

FINDING MY VOCATION

**A GUIDE FOR
YOUNG PEOPLE
SEEKING
A CALLING**

WILLIAM BOEKESTEIN



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To Ron,
for giving me a job,
a place to live,
and so much more
when I desperately needed it

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INTRODUCTION

When we are very young, we enjoy being asked what we want to do when we grow up. And our answers are often creative and well paired with our passions: I want to be an artist, an athlete, or an animal groomer. When young our ambitions have not yet met obstacles. We imagine that we will surely end up doing something we love.

In our teen years and beyond, answering questions about our future is harder. Our interests can change rapidly. We might begin to doubt our abilities. The reality begins to sink in: my future work might not align with my dreams.

At least this was my experience. As a teenager, I not only wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life, I didn't even know the kinds of questions to ask. I basically only knew that I needed a job and didn't want to do something I hated. Many young people are more thoughtful than I was. But even among the most hyper-focused people I knew, not everyone ended up doing what they had hoped. Some of my middle-aged peers still wonder what they will do when they "grow up." For others even the question of meaningful work induces anxiety. What have I done with my life? is a common question older adults ask. We all want our lives to mean something. We crave significance.

What you might fail to realize is that you don't need a "perfect" job. But you do need to be faithful and productive in ways that honor God. And simply doing that is far more beneficial than you can know. "Earned success," the fruit of any good work done well,

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“is a vital antidote to boredom, trauma, alienation, and depression.”¹ Your work life is crucial to your flourishing. And even work conducted in what has been called the pre-prime working years, ages sixteen to twenty-four, is extremely important. During these years you will develop a “professional grammar” including “life skills, experience, resilience, rejection, success, development of a mutual cooperation instinct, the basic practice of showing up, having responsibilities and expectations.”² These will be the building blocks upon which to build later success.

Or not.

Your working years have the potential to be either satisfying (Eccl. 2:24) or meaningless (v. 11). Some people approach all of life, including work, with a sense of mission. Others drift from task to task. Some excel at work. Others do only the bare minimum. Some properly balance work, family, and other obligations. Others are enslaved to their work or don’t work enough to care for their own. How can you figure out what you are supposed to do, and then do it well?

The key to a balanced life is the Christian doctrine of calling, or its Latin equivalent *vocation*. Believers have been called by God out of the world and into his service. To “those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28 ESV), God provides a place and time and the required gifts to fulfill his mission in the world. Or as Paul puts it: “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). Our unique opportunities to do God’s will form our vocations, our callings. And the work you do, as a teenager or young adult, constructs the mold that will shape your later life.

In this book I aim to explain and apply vocation in three movements. First, we will *ponder* the doctrine of vocation. What does it mean to have a vocation, that is, a calling? What does Scripture teach about work? And how does the special calling of grace relate to our ordinary callings in the world? Second, we will learn how to *prepare* for vocational living. I will share what people of God at

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almost any stage of life can do to become better qualified to glorify and enjoy God in their various stations. What skills and character qualities will you need to be useful in the world? How can you sort through the countless vocational options? And how do you chart a course for a rewarding work life without compromising your other callings? Third, we will explore how to *practice* vocation. What biblical disciplines will help you succeed at work? How does your work life relate to the rest of who you are? And how should you steward the fruit of your labor? Finally, the last part of the book is an appendix that tackles common questions you might find yourself asking as you think about your future.

As I wrote this book, I interviewed dozens of people who exemplify godly work. Some of them are young, not much older than you might be. Others are retired and able to reflect on their careers with the advantage of hindsight. Their stories and advice are featured at the end of each chapter.

In this book you will also hear a lot of other voices. This is deliberate. Vocation is deeply embedded in the Protestant tradition. It is good to listen to how others have thought through this subject. Because I frequently include the thoughts of others, there are a lot of endnote references in the body of this text. Don't be intimidated by them. You don't have to read them. Many simply document my sources, though others suggest further reading or provide needed clarification.

Work is a weighty topic, but instead of being intimidated by it, you should treasure the rare blessing God has given to you even to consider these matters. It is easy to forget that "the majority of humans...have thrust upon them tasks and responsibilities about which they have no choice. They are in survival mode."³ Your life sometimes feels this way. But you have far more freedom than you might realize. And if you are in a state of grace, God enables you to freely will and do eternally meaningful and rewarding things.⁴

This book is a guide for young people trying to figure out what to do with their lives. This means it is also for the parents of young

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people.⁵ After all, as one sixteenth-century Reformed confession puts it, addressing parents, “It is necessary that [children] be taught and instructed in such studies or crafts for which they could gain an honest living, so that they would shun idleness and, above all, to be so taught that in all things they would have their true hope and trust in God alone.”⁶ Parents must bring their children up “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). And a large part of this upbringing includes preparing for a God-honoring vocation.

I’m glad you are reading this book. This decision suggests that you are not interested in meandering through life, thoughtlessly doing the next thing thrust upon you. You want a calling, a meaningful set of responsibilities and accompanying rewards that you can call yours. Let’s begin pondering this invigorating idea of calling by asking, What is vocation?



**PART
ONE**

POUNDERING VOCATION



WHAT IS VOCATION?

Horatius Bonar was a nineteenth-century pastor. He was also a hymnist, which means he was a poet. And gifted poets have a way of using just the right words to express deep truths. In only a few lines Bonar expresses the yearning that the doctrine of vocation answers:

Fill thou my life, O Lord my God, in ev'ry part with praise,
That my whole being may proclaim thy being and thy ways.
Not for the lip of praise alone, nor e'en the praising heart,
I ask, but for a life made up of praise in ev'ry part.

...So shall no part of day or night from sacredness be free,
But all my life, in ev'ry step, be fellowship with thee.¹

This is what believers in Jesus want. God has called us to offer not just our minds and hearts but our bodies too as “living sacrifices” (Rom. 12:1). We want to please God not just in the few hours a week we gather with the congregation in worship but every minute of every week. Salvation frees the penitent from hell; but it also gives us ample reason to get out of bed every morning in the here and now.

It is the biblical doctrine of calling or vocation that teaches us how sacred every part of day and night is. Calling is a clear teaching

of Scripture (for example, 1 Cor. 7:17–24; 2 Peter 1:3). But during the Middle Ages it was overlooked because of a radical distinction between the sacredness of church work and the commonness of all other labor. Medieval Christians thought only church workers had a vocation—everyone else simply performed jobs. The fourth-century church father Eusebius said, regrettably, that those who “have minds for farming, for trade, and the other more secular interests” have “a kind of secondary grade of piety.”² Only church workers had first-rate godliness.³ This false distinction was challenged by the Protestant Reformation. “Devotion,” write Joel Beeke and Mark Jones, “was largely confined by medieval Catholicism to the monastery; the Reformers released it into the marketplace.”⁴

We need to recover this teaching today as many modern factors threaten the reality of vocation. Secularism scorns the value of spirituality and therefore the sacredness of work. Industrialization—with its introduction of machines and the goal of making human production more machine-like—and computerization challenge the human element of our work. Globalization makes it hard to know how our earnest occupational contributions can remain untainted from more sinister motives; after all, players in a world economy have little control over how their labor is used. On top of all this, the bewildering number of occupational options can intimidate us into inaction or plague us with regret.

Because vocation is biblical, it can help us live a “life made up of praise in ev’ry part,” even today.

The Basic Idea of Vocation

The French reformer John Calvin taught that calling is as simple as knowing what God wants us to do in the place that he has appointed us to live: “The Lord bids each one of us in all life’s actions to look to his calling.” By “calling” he means that God “has appointed duties for every man in his particular way of life.” Each of us is like a guard stationed to a particular post so that we might “not heedlessly wander about throughout life.” This calling

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from the Lord “is in everything the beginning and foundation of well-doing.”⁵ The father of English Puritanism William Perkins further developed the biblical theology of vocation. He defined it as “a certain kind of life, ordained and imposed on man by God for the common good.”⁶ The reformers agreed that “a person’s ‘calling’ was the whole network of relationships and opportunities and duties which formed his life.”⁷

In Scripture, the term *calling* almost always refers to God’s call to faith, the Spirit’s working of that faith, or the active life of faith. So in one sense what we call a vocation is just a part—though a large part—of our general calling to live honorably before God. Our “master-vocation” is to love the Lord supremely and our neighbor as ourselves. We do this at home, church, work, and in the public square. As a subset of our master-calling, our particular callings are how we love God and others with the skills the Lord has given us. The “main end of our lives,” says Perkins, “is to serve God in serving men in the works of our callings.”⁸ Your vocation is the unique way in which God has chosen you to fit into his great plan.

Prior to submitting to Christ, many people lack that sense of purpose that can only be found in vital union with God (see Rom. 8:28). In other words, there is a connection between what is known as God’s *effectual* call and his call to a *vocation*. Here it is: when God powerfully calls his elect by changing their hearts, he also gives them a life-calling; he enlists them in his service. After conversion, for example, tax collectors and soldiers do the same work but now with a different master and new motives (Luke 3:10–14). They are now owned by God and work for his glory. Reformation theology affirms that every Christian has a special role in this world as prophet, priest, and king.⁹ Therefore, Christians have a vocation, a divine calling to serve the Lord. Calling in Scripture usually has to do with our call to faith.

But in at least one place the apostle Paul broadens the sense of Christian calling. Paul exhorts each believer to “lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him”

(1 Cor. 7:17 ESV). Paul gives the example of a bondservant who becomes a Christian through the effectual call, the gift of regeneration. Even in such a lowly station a Christian is free to serve the Lord. The German reformer Martin Luther even translated 1 Corinthians 7:20 like this: “Let every one stay in the *vocation* in which he is called.”¹⁰ Calvin understood this passage in the same way; it describes the vocations of tailors and merchants, to give just two examples.¹¹ According to the nineteenth-century American Presbyterian pastor Charles Hodge, Paul’s wonderful point is that “the gospel is just as well suited to men in one vocation as in another.”¹²

One surely does not have to become a minister to have a calling. In fact, it is essential that *not everyone* become a minister: “The Lord calls his people in *all* walks of life to follow him. He wants them to be Christian fathers and mothers, Christian husbands and wives, Christian employers and employees. Each one should fulfill the role the Lord has assigned.”¹³ In a sense, we are all religious workers since “we live, and move, and have our being” in God (Acts 17:28). We can do nothing that is truly areligious. So Luther could call the stations of civil government, employers, or hired workers of all sorts, “holy orders.”¹⁴ He was deliberately rejecting the Roman Catholic notion of holy orders in which only official church workers were set apart for a sacred purpose. Perkins likewise “rejected the false dichotomy between sacred and secular” and saw vocation as “the unique way” that we love God and our neighbor.¹⁵ Puritan George Swinnock wanted the tradesman to know that “his shop as well as his chapel is holy ground.”¹⁶

Vocation means that even bondservants, and anyone else with a hard, undesirable job, can work “heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men.” Paul reminds lowly servants that they “serve the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:22–24). There is no reason for someone doing valid work to change professions when they become a Christian—they can serve God where they are when they are called to faith: “Whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Scripture’s call to every person is this: “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice,

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holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1 ESV). Calvin believed that “no sacrifice is more pleasing to God than when every man applies himself diligently to his own calling.”¹⁷

The Christian doctrine of vocation dignifies all legitimate efforts: “All honest work is sacred when devoted to the glory of God.”¹⁸ Doing your job doesn’t take you away from the work God calls you to. The workplace is where you will likely spend most of your time *in* that work he has called you to. The same is true in various degrees for labor in the family, for unpaid labor, and for engaging in civic responsibilities. After all, as Os Guinness puts it, in vocation “God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to his summons and service.”¹⁹

But the doctrine of vocation may not simply be assumed. It must be put into practice.

The Ingredients of a Vocation

At least three things are necessary to enjoy a vocation, a true calling from God.

A Right Perspective

The insightful twentieth-century British writer Dorothy Sayers puts it this way: The outcome of our “work will be decided by our religious outlook: as we *are* so we *make*.”²⁰ There is a difference between how believers and unbelievers approach their varied responsibilities. Without trust in God we use opportunities to make a name for ourselves (see Gen. 11:4). Or we expect work to give us the kind of satisfaction that we can only find in Christ. We may see our jobs simply as ways to get money. But faith in God and obedience to his word can transform any valid work into worship.

Instead of inflexibly insisting on following your passions into ideal work—*I need to be an executive chef or an artist or a Navy*

Seal—as a Christian you must prioritize faith, hope, love, and patience even in roles that might be miles away from childhood dreams and current aspirations. In these situations we cheerfully live out our responsibilities before God.

Not all work is intrinsically satisfying. And all work has challenges. But a vocational outlook can help you transcend the liabilities of working in a fallen world. The Heidelberg Catechism is helpful here. Question 91 asks, “But what are good works?” Part of the answer emphasizes the perspective of the worker. Only those works are good “which are done from true faith...and for [God’s] glory.”²¹ The various arenas of our lives—work, church, family, recreation—must be governed by trust in God and an interest in his glory. In this way, “whatever someone’s station may be, faith transforms it into a vocation.”²² A vocationally minded person sees work “not, primarily, [as] a thing one does to live, but [as] the thing one lives to do.”²³

A Valid Venture

You can glorify God in whatever work you undertake, provided it is noble work. God acknowledges as vocations, according to Calvin, only “lawful modes of life, which have God as their approver and author.”²⁴ As the Heidelberg Catechism notes, good works must be done “according to the law of God.”²⁵ You cannot glorify God by bringing a godly attitude to an evil job. The builders of the tower of Babel worked heartily, but they lacked a valid calling because the project displeased the Lord. So, as Sayers writes, “We should ask of an enterprise, not ‘will it pay?’ but ‘is it good?’”²⁶

What tests can we apply to discover whether a job is good? Seminary professor and pastor Dan Doriani offers this answer: “Work is good...if it is moral...builds character...achieves good goals...pleases God, conforms to the structures of his world, and fits his vision of the good.”²⁷ A job is worthy of our efforts if it harmonizes with God’s original mandate that humans steward the earth in submission to him (Gen. 1:28). Legitimate work must serve God

by serving people. Only if a job meets these standards can it qualify as a vocation. So some occupations cannot possibly be callings—professional gambler, loan shark (in Scripture, a usurer, or one who extorts the borrower through crippling loan terms; Ex. 22:25–27), drug dealer, pornographer, and thief, to name obvious examples.

This doesn't mean that every qualified job will *feel* like a calling. Few people washing dishes in a low-quality restaurant believe that they were born for such a job as this. But while a stepping-stone job may not be your final career, it may be the place where you will live out your faith for a time. As we will later see, you can desire vocations that meld your skills and interests to valuable and fulfilling work. But at the very least you must believe in the work you are doing. For “whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23). Still, vocational living doesn't demand work that checks all your wish-list boxes, especially early in your working life.

Faithful Work

The final ingredient of a vocation has to do with how you apply a right perspective to a valid undertaking. In other words, vocational living requires more than being a professing Christian and fulfilling legitimate opportunities. You must work well. Vocation defines not only the *why* and *where* of work, but also the *how*. Sayers sums up vocation as the calling of people “made in God's image” to “make things, as God makes them, for the sake of doing well a thing that is well worth doing.”²⁸

Kingdom work means not only doing quality work but also performing work in a way that honors God's command to love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:39). To put it differently, you must not only produce a quality product or render excellent service. You must use your callings to love your neighbor. So Perkins wrote that a person's vocation calls him to “become a servant to his brother in all the duties of love.”²⁹ For Christians work is not how to get ahead, clambering over the backs of others; it is how to value the interests of others (Phil. 2:4). A vocational mindset,

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writes pastor and author Jay Kim, “calls Christians to disrupt a culture of self-interest with sacrificial, self-giving love by leveraging skills and resources in partnership with others, for God’s glory and the good of all.”³⁰

At work God is both the Lord of your labor and the example for your conduct. After forming and filling the world, God charged Adam to take his unique abilities and apply them earnestly and diligently to a particular plot of ground (Gen. 2:15). The plots of our lives vary but our purpose is the same: to put into practice the principles of God’s kingdom in every area of life. You fulfill your vocation by living according to God’s code of conduct in your various spheres of responsibility. Doriani puts it succinctly: “Truly good work uses the right means, has godly motivations, and pursues beneficial goals. Good work is both lawful and helpful to humanity.”³¹

Vocation is just the doctrine you need to elevate work to its rightful place as designed by God. It is clarifying. You must work. You don’t know exactly what God has planned for you, but you must be—and can be—faithful with what the Lord gives. Vocation is also invigorating. You can truly work for God no matter what you do, whether you feed cows as a farmer or feed God’s people as a pastor. Because you work for God and your neighbor, you must work heartily, offering your very best. That doesn’t mean that you look to your work for your value; you have that in God’s love, which you receive through the gospel. So freed from sin and given a meaningful life, the doctrine of vocation is, finally, liberating. God placed us in his world to work for his glory. That is a great responsibility. But don’t worry; “we as individuals aren’t responsible for the world; we are just responsible for the pieces that God gives to us.”³²

Peggy >>> Medical Lab Technician

Peggy, presently retired, worked in hospital clinical settings nearly her entire career. Her particular fields changed, but her pursuit of excellence and a devotion to serving God led her wherever she went.

Peggy explains her path this way: "I pursued a strong interest in biology after a high school project in blood typing. I was fascinated by what could be learned from blood! I majored in biology in college. Numerous laboratory projects along with excellent courses in pathogenic bacteriology and parasitology moved me to investigate medical laboratory work."

Peggy was encouraged by a college counselor to match this interest and the nature of lab work with her personality. She loved to organize, investigate, and work independently, and she had a penchant for detail—all of which complemented this type of work. She sought a post-graduate clinical year at a medical center where she could rotate through various types of laboratories. She says of that time: "I enjoyed this year immensely and after its completion, began a career!"

As a Christian, Peggy sought the Lord's guidance and doors opened right along. After four years of work experience and then viewing a magazine ad about the need for medical personnel in a new hospital being built in southern Haiti, she began what would become a ten-year term for a Christian medical group. When it was time for a native Haitian to take over her role, the Lord opened a door for her to return to the States for further education, this time in general biblical studies. She closed out her working years serving with an organization that provided lab equipment to underfunded clinics around the world. The team delivered and installed equipment, trained technicians in instrument use, and instructed them in good laboratory practice.

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At every stage of her career, Peggy knew the Lord's leading. Though the Lord never gave her a spouse and a family of her own, she could still say, "God gave deep satisfaction and blessing. There were difficult days and discouragements, particularly in Haiti, but always his faithful presence."