Callings

TWENTY CENTURIES

OF CHRISTIAN WISDOM

ON VOCATION

edited by

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In memory of
Carl H. Placher
1903-1966

pears in *Summoning*, but that book is nothing like a continuation of this one. Truth is, the last fifty years include so many important trends — including changes in Catholic thought after Vatican II and a greater inclusion of the voices of women and people of color — that attempting to represent them would have vastly lengthened an already long book and given it a historically unbalanced shape. So it stops well short of the present.

Its ending point is not this book's only limitation. For a range of times, places, and traditions I could not find readings that seemed accessible to contemporary readers or could not secure the permission of copyright holders for the texts I wanted to use; no doubt the fault often lay with my not knowing where to look. But I decided my first responsibility was to find texts from the history of Christianity that would get people today thinking about vocation, even if that meant giving too much attention to periods where I could find a number of fascinating pieces and not enough attention to periods where I feared the texts I located would have had only historical interest. I have tried to gather texts with my likely audience in mind, an audience more apt to be thinking about choosing a profession than, for instance, surviving a famine. For millions of people, I realize, surviving famine is a more pressing concern, but they are an unlikely audience for a book like this one — whose audience, however, may include people with gifts that could someday improve the world's prosperity and justice.

Terry Archambeault, Dorothy Bass, Mike Eikenberry, Amy Huffaker, Wayne Lewis, Nick Myers, Elly Schroeder, Martha Schwehn, and Anne Sutherland provided a most helpful test audience. Rich conversation with Lewis Galloway and the Lake Fellows and other young staff members of Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis helped me rethink some important issues. Debbie Polley was, as always, the ideal interlibrary-loan librarian.

I could not have finished without the help of Nicholas Myers, a gifted Wabash student and my research assistant for the project. He not only did most of the work but was the first and most helpful reader of everything I wrote.

My father got his first full-time job when he was eighteen, teaching all eight grades in a one-room schoolhouse. During the rest of his career, he at various times taught everything from kindergarten to graduate school, and he thereby taught me, along with much else, what it means to have a vocation as a teacher. So this book is dedicated to his memory.

Feast of Ignatius of Antioch, Bishop and Martyr W.C.P.

Introduction

I don't know Who — or what — put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone — or Something — and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.[1]

DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD
Secretary-General, United Nations, 1953-1961

"What are you called to do with your life?" "Do you have a vocation?" Put like that, these may seem strange questions, not the sort of thing we would ordinarily ask. We may not even be sure what they mean. Yet many of us worry about finding a direction or purpose or meaning for our lives. We wonder if the bits and pieces of our struggles, disappointments, and successes will add up to a significant whole. "Call" and "vocation" are categories the Christian tradition has long used to address such issues.

"Vocation" is just a Latin word for "calling" — the two words are more or less interchangeable. To tell the truth, neither one has a clear definition these days. When I was in high school, "vocational education" meant courses in auto shop and typing, for people who weren't going on to college.

1. Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, trans. Leif Sjoberg and W. H. Auden (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 205.

"Vocation," I suppose, just meant "a job," and so these were classes for people going straight from twelfth grade to full-time work.

By contrast, people preparing for ministry or priesthood often get asked if they have "a call." For some, it's an embarrassing question. They think that the pastorate or priesthood may be what they're supposed to do with their lives, but that word "call" suggests some kind of voice from heaven that corresponds to nothing in their experience. Perhaps it evokes memories of an old Bill Cosby routine about Noah's ark, in which a deep bass voice calls out from above, "NOAH! NOAH! THIS IS THE LORD, NOAH!" Cosby, a nervous grin on his face, looks upwards and says, "Yeeeah! Riiiight!"

Is that what it means to have God call you? Could most of us imagine such a strange event happening to us?

Down the centuries, Christians have looked for definitions of "vocation" somewhere between the trivial sense of "just a job" and the hard-to-believe image of a miraculous voice from heaven. *Central to the many Christian interpretations of vocation is the idea that there is something — my vocation or calling — God has called me to do with my life, and my life has meaning and purpose at least in part because I am fulfilling my calling.*

On much else concerning vocation, Christians have regularly disagreed. They have debated questions like these:

- Is what God wants me to do simply that I should live as a Christian? Or is my job my vocation? Or does my calling have at least as much to do with being a spouse, a parent, a good citizen, or something else?
- How do I know what I'm called to do?
- Is there one right answer to the question of my calling?
- Are there jobs it is wrong for a Christian to do?
- Can I make a mistake, and not do what God has called me to do? If so, what are the consequences?
- Can my vocation change?
- Can those who do not believe in God have vocations? Can there be a calling without someone who calls?

The answers to such questions have remained in dispute, and the following pages record some of the disputes. Christians will read them looking for what their own tradition has to say about vocations; non-Christians may also find it helpful to explore, by way of comparison with their own tradition or untraditional searches, how Christians have thought about issues of concern to any human being.

Amid all the controversies Christianity has preserved the fundamental idea that our lives count for something because God has a direction in mind for them. I recently heard the pastor of one of the wealthiest congregations in America addressing a class of graduating college students. "By nearly all the criteria by which our culture measures success," he said, "most of my congregation is spectacularly successful. They make more money than they know how to spend. They have the most prestigious job titles. You read many of their names in newspapers and magazines — they're famous. But as their pastor I know how many of them are *desperately* unhappy." Therefore he warned those graduating seniors: "Be careful about following the path to 'success.' You can arrive at the goal and find only emptiness."

If the God who made us has figured out something we are supposed to do, however — something that fits how we were made, so that doing it will enable us to glorify God, serve others, and be most richly ourselves — then life stops seeming so empty: my story has meaning as part of a larger story ultimately shaped by God.

But how can we discern such a call? To the occasional saint, the call apparently does come as a voice from heaven, but most people figure out, usually as part of a community, how God is calling them through prayer and meditation, inward reflection on their own abilities and desires, and looking out at the world around them and its needs. God calls you, the contemporary preacher and novelist Frederick Buechner has written, to "the kind of work (a) that you need most to do, and (b) that the world most needs to have done. . . . The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."[2] To believe that a wise and good God is in charge of things implies that there is a fit between things that need doing and the person I am meant to be. Finding such a fit, I find my calling.

Looking back to the wisdom of the Christian tradition can help us think about these issues better. The past does not always have the right answers, but its answers are often at least *different* from those of the present, and the differences cause us to question our own previously unexamined assumptions. Why do we think X when people used to think Y? After traveling in other countries, we come back to our own with new questions. But the past too is a different country, and, voyaging in it, we gain richer perspectives on our own time.

But great Christian thinkers can offer us more than just interesting alternatives. The twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth (a selection from

2. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 95.

whose work appears at the end of this volume) once explained that he read Paul's letters in the New Testament primarily because "Paul knows of God what most of us do not know, and his letters enable us to know what he knew."[3] Many of the saints and teachers quoted in this book knew things about Christian vocation that most of us do not know. Reading selections from them can help us know what they knew. In all manner of ways — on social equality or on the role of women, for instance — many of them were narrow-minded or just wrong. But on how to follow our callings, they have something to teach us.

What Does the Bible Say?

Christians usually look for answers to our questions about faith and life first by turning to the Bible. But Scripture does not provide a clear, straightforward account when it comes to questions about vocation. Right at the start, for instance, if offers two very different pictures of the meaning of human work. In Genesis the Lord puts Adam in the midst of a beautiful garden "to till and keep it" (Gen. 2:15). Even in a good creation there is work to be done, and human beings are to find meaning and fulfillment in serving God's pleasure by doing it. In contrast, after Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, work comes as punishment: Adam will now eat only "in toil" and "by the sweat of your face" (Gen. 3:17, 19). It distorts the biblical message to take either one of these stories by itself and ignore the other. This complexity in the Bible, moreover, parallels a complexity we encounter in our own experience — work can be both blessing and curse, the task that fulfills us and gives our lives meaning in the service of God or the burdensome job we endure to put food on the table for our families.[4]

More generally, when the Bible talks about "call" or "vocation," it characteristically means a call to faith or to do a special task in God's service. In the Old Testament, God calls the first Israelites, the prophets, and rulers to do his will. In the New Testament the word *klēsis* ("calling," from the Greek verb *kaleō*, "to call," used eleven times, mostly in letters by Paul or authors in-

3. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 11.

4. "Man's life is built up every day from work, from work it derives its specific dignity, but at the same time work contains the unceasing measure of human toil and suffering." John Paul II, *Laborem exercens: On Human Work* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1981), 3.

fluenced by him) consistently refers to God's call to a life of faith.[5] Paul assures the Thessalonians, "We always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call" (2 Thess. 1:11). Reminding the Corinthians that God makes use of foolishness and weakness, he writes, "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1 Cor. 1:26). In both cases the "call" was to come, be a Christian.

Some scholars therefore argue that the initial call to faith or calls to a special mission are the *only* biblically warranted meanings of the word "call." But it is always dangerous to argue that something did not exist just because the historical record does not mention it. The Bible, after all, focuses on the stories of people for whom God had a special task, not the more "typical" farmers or potters, husbands or wives, or parents, so it is hard to be sure whether the biblical authors would have thought of their more ordinary roles in life as callings. Colossians insists, "whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters" (Col. 3:23). This passage does not use the word "call," but it certainly invites Christians to think of any task as work done in the Lord's service. Here, as on other issues, the Bible gives us complex answers, and, in trying to understand them, it makes sense to ask how wise Christians down the centuries have interpreted them and understood what Christian faith means by vocation or calling.

Four Historical Periods

The ways in which Christians think about vocation have changed radically, in part because society has changed. For example, most of us in prosperous societies today have many choices of careers, but in most times and places the vast majority of people have had few options. A peasant's son became a peasant; a goldsmith's son joined the goldsmiths' guild. Daughters had even fewer choices. Even at the top of society, in the Middle Ages the king's eldest son became king, the next perhaps a bishop, the third likely joined the army, and the king's daughters were married off to strengthen key alliances. There could be interesting exceptions, but for most people it just wouldn't have made sense to ask, "What are the career choices you are considering?" So whatever "vocation" meant, it did not usually mean choice of jobs.

5. Karlfried Froehlich, "Luther on Vocation," in *Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 123.

Any broad categories oversimplify, but there are roughly four broad periods in Christian history when "calling" has had different meanings. Even the words used sometimes mark the differences.

Calling to Christian Life in the Early Church

For the first several hundred years of Christianity, Christians were a minority, rapidly growing in size but often at risk. Many Christians joined the church as adults, and their decision often meant a break from family and previous way of life. Their response to their call (in Greek, *klēsis*) made them automatically outsiders to most facets of society, uncomfortable with its standard forms of entertainment, unable to share much of its social life. Persecution of Christians was sporadic and usually localized, but in the Roman Empire, where most Christians lived, refusal to perform the sacrifices of the imperial cult was technically illegal. Even if the risk was usually small, being a Christian meant the possibility of arrest, torture, and death. Thus the fundamental vocational questions for Christians or potential Christians were initially, first, should I be a Christian? and, second, how public should I be about my Christian faith?

In the fourth century, after the Emperor Constantine became a Christian, Christians (still for some time a minority in the Empire) faced a different problem. Christian faith no longer risked torture; it could even provide a convenient way to get ahead in society. New converts flooded into the church. How could Christians preserve a sense that Christianity involved a cost, took a risk? What were Christians called to do when it seemed pretty easy just to be a Christian? Some of them went to the desert to be nuns and monks, and found their callings in lives of radical self-denial that preserved the dramatic challenge of Christianity.

Religious Vocations in the Middle Ages

For roughly a thousand years in the Middle Ages, by contrast to the situation of the early church, the vast majority of Christians grew up in the church, surrounded by other Christians. Whether to be a Christian was scarcely a real issue for them. But what kind of Christian should they be? Some felt called to be priests, monks, nuns, or friars. Indeed, for medieval Christians "having a vocation" (in Latin, *vocatio*) meant almost exclusively joining the priesthood or some monastic order. Thus the central vocational

choice for Christians was — should I stay a part of my family, marrying, having children; or choose the priesthood or the "religious" life in a convent or a monastery or as a wandering friar ("religious" usually meant "monastic")?

The Reformation and Seeing Every Job as a Vocation

Around 1500, however, many European ideas about vocation began to change, for both secular and religious reasons. On the secular side, the increasing complexity of society offered many people more choices. A peasant could run off to a rapidly growing city and find a new job. Someone with a bit of money could invest it in looms to produce cloth or a ship to go off on a trading expedition and grow rich off the profits. The adventurous and the desperate could set off for a new life in the Americas. On the religious side, even before the Reformation, adherents of the "New Devout" and other such groups were experimenting with ways to live a life particularly dedicated to their faith while holding a secular job or getting married. "We are not Religious [i.e., not nuns or monks]," one wrote, "but we mean to live in the world religiously."[6]

With Protestants, traditional categories underwent even more radical transformation. Martin Luther proclaimed "the priesthood of all believers" and, like most other Protestant pastors, got married. Thus among Protestants, everyone was a priest, and pastors increasingly lived more like everyone else. One could be called to a life of preaching, but alternatively to government, commerce, crafts, farming, or anything else — and preaching was as compatible with marriage as was any other calling.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul had written that Christians should remain uncircumcised if they had not already been circumcised and, if they were slaves, worry about how to be a good Christian as a slave rather than try to gain their freedom. He summarized his argument by declaring, "Let each of you remain in the *klēsis* in which you were called" (1 Cor. 7:20). In his German translation of the Bible, Luther at that point translated *klēsis* as *Beruf*, the ordinary German word for an occupation. (A standard German application form would say, *Name, Vorname, Beruf* — Last Name, First Name, Occupation.) Thus for Luther your "calling" was first of all your job (though he acknowledged that marriage and parenthood were also callings).

6. *De coercendis inconstancie filii*, quoted in Francis Oakley, *The Western Church in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 131.

Most Protestants followed Luther's example. "Our savior Christ was a carpenter," the seventeenth-century English Puritan Thomas Becon reminded his readers. "His apostles were fishermen. St. Paul was a tentmaker." Such were their initial callings or vocations.[7] Where Luther emphasized remaining in the calling to which you were called, his successors opened up the possibility that a good Christian might change callings during the course of life. But the basic idea remained: your job was your vocation, and thus everyone, not just priests, nuns, and monks, was called by God to their particular work.

Vocations in a Post-Christian Age

In the last two centuries, patterns of thinking about Christian vocation have continued to change. Since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, Catholic thought has shared the previously Protestant idea that any job can be a vocation. In more economically advanced countries, at least, most people have lots of choices of job or career. Even the "normal" pattern of a family — father and mother married for a lifetime, several children — is no longer the way most people live. New options in work and family life offer great freedom, but they also impose significant burdens. "What does God want me to do with my life?" becomes an even harder question.

Moreover, many people grow more nervous about identifying "vocation" with "job" or "career." An idea that seemed liberating to many of Luther's contemporaries has come to seem to some more like a burden. Furthermore, even when we have learned to dismiss many of the ideas of Karl Marx, we can recognize that he had some valid points when he talked about "alienated labor" in the modern world. The shoemaker of several hundred years ago made shoes for friends and neighbors, and brought all the skills of a craft to making them well. The modern assembly-line worker too often anonymously adds a particular bolt to a product for an unknown customer, a task in which one cannot really excel. The work does not seem to belong to the worker. It is hard to feel pride in one's work in such an "alienated" situation, and thus somehow also hard to feel "called" to such a job. Nor is the problem confined to factory laborers. Lawyers and businessmen working without ever meeting their clients, accountants moving money around to fit

7. Thomas Becon, "Thomas Becon Catechism," in *Works* (Cambridge: The Parker Society, 1844), 1:398; quoted in Paul Marshall, *A Kind of Life Imposed on Man: Vocation and Social Order from Tyndale to Locke* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 34.

the rules of tax law, and many others may feel just as alienated in their work.[8]

Many of us today also live much of our lives after retiring from our "job." We are apt these days to be more aware of the severely disabled and others who cannot hold a job at all. Does someone without a job not have a calling and thus not have a meaningful life? At a different extreme, some careers seem so to dominate people's lives as to leave us worrying if the idea of *job* as vocation is not a danger to our roles as spouses, parents, free creatures of God. Should our jobs consume our whole lives?

For these reasons and others, some contemporary theologians have grown suspicious of the very idea of "vocation." In recent years many Christians in Europe and North America have also come to feel — perhaps this is true for the first time since Christianity's first few centuries — that they do not live in a Christian society. Hence, some writers talk about our time as "post-Christian." It is not just that our neighbors may be Muslim or Hindu or atheist or vaguely "spiritual" but not Christian. The values of our culture seem to have so much to do with acquiring the lifestyles of the rich and famous. Advertising surrounds us with images of sexual pleasure and material wealth. "What is God calling me to do?" or "How can I pick up my cross and follow Jesus?" — these seem ever stranger questions. Trying to live as a Christian pushes upstream against the dominant values around us. We do not face the threat of martyrdom, but it is possible to see a connection between our time and the earliest centuries of Christianity, when Christians were outsiders in a world dominated by non-Christian values and assumptions. *Simply living as Christians* could be our calling too.

Learning from the Past

One reason to read passages on vocation from the history of Christianity is thus to encounter a range of different options. For Christians "vocation" does not have to mean "converting to Christianity" or "becoming a monk" or "finding a job" — it does not have to mean *any* one thing. The study of history frees us up by offering a wide range of ways in which past Christians have found that God was calling them, so that we do not feel that following the Christian tradition leaves us only one choice.

Beneath all these variations — from the *klēsis* to a Christian life in the

8. See William F. May, *Beleaguered Rulers: The Public Obligation of the Professional* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

early church, to the *vocatio* to a religious life in the Middle Ages, to Luther's *Beruf* and beyond — Christians in all times and places have struggled to figure out, "Is there something God wants me to do with my life? What is it? How can I be sure?" Yet a few other differences between past and present are also worth noting.

The most dramatic contrast to emerge when reading texts from past times about human roles probably concerns gender. In nearly all of Christian history, vocational choices for men and women were radically different. It would be absurd to try to disguise the discrimination against women taken for granted in many of the texts gathered here. A generation of feminist scholarship has made far more women's voices from the past accessible to us, but the record still too often presents a story *of* men, told *by* men. Sometimes we can just generalize what an earlier generation said about men to all of us. Sometimes interesting questions arise about whether such a generalization works. Sometimes we cannot read a passage without reflecting on the pain suffered by generations of women.

Other differences in past texts challenge present assumptions. The very claim that there is something God wants me to do with my life, for instance, threatens many contemporary definitions of freedom. Surely I can do whatever I want with my life, and the choice is mine. Much of the Christian tradition, however, has argued that that vision of life as a sea of infinite choices is more like slavery than freedom. If "freedom" means that every choice is open, and none is the wrong answer, then my choices cease to have any larger meaning. The direction of my life can be shaped by the pervasive siren calls of consumer culture, or by my own quest for immediate satisfaction. Either way, the advent of next year's fashions or the boredom I find in the pleasures of the moment leaves me hungry for something else, a cycle of hunger always unfulfilled.

Maybe, however, "freedom" means something different. What excitement to find that there is some right answer for what to do with my life, some place in the puzzle where my piece fits snugly and exactly! The Book of Common Prayer speaks of that God "whose service is perfect freedom."[9] When we find the match between our joy and the world's need, the place God wants us to be, it does feel more like liberation than imprisonment.

I sense just now, perhaps particularly in the generation of my students, a hunger for such liberation. I have long suspected that most young Christians are more willing to be challenged than their churches are to challenge them.

9. "Collect for Peace," in *Book of Common Prayer, Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), 17.

We are so concerned to make Christianity seem easy that we fail to notice that maybe young people are not looking for an easy Christianity. Assembling the readings at the beginning of this book, I was worried about including martyrdom stories, or stories of the lives of Christians who gave away everything they had. Might it all seem too extreme? I was reassured not only by the hunger I sensed in my students for a challenge but also by the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., when he was accused of being an extremist: "Was not Jesus an extremist in love? . . . Was not Amos an extremist for justice? . . . Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ?"[10] Christian faith is not (not always? not usually?) a call to caution and moderation.

Our hearts are restless, Augustine said so long ago, until they find their rest in God. We accumulate worldly recognition and material goods, but they leave us unsatisfied. The stories of our lives come to seem pointless if they are not part of some larger story. And so it is that we search for what God is calling us to do.

10. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 297.