



Vocation, Work, and Work for Pay

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As western countries face continuing problems about unemployment and the significance of work, and the various Christian churches wrestle with problems of the “calling” and ministries and responsibilities of the whole People of God, it is, I suggest, helpful to sort out some of the confusions we may fall into about our vocation, our work, and our paid work.

The word “vocation” has been much differently used by different churches. I remember once in Manchester, England, my dismay when attending a conference as a high school adviser about careers (in American English, a “vocational guidance counsellor”): it turned out to be run by the local Roman Catholic diocese, and was concerned entirely with “religious vocations” in the narrowest sense; we who attended were simply expected to encourage our students to become priests, monks, and nuns. I was reminded of the rather unhelpful saying

He has a real vocation,
You have a fine career,
She has a dull job,
I'm out of work!

Of course a good many Christians feel and have felt that they are specially called by God to special work—whether they are ordained or in a religious order or not. In a recent letter in the London *Daily Telegraph* a nurse wrote firmly, “My work is not a job but a vocation.”¹ Yet though we most honour such perceptions of divine guidance, we cannot let our understanding of Christian vocation be reserved only for such people, while lesser believers are by implication kept outside the inner circle of the “really called.”

¹*Daily Telegraph* of November 25, 1983.

I. WE ARE ALL CALLED

Our vocation—the vocation of all human beings—is the call from God to be part of the new humanity in Jesus Christ, to be citizens of the Kingdom and the People of God. And this is true for *all* of us, whatever our occupation and job, and indeed whether we are employed or not. This marvellous vocation and dignity is for everybody, irrespective of our age, sex, education, race, nationality, intellectual ability, occupation—or ordination. This vocation does not apply just to those in churchly occupations (like clergy) or in “important” jobs (like being a surgeon or a nurse). An archbishop’s taxi driver has just the same vocation as an archbishop. As Alan Richardson, one of the most perceptive writers about work and vocation in the post-1945 period,

insisted, “God is no respecter of persons or of class or professional demarcation.”² And as that distinguished laywoman Mollie Batten once wrote for the Board of Social Responsibility of the Church of England:

The concept of vocation, therefore, ought not to be restricted to that part of a person’s activity which is called their work, nor is a vocation to be regarded as the prerogative of special Christians like monks or clergymen or professional people who work with persons. All Christians have their vocation.³

This is the really good news of the gospel. It frees us from restricting vocation to “top” people. It restores true human dignity to us all, no matter what our position or income or powerfulness or powerlessness may be. This is what—for the vast majority of Christians—is signified by our baptism, which is infinitely more important as a Christian symbol than ordination or the consecration of a bishop. When priests or other clergy are spiritually uneasy about their position in the confusions of today’s changing churches, it is primarily on their vocation as members of the People of God that they must trust, not on their position in their ecclesiastical hierarchies and structures. And it is only when ordinary Christian laity—not just the well educated—understand their vocation to be mature, adult, informed, responsible Christian members of the Body of Christ, just as much as priests or theologians, that we shall realise the true potential of the whole Church in Britain or America or Kenya or anywhere else.

II. WE ARE CALLED TO WORK

Yet God does call us to a life of Christian work and active discipleship. We are not only to “be” but also to “do.” Maybe, in the past, some American churches have too much honoured “busyness” as a Christian virtue, so that a congregation’s spiritual health might be measured in the number of weeknight meetings held or the gallons of coffee brewed in those impressive parish kitchens (designed, surely, to feed the five thousand). Yet I dare to suggest that in the last

²Alan Richardson, *The Biblical Doctrine of Work* (London: SCM Press, 1952) 36. This little book is still very valuable.

³E. M. Batten, *Work in Britain Today: A Christian View* (London: Church Information Office, 1969) 65.

thirty years there has been a certain overemphasis in some congregations and Christian communities on the spiritual benefits of simply “existing” in Christian joy. William H. Willimon recently commented in a perceptive article: “Thank God Michelangelo had an obsessive need to work, and nobody counselled him out of it.”⁴ There is a great deal in the Bible about responding to God’s call and to his gracious love by working to his glory and remembering the bitter needs of our neighbours and our fellow inhabitants on this planet. It is fine that Christians are developing theologies of leisure, but these can be a trap if they are used to justify a certain callousness to human distress.

As long as we have strength, we are to offer what gifts and talents we have in active ministry. *And we all have some.* This is not just a fine theory for poets or computer specialists or passionate preachers. The difficult language of Pope John Paul’s encyclical *Laborem Exercens*⁵ should not stop us from understanding his fine emphasis on the value of human activity, even

that of dull manual toil, which he knew personally in the German occupation of Poland.

This call to active Christian work applies to all kinds of young people, long before they are fully “trained” for a career, and whether they like or they detest churchly activities like singing in a choir. It applies to all kinds of older people; there is no retirement from our Christian pilgrimage, and many of those over 55 or 65 are rather shabbily encouraged to find a place on the shelf when they have much work (though often different work) to undertake for the Lord.

III. CHRISTIAN WORK IS MORE THAN PAID WORK

However, our “Christian work” is not the same thing as our “work for pay” (if we have any). It is true that for some people a very major element in their Christian pilgrimage will be performing their paid jobs well and at the same time self-critically, whether these are church occupations or not. It is admirable that we now have a new wave of interest—almost repeating the concerns of the 1950s in understanding Monday to Friday occupations as opportunities for Christian service, even in the compromises and ambiguities of the secular structures of our modern world.⁶ It is important that we should do our paid jobs conscientiously and thoughtfully, rather than skimp them and hurry off to “real Christian service” in the parish. Yet it can be very wrong if (following no doubt false understandings of Calvinist or other Protestant teachings about work) industrialists and bank managers are encouraged to think of worldly success in their careers and occupations as signs that they belong to a special category of truly blessed believers, while those in menial jobs are to be judged decidedly inferior disciples. If, among politically radical Christians, there is sometimes a tendency to denounce all people with secular power as oppressors, other church people are still inclined to honour those who have “important” jobs, and to forget the gifts and the service of those with less wealth or influence. It must also be

⁴William H. Willimon, “A Labor Day Reflection on the Work Ethic,” *Christian Century* 100 (August 31, 1983) 776.

⁵The text and a useful commentary may be found in Gregory Bauma, *The Priority of Labor* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982).

⁶See, for example, William H. Diehl, *Thank God It's Monday* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

admitted that some Christian theorists have been much too romantic about work as a creative craft, honouring the Creator. Many jobs are dull and pretty repetitive and even degrading, and who can blame people in such work if their heart and interests are concentrated mainly on their families and acquaintances, and on their evening and weekend activities? No doubt, as Martin Luther emphasised, sweeping a room and cleaning a cafeteria and tightening nuts on an auto assembly line are important to God and to society (who wants a Monday morning car?); but it is ridiculous to identify such occupations as the most creative elements in our total “Christian work.”

We need to watch our patterns of worship about these points, and in particular those new kinds of liturgical experiments which aim to affirm publicly the vocation of all God’s People. (How many laity, over the centuries, have been trained Sunday by Sunday to regard themselves as God’s passive sheep by the bad old patterns of clerically dominated worship?) I have been very encouraged to discover different attempts to honour the calling and the responsibility of all Christians, not just the special functions and work of the clergy. Yet sometimes I have found these special worship services affirming only those laity who take part in churchly ministries, like

church school teaching and fund raising (perhaps this is a temptation specially for Episcopalians and Roman Catholics?). Other liturgical forms have seemed to emphasise too much secular success in law, finance, or industry (a weakness for Presbyterians or Minnesota Lutherans, perhaps?). Any service of worship which intends to affirm the common vocation of all the People of God and their work for the Lord must include *all* of them, and all their varieties of discipleship. Here I would mention the simple and powerful Thursday night services in Iona Abbey, Scotland, known as “The Act of Belief,” which I would wish to testify to as very important to me personally.

IV. A QUESTION OF QUALITY

The essential thing about our “Christian work,” our active response to God day by day, is that there is to be some quality in it. Whether it is paid for or not, and whether by a church employer or not, it is to be done conscientiously and effectively, “as unto the Lord.” All persons must work out for themselves, together with their spouses and their families, how much “volunteer” work they can undertake, either in the parish, in other Christian organisations, or in secular and neighbourhood and political work. Those with special family obligations, or in very demanding paid occupations, may well have to limit the amount they do. Clergy and other Christian organisers must encourage them to be thoughtful and prayerful about this, and then respect their decisions: some Christian families and friendships are at serious risk because of religious workaholism; others are indulgent cosy nests with both parents and children neglecting the world outside. But whatever is planned and undertaken must be done carefully and with some good humour and sensitivity. Sloppiness is not next to Godliness, and some of our Evangelical friends can teach us much about a cheerful efficiency in Christian work.

I suspect that here we need to work hard on some theories about leisure and “spare time.” Of course Christians, like everybody else, need some leisure

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and vacation time—though not necessarily the lavish expenditures of both time and money which are now customary in some western countries: soon air trips to the Far East will be considered “essential” to our Christian and human development if the travel agents prevail. There are also some arguments to be developed about the feeling that volunteer work is really a leisure activity—and therefore, perhaps, not to be undertaken as seriously or as carefully as “paid work.” I am not entirely happy, for instance, with some recent comments from the distinguished Presbyterian editor, George Laird Hunt, when he suggests that “church time is leisure time.”⁷ Of course he is right when he asks those organising church work to use volunteer workers wisely and well; but we need surely to recognise our Christian volunteer work as an essential part of our discipleship, not primarily as enjoyable leisure activities.

This is not at all the same as one of those nineteenth century calls to a dull, dutiful work ethic, which did sometimes equate secular success or hyperactivity in church work with saintliness. It is to say that God offers us all a marvellous vocation, and expects us to respond to this by good, prayerful work. And this is as true for ordinary people and the unemployed and the retired as for those who—so far—have kept their paid jobs and their “respected” positions in church and state.

⁷George Laird Hunt, Editorial in *The Presbyterian Outlook* 165 (October 17, 1983) 8.