

II. The Place of Work in the Divine Economy: God as Vocational Director and Model

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Few Christians see their daily work as directly connected to the calling and purposes of God. Those who do see a relationship often have only a partial awareness of the way the two are linked. Only some people experience a dramatic call from God to take up a particular type of work. A minority perceive their work as central to the concerns of the kingdom of God. I want to argue, however, that more people are drawn by God into a specific form of work than are aware of it. Further, more work than we realize has a role in fulfilling God's purposes.

In what follows I explore the variety of ways in which God leads people into divinely endorsed work. Current understanding of the meaning of the *call* of God is inadequate. This issue must be viewed broadly and deeply. I also want to identify the multiple ways in which God's presence and human activity overlap. This commonality is far more extensive than is usually recognized, but to appreciate it we have to broaden our perspective on God's activities.

God as Vocational Director

For many people referring to God as "vocational director" will seem strange. Yet this is an appropriate way of describing one of God's primary concerns. In the past this aspect of God's work has been described as the *call* of God. While this description is satisfactory, it can be misleading. God's vocational direction is broader than this traditional approach suggests.

The idea of a *call* is derived from such passages as Isaiah's well-

known vision of God's heavenly court. At this divine board meeting Isaiah overheard God ask: "Whom will we send and who will go for us?" to which Isaiah replied: "Here am I, send me!" (Is. 6.8). It is not difficult to think of other examples from the Bible where people were directly challenged by God in a similar way. Moses, Samuel, Jonah, and Jeremiah immediately come to mind. Then there are people like Paul, who describe themselves as "called to be an apostle." (Rom. 1.1).

There are broader ways in which the word *call* is used in the New Testament. Most often call refers to the way all those who have heard the word of Christ are challenged by God to respond to the Gospel itself (1 Cor. 7.20). But today many have drawn the conclusion that people have only been recruited in to the divine workforce if they have had a dramatic encounter with God. This may come through hearing a sermon or an address, reading the Bible or some other book, receiving counsel, or a prophetic word from some other person.

In some churches the idea of call is tempered by the conviction that those who have been called are being led by God. In that sense, the call is broadened to embrace the way circumstances begin to point that person in a particular direction. It includes the church's affirmation of the person's demonstrated qualities and gifts. In virtually all cases, this call is to a ministry in a church or para-church setting or in a Christian or missionary organization.

Given this interpretation of what a call involves, it is not surprising that most Christians conclude that they have not experienced anything of this nature. Even those who sense that they are in the place where God wants them to be rarely speak of receiving a call to their work. This partially explains why the majority of ordinary Christians feel they are second-rate citizens of the kingdom of God, overshadowed by those who devote themselves to ministry in, or on behalf of, the church.

Closer inspection of ways God draws people into vocations outside the church and of the divine value placed upon their work suggests a different approach. Return for a moment to the biblical examples. All were either prophets or prophetic religious leaders. What about people involved in other kinds of work used by God, in particular those working in the marketplace?

We meet several of these marketplace workers early on in the Old Testament, but they continue to appear throughout the biblical narratives. It is worth looking more closely at a few examples:

Two Builder-Craftsmen. Bezalel and Ohaliab were responsible for the building of the Tabernacle. Their skill in metalwork, masonry, carpentry, and design is described as a gift of the Spirit. But these men are not drawn into this work through a personal encounter with God. Their names are given to Moses by God, but Moses is the one who recruits them. No doubt their hearts were stirred to participate in the work, but there is no direct prophetic call (Ex. 31.1-11; 35.30-36.2).

A Beauty Queen. Esther was a young Jewish woman who won a royal beauty contest and became the king's wife. This turn of events was completely beyond her control and involved a deliberate personal decision to hide her Jewish identity. Despite this, she was drawn into a political struggle to save her people from genocide. This challenge does not issue directly from God, but through her uncle Mordecai. Though she prays for guidance on the matter there is no mention of any overt divine response. But she becomes convinced that she has "come to the kingdom for such a time as this" and begins a subtle round of diplomacy to save her threatened kinfolk (Est. 3-8).

Four Senior Administrators. How did Daniel and his friends come to hold significant administrative posts in the land of their exile? They were chosen to be trained as public servants because of their physical bearing, social connections, intellectual aptitude, and general knowledge. In particular they demonstrated a God-given capacity for learning languages, understanding literature, and interpreting dreams. Despite an unwillingness to engage in certain religious practices and a consistent adherence to their own religion, Daniel and his friends are finally promoted to top positions in the civil service (Dan. 1-6).

A Governor. Nehemiah was a minor official in the court of the Persian king. Nehemiah had a deep concern for the welfare of Jerusalem and of the people left behind there as a result of exile. He questions some Jews coming from a visit to their homeland and then prays that God would open up the opportunity for him to return there so he can rebuild the city. While he receives no direct answer to his prayers, his sincere grief at the fate of his country prompts the king to enquire what troubles him. The king then permits Nehemiah to return to Judaea as governor and rebuild the city (Neh. 1-2).

A Businesswoman. Tabitha (or Dorcas) lived in the city of Joppa on the Mediterranean coast and was well-known for her skills in designing and making clothes. She was also renowned for assisting the poor

and being a generous benefactor. We have no idea how this socially eminent widow came to understand her vocation, although she is very similar to the ideal woman described in Proverbs 31. It is likely that she followed Paul's advice (1 Cor. 9:20 ff) that new converts should work out their calling in their present situation and position (Acts 10.32-43).

These examples clearly show that God draws people into their divine work in a variety of ways. In none of these cases is there a prophetic call. This does not mean that this work is inferior to that of the prophets; it is simply different. What is crucial is whether the persons have a clear sense that they are in the positions God desires. That sense can be present even without a dramatic or prophetic call. As our chief vocational director, God is not bound to only one way of guiding us. In fact, God shows great versatility in this matter.

William Diehl provides an interesting case study that is relevant to this question. In preparation for his book *In Search of Faithfulness*, Diehl surveyed almost 200 Christian CEOs around the country. His aim was to identify what made some of these people more effective and integrated Christians than others. He discovered that the decisive factor was the individual's sense of vocation. Those CEOs with a sense of vocation consistently scored higher on all the indices of Christian faithfulness, for example, prayer and meditation, involvement in the church, personal maturity, financial generosity, and seeking justice in the workplace.¹ However, like Diehl himself, these people did not possess any dramatic sense of God's call.

Because we tend to restrict our understanding of vocation as a divine intervention that is heralded by a prophetic message, most marketplace Christians conclude that God has not brought them to the place they now occupy. This affects both their understanding of the value of their work, and how it contributes to God's kingdom. In part this explains the frequent disjunction that is observed between people's faith and work. Clearer teaching and discussion on this in sermons, classes, and small groups, as well as through workshops, seminars, and conferences, would make a real difference.

God as Vocational Model

God not only gives direction to us as we seek our divine vocation, but provides a model for our work. Because there is overlap between divine and human work, connections can be identified. Only a limited amount of attention has been given to this by theologians, preachers, or ordinary Christians. Yet, as W. R. Forrester in his book *Christian Vocation: Studies in Faith and Work* states:

If we are to be able to redeem men [and women] in our age of techniques and depersonalizing machinery, we must be able to make real to them the great truths of Creation, Providence and Grace, as these are personalized in the doctrine of vocation.²

We focus first on the most familiar aspects of God's work before touching briefly on several others.

Redemptive Work. God's saving activity rightly has priority in any discussion of divine work. Everything God does revolves around this. What took place in and through Christ lies at the center of human history and the material universe, reconciling "all things, whether in heaven or in earth" (Col. 1.19-20). This is why we prize the work of evangelists, apologists, and church founders. This aspect of God's work is also reflected by ordinary Christians whenever they speak up for God, talk about Christ, or help start a church. Unfortunately in some quarters it is *only* when someone is engaged in these activities that they are regarded as doing God's work. The workplace is perceived as sort of a farm-system for the "real work" of God, a place for evangelization, and a source of financial support for full-time evangelists and church-founders.

We should "always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks" about our faith or way of life (1 Pet. 3.15). C. S. Lewis is a fine example of a lay person who did this. Most of his fiction writings (all written as a hobby) are apologetic or evangelistic in intent. But as part of his university responsibilities he also wrote several scholarly books that reflect his central Christian convictions. (These are beautifully crafted, also reflecting God's way of working). In some cases people's ordinary employment does possess a redemptive dimension. This is certainly true of many who are counsellors or social workers, as well as others involved

in negotiating an end to hostilities, in mediating divorce cases and other disputes, and in resolving neighborhood or racial conflicts.

This happens in other areas. For example, there are also screen writers and producers who are committed to developing redemptive motifs in their scripts. This does not mean that they overtly preach the Gospel, but that in the story a moment of transformation occurs through a word or action embodying faith, love, or hope. This approach demonstrates that all kinds of ordinary work can contain an authentically redemptive component.

Creative Work. God's work began long before Christ came into the world to redeem it. In Genesis, God is the creator, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1.1). This aspect of God's work is a constant feature of the biblical writings. Mostly this refers to God's fashioning the physical and human world. But it is also a way of describing the novel and surprising ways God shapes historical and future events. Divine dealings are always fresh, surprising, and a little paradoxical. Anything God puts a hand to is likely to have a creative edge. Creativity is integral to the divine character.

Though we are not able to create something completely out of nothing, we are able to imitate God in this respect. Our creative work is possible because God has planted within us the capacity to be creative. More emphatically, God continues to work in the world partly through human creative work. Some people engage in this without acknowledging that God is the source of their fresh inspiration. Others are fully conscious of God's role in their efforts. We are accustomed to thinking that some occupations are more creative than others. Certainly the arts do give the creative imagination considerable room for play. Musicians, painters, sculptors, writers, and film makers do reflect God's inventive approach to work. There is an obvious and direct connection between the two.

But creativity is broader than this. The whole range of crafts comes immediately to mind. The biblical writings often depict God as a crafts-person at work, for example, as a potter, metalworker, weaver, knitter, stonemason, carpenter, builder, or architect. In their own ways these occupations, as well as others ranging from gardening and landscape artistry, to interior design and urban planning, can be earthly manifestations of heavenly work. But any occupation or activity that has a touch of originality about it reflects something of God's creative work. In

some fields there may be little room for this creativity, but rarely is the capacity for it altogether absent. Even routine activities are open to the play of the creative spirit and do not always need to be predictable or monotonous. Many homemakers, office workers, and factory hands have found ways of gracing aspects of their work with a creative touch. Their doing so is a testimony not only to the human, but also to the divine spirit at work.

Providential Work. Between God's creative and redemptive activity, as a kind of extension of the one and preparation of the other, is the vital bridge of God's providential work. The full range of what God brings, gives, and supplies to us is celebrated in many places in the Bible (Ps. 104). The connection between this and our work is frequently overlooked or minimized in Christian thinking, preaching, and teaching. Sometimes God's creative activity is spoken of in such a way as to encompass this. The work of divine providence includes all that God does to maintain the universe and human life in an orderly and beneficial fashion. This includes conserving, sustaining, and replenishing in addition to creating and redeeming the world. Basically it has to do with God being the daily provider of whatever is necessary to meet the material, animal, and human creation needs.

Many types of human work are similar in character. Bureaucracies make possible the smooth and efficient running of society. Public utility workers play a significant role in keeping the physical and social infrastructure going, as do entrepreneurs who build businesses and create jobs for others. Service occupations and trades exist to supply and support people, organizations, and institutions in a wide variety of ways, as well as to fix things that go wrong and remedy problems that arise. The lower-ranking civil servant or housing inspector, the trash collector and cab or bus driver, the garage mechanic or builder, all play their part here. At times these people help us out in ways that are especially providential. We literally "thank God" for them when they appear on the scene, or refer to them as "angels in disguise." Consciously or not, our language is appropriately theological here, and sometimes it is those with the humblest occupations who help us out most. Where, for example, would our multi-story office buildings be without janitors or cleaning services?

Most occupations contain an element of doing the groundwork, keeping the machinery going, or fixing what is broken. Even the most redemptive or creative work involves these practical elements. The

evangelist has to plan as well as preach. The scriptwriter has to make deals as well as dream up stories. Housework and other chores are a significant part of homemaking. Maintenance and organization are integral to most forms of work. We should not chafe at this or regard such activity as inferior. Without it no significant work could be done. Perhaps the extraordinary patience of God stems in part from the amount of time and effort God continually puts into such work!

If there were time, we could look in detail at other aspects of God's work that have connections to the work we do. The brevity of the following references to these connections does not imply that they are less significant than the dimensions of divine activity already covered.

Justice Work. Though God's justice goes beyond giving people their fair and equal redress or due, and though human justice constantly fails to live up to this standard, there is a valid connection between the two. In some measure legislators and government regulators, judges and attorneys, supervisors, and para-legal workers play a role in the purposes of God in the world at large. It is not a slip on the part of Paul when he describes those who seek to reward good and punish evil as "servants (or ministers) of God" (Rom. 12.4). So, in a different way, are social activists, minority advocates, consumer protectors, and others. But in many types of work, including what takes place in the home, people apply equitable rules, seek to avoid discrimination, or adopt an affirmative action approach.

Compassionate Work. There is a distinct overlap between this dimension of God's work and justice work. Compare especially the divinely appointed "servant" described in the prophets (Is. 40-55). In linking God's activity here with its human counterpart, one thinks immediately of the helping professions, ranging from doctors, nurses and paramedics, psychologists, therapists, community workers, home visitors, personnel directors, and welfare agents. In addition to these, many people are involved in some kind of helping work in a part-time capacity or as part of their regular job responsibilities, both inside and outside the home.

Revelatory Work. Throughout the Bible, God is constantly described as the one who enlightens others about the truth. What was "hidden for long ages past" is now "revealed and made known . . . by the command of the eternal God" (Rom. 16.25-26). This is a fundamental dimension of God's work, without which we would not know anything

about what God has done. While there are obvious and direct connections with the work of the preacher and teacher, echoes of the more general revealing, enlightening, educating activity of God occur in all work that seeks to bring truth and wisdom to others. Since, as has often been said, "all truth is God's truth," those who communicate truth of any kind, professors, teachers, writers, commentators, journalists, parents, humorists, or cartoonists, are to some degree engaged in divine work. Since helping others to learn wisdom is integral to many other activities, we should not limit this to occupations of an educational or informational kind.

Conclusion

The examples I have provided are not the only facets of God's work that can be correlated with human work. I have provided some key examples rather than cover the whole range of possibilities. Nor, in making these connections, am I overlooking the way so much human work obscures or perverts divine activity. Human work can easily turn into something that panders to people's acquisitive desires, becomes destructive rather than beneficial, or develops an idolatrous or demonic character. When this happens our work becomes the opposite of what God intended it to be. At the end of history God will "test the quality of each person's work" and all our "work will be shown for what it is" (1 Cor.3.13).

Even here, however, the Bible provides us with some useful categories for evaluating common attitudes about work. Fruitful correlations can be made between negative counterparts of God's approach to work and such erroneous attitudes towards human work. Let me give two brief illustrations of this.

The Bible condemns people who attempt to justify themselves by their own religious efforts rather than accept the fact that they have been justified by what Christ has done. Even where believers understand that they are justified by faith, in certain areas of their lives they may still tend to try and justify themselves. These days they are more likely to do this through their occupations rather than their church-related activities. For many people today their sense of self-worth, acceptance by others, and ultimate significance is tied up with their careers. This is true even for pastors and other church workers. But our worth, acceptance, and

significance must not lie in our work, whether or not it allows us to influence or serve to the wider society. Otherwise those who are too young or too old to work, or those who are too physically or mentally challenged to work, have no value, can never find full acceptance, and have no wider contribution to make.

The Bible recounts many occasions on which the people of God turned their backs on God's commitment to them and gave themselves instead to other gods. In doing so they broke the terms of the covenant that God had established with them; they were not loyal to the mutual obligations of the covenant. These days it is the language of contract rather than covenant that pervades the world of work. Today's emphasis is on gaining the maximum advantage at the other's expense, making the agreement as easy to get out of as possible should need arise, even intending to break it should a better opportunity come along. In workplaces loyalty often is in small supply, both on the part of employer and employee. Unless we can reverse the tendency to turn all covenantal arrangements into weaker contractual ones, and to regard contractual promises and obligations as provisional and breakable, the whole world of work is likely to become even more jungle-like than it is now.

Apart from human work often tending to obscure or pervert God's approach to work, there is a further danger. Too often we succumb to the temptation to rate certain types of secular work as more closely reflecting divine concerns than others. So, for example, engaging in one of the "helping professions" is often regarded as more Christian than other kinds of work, such as banking, real estate, or running a company. This kind of distinction is merely a modern variant of the old dichotomy between monastic and ordinary work. The Reformers did away with such status distinctions, even with those between pastoral and lay work in their own churches. As Luther said:

There is no work better than another to please God; to pour water, to wash dishes, to be a shoemaker, or an apostle, all are one, as touching the deed, to please God.³

Indeed one of our major weaknesses today is that there are too few Christians in occupations that are less overtly people-centered, especially in ones where there is the constant need for compromise or possibility of being compromised. Christians tend to gravitate to occupations that

“pick up the pieces.” If only more recognized the value of their vocation in the occupations that shape modern society, for example, finance, technology, politics, and mass media, they might help prevent everything falling apart for so many people. It is partly because Christians have too narrow a sense of call and cannot see the connection between such work and God’s work that they take a detour in other directions.

Notes

1. William Diehl, *In Search of Faithfulness: Lessons From The Christian Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 198.
2. W. R. Forrester, *Christian Vocation: Studies in Faith and Work* (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1953), 20.
3. Martin Luther, “Treatise on Good Works,” J. Atkinson, ed. *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 44, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 26-27.

Questions for Discussion

1. Have you been able to forge links between your faith and your work? Where did you find this help and how helpful was it?
2. To what extent are you conscious of a *call* or of the leading/guiding of God in connection with your work?
3. Can you think of other examples of marketplace believers in the Bible? What occupations do they represent and how did these figure in God’s ongoing purposes for humankind?
4. What connections between your primary work and any facet of God’s work can you discern?