that we have a good understanding that the Christian call to salvation also comes with a Christian call to the community as a people called to a holy life and to a royal priesthood, attention can be given to the question of a specific vocational calling. Is there a call on the Christian life to a particular career path? Is there a divide between the sacred and the secular? It is to these questions that we now turn.

Vocational Calling

As has been addressed above, vocation and calling are a central part of what it means to be human. Once we are part of the Christian community through the general call of God to salvation, the question of God’s will and design in our lives for our career and vocation also becomes a central part of how we direct our lives and make our choices. Therefore, the questions that must be asked are: Does God call us to work? If so, does God call us to a particular career? Much like we did above, let us turn to the Scriptures and address each of these questions in turn.

²⁶ Barnette, *Has God Called You?*, 17.

²⁷ Barnette, *Has God Called You?*, 16.

The Call to Work

With a brief survey of the Scriptures, there can be no denying that there is a calling from God to humanity to work. This can be clearly seen within the first few pages of Scripture. In Gen 1:27-28 and again in Gen 2:15, God mandates to Adam and Eve to not only “be fruitful and multiply,” but to also “fill the earth, subdue it and have dominion...” After the creation of man, God places Adam in the garden and commands him in Gen 2:15 to “work it and keep it.” This same work mandate is repeatedly mentioned throughout Genesis, most notably after the Flood when God gives this work mandate to Noah and his family in Gen 9:1. This call to work is not only found in the Old Testament, but also within the New Testament. Consider the Apostle Paul’s statement in 2 Thessalonians 3:10 when speaking on the importance of the mandate from God to work when he says, “if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.”

The question of a calling from God to work does not only extend to the act of working itself, but also to the purpose of work. Consider briefly two other passages, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament, that helpfully defines for Christians that the purpose of work is for the care of the family. Looking first at the Old Testament in Proverbs 13:22, Solomon notes “A good man leaves an inheritance to his children’s children...” While brief, it can be noted here that an important aspect caring for family is to ensure that they are not left poor and destitute. At the same time, however, the whole chiastic structure of Proverbs 13:22-25 deals with the issue of work as care for the family. As Duane Garrett notes, “All people desire to leave a good heritage for their children, and vv.22,24 speak, respectively of providing for the material and moral needs of one’s descendants. Proverbs regularly keeps these two in balance. It emphasizes the need for moral training without depreciating the physical needs of family life.”²⁸

Moving on to the New Testament, consider once again the Apostle Paul’s words to Timothy in 1 Tim 5:8 when he states, “But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an

²⁸ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 1993), 123.

unbeliever.” These are harsh words from Paul, but ones that also cause many to stop and take notice. Philip Towner notes that Paul’s meaning here “makes care for family an outworking of genuine faith.”²⁹ Similarly, fourth century pastor and theologian, John Chrysostom notes that “the law of God and of nature is violated by him who does not provide for his own family.”³⁰

With these brief examples, the question of a call from God for work can be answered with an emphatic yes. God has called us to work in his work mandate found in the book of Genesis, and God has shown us in 2 Thessalonians that we are to work if we desire to eat. It is also noted that this call to work also extends to the purpose of work, which is the proper care for one’s family as shown in both Proverbs and 1 Timothy. Now that the question of God’s call for work has been answered, let us now consider the question of calling to a particular career.

The Call to Vocation

In our efforts to define and understand the term “vocation” it was noted that many see a dichotomy between one’s Christian life and one’s vocation. To answer this second question of the vocational call, especially as we consider the question of a sacred or secular divide, it is imperative that a holistic approach to the Christian life be undertaken. Vocation and calling need not be separated for the believer. Schuurman notes that the use of the terms “vocation” and “calling,” “both reflect and contribute to the fact that many Christians fail to see most of their lives in terms of vocation.”³¹ How can we understand this, then, when it comes to the career paths that we choose? This question can be answered, not only by considering the Scriptures, but also by taking a holistic approach to the Christian life. Here again, the Apostle Peter reminds his

²⁹ Philip Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, accessed June 4, 2020, <https://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.sbts.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1058520>.

³⁰ Peter J. Gorday, *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 317.

³¹ Schuurman, *Vocation*, 3.

readers that, as Barnett notes, our ultimate Christian vocation is to “declare the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”³²

As one begins to ask the question of God’s call towards a particular career path and to search the Scriptures for an answer, they would easily note that God does indeed call some to particular kinds of work. Note specifically Oholiab and Bezalel in Exodus 31 who were both called by name for the purpose of building the Tabernacle. Also note that Paul was “made a minister” (Eph 3:7) and that Barnabas and Saul were both set apart for the work that God called them (Acts 13:2). Later in the book of Acts we see again that Paul, now with Timothy, were set apart to preach in Macedonia (Acts 16:10). Therefore, we can conclude that some are indeed set apart by God for a particular vocation.

However, at the same time, we also have no clear evidence in Scripture that God calls individuals to a particular career path outside of the influence of the Christian vocational life. Allow me to explain in two ways. First, in every example given above each individual was called for the vocational Christian purpose of “declaring the excellencies of him,” (1 Pet 2:9). Working in conjunction with the Great Commission mandate given by Christ in Matt 28:19-20 and Acts 1:8, all Christians are called to the vocation of the proclamation of the Gospel. Even in the examples of Oholiab and Bezalel in Exodus, the work of both of these men was for the express purpose of the glory of God. Second, one’s career may simply be determined by skill, knowledge, and opportunity. Consider again the Puritans and their understanding of the gift of work. As Ryken notes, “the Puritan view that God calls all workers to their tasks in the world dignifies all legitimate kinds of work.”³³ Schuurman is again helpful here when he notes that some may not receive a burning bush or heavenly courtroom type call, but “for the vast majority

³² Barnette, *Has God Called You?*, 16.

³³ Ryken, “The Original Puritan Work Ethic.”

of Christians, God’s callings are discerned quietly, when the heart of faith joins opportunities and gifts with the needs of others.”³⁴

With these examples and with this understanding, we can conclude that all aspects of the Christian life are to be holy. There is not, and should never be, a divide between the sacred and the secular in the life of the Christian because every aspect of the life of the Christian is to be sacred. As Schuurman notes, “vocation infuses all mundane activities – domestic, economic, political, educational, and cultural – with a *religious significance*...”³⁵ Have I been called to the sacred or the secular life? The answer here is an emphatic “yes.” As a Christian seeks to live faithfully within the communal life of the church, their whole life, including their career, is a vocational calling in the Kingdom of God. While a Christian may be seeking the answer to the question of career, that answer can be clearly discerned through the guidance of God, with the help of the Christian community, while faithfully living out our vocational calling to “declare the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9).

Conclusion

As has been clearly shown throughout this paper, the question of the Christian’s call to a vocation within the sacred or the secular life is that all Christians are called very clearly to both because both are one and the same for the believer. If we understand vocation not only as the means by which we make a living and put food on the table, but also the means by which we provide for our families, live out the work mandate found in Scripture, and proclaim the Gospel, then the career for which we choose by which to meet these requirements makes little difference. Yes, Christians are called to work, and that work may be a math teacher, mechanic, nurse, or even the military. However, Christians are called to Christ first and foremost. Once vocation is seen as a way of life, lived faithfully within the Christian community, the question no longer

³⁴ Schuurman, *Vocation*, 4.

³⁵ Schuurman, *Vocation*, 5.

becomes whether I am called to sacred or secular, but rather “what does the Lord require of you? To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

*Honor Code: I have written this paper exclusively for 29250. If I received any edited or proofreading advice, I have made all such corrections myself. I have also documented each paraphrase, direct quotation, and borrowed idea in compliance with the Turabian and SBTS style manuals.

APPENDIX

1. Main Arguments

- a. There are at least two main arguments on Vocation. The first is vocation is nothing more than the job that pays you money. Put simply, vocation and career are interchangeable.
- b. The second is that vocation is a way of life, a calling, a purpose. This argument has more intentional religious meaning.

2. Facts and Trends

- a. According to a study released by Barna in October 2018, Christian workers set the bar when it comes to higher standards in the workplace. It seems that Christians, for the most part, take Jesus at his word when he calls us to be “salt and light” in Matthew 5:13-16. Interestingly, according to Barna, 63% of believers feel guided by a sense of humility and 53% feel guided by service. When considering the high drive, “climb the ladder” mentality in many workplaces, this is fascinating. It is also quite interesting that among generational groups, Christian Millennials are the most likely to say that it’s important for Christians to mold the culture (40% compared to 33% of Baby Boomers).
- b. This study can be found here: <https://www.barna.com/research/faith-workplace>

3. In the News

- a. In reflecting on the vocation to family, Christianity Today has a helpful article regarding a recent book released by the provost of Patrick Henry College. In this work, the author notes Martin Luther’s ideals of “loving and serving our neighbor,

and to his view of the family as a ‘holy order’ unto itself.” The article may be found here: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/march/family-calling.html>

- b. Another helpful piece regarding our vocation is found not only in an article, but in the whole October 2018 issue of Christianity Today magazine. The editor’s note helps describe the issue and the discussion on vocation, as well as provide a link to the downloadable issue of the magazine. The editor’s note can be found here: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/october/our-october-issue-rethinking-vocation.html>

4. Key Texts

- a. Genesis 1:28; 2:15 – These verses are key as they give us a very early example of a “work mandate” from God to mankind. Part of our vocation in God’s kingdom is to care for the earth, keep it, and have dominion over creation.
- b. 1 Timothy 5:8 – This key passage from the New Testament simply helps to give us a quick biblical understanding of the necessity of caring for one’s family through the act of provision and work. In many ways, this is a Gospel extension of the work mandate found in the Genesis texts above. Not only are we to have dominion over the earth, but now because of sin and the Fall, it is necessary that an aspect of that dominion be provision for our family’s needs.

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