



What Are They Saying (and Not Saying) about Vocation?

CHRISTOPHER RICHMANN

The Reformation altered Christians' understanding of God's word, sacraments, good works, and vocation. Although vocation has never received the attention other pillars of Reformation doctrine enjoyed, today "vocation is being rediscovered" by Western Christians.¹ Believers desire to know the meaning of their faith for daily life, and much of what they are learning comes from beyond their local congregations. Church leaders should ground their understanding in Scripture and tradition while also familiarizing themselves with the current conversation so they may discuss vocation constructively with those God calls them to serve.

Below is a distillation of significant themes in the recent literature on vocation, drawing on nearly thirty books published in the last dozen years.² The themes are not always easily disentangled, yet I note the dominant claims and—where present—critiques, counterclaims, or differences in emphases. For illustration, I quote widely across the texts, but I mostly refrain from piling on reinforcing

¹ Paul J. Wadell and Charles R. Pinches, *Living Vocationally: The Journey of the Called Life* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021), 5.

² The collection of English texts is not exhaustive but, I hope, representative. Some of the books are scholarly, but most are written for non-specialists. I omitted books focused on calling to church ministry, multi-author essay collections, and texts that were not explicitly working in a Christian frame.

There is a veritable modern industry in books on vocation, which seek to help believers understand the possibility of finding and embracing the call of God in vocational terms. Surveying a representative sample of these books, this article critiques many of the assumptions and presumptions of this literature, especially a lack of understanding of suffering and sin.

citations. The aim is not analysis of any particular work but a portrait of the state of the conversation. In a final reflection, I identify potential critiques and a worrying gap in the literature.

Writers disagree on whether vocation is the lot of all humans or the preserve of Christians. Some claim that “Christians do not have a monopoly on vocation,” or prefer to speak about the vocation of humanity in general.³ Others contend that vocation “is discovered when we put the lordship of Jesus at the center of our lives.”⁴ A variation is the claim that non-Christians have God-given “stations”; for Christians, the stations become *vocations* by virtue of recognizing God’s voice urging us to love others in these stations.⁵ Still others prefer to split the difference, acknowledging the difference faith makes for the Christian’s experience, yet not reserving *vocation* as a technical term for this distinction.⁶ Regardless of position, writers address this issue with assertions rather than arguments.

For many writers, the notion that Christians alone have vocations is implicit in claims that vocation is the vehicle for forming society according to God’s will. As Steven Garber puts it, Christians should exhibit “a faith that shapes vocation that shapes culture.”⁷ A true vocation must “make a difference.”⁸ Held up for emulation are occupations addressing wicked problems like human trafficking, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or AIDS in Africa.⁹ A vocational hierarchy emerges. Occupations with presumed large-scale positive impact take precedence, such that working a well-compensating but not obviously altruistic job in order to care for one’s disabled child is second-best.¹⁰

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³ Wadell and Pinches, *Living Vocationally*, 60; James W. Skillen, *God’s Sabbath with Creation: Vocations Fulfilled, the Glory Unveiled* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019).

⁴ Todd Wilson, *More: Find Your Personal Calling and Live Life to the Fullest Measure* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 50.

⁵ Michael Berg, *Vocation: The Setting of Human Flourishing* (Irvine, CA: 1517 Publishing, 2021), 6.

⁶ Jeffrey Leininger, *Callings for Life: God’s Plan, Your Purpose* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 2020), 71.

⁷ Steven Garber, *Visions of Vocation: Common Grace for the Common Good* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014), 18.

⁸ Gordon T. Smith, *Courage and Calling: Embracing Your God-Given Potential*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 108. See also Susan Robb, *Called: Hearing and Responding to God’s Voice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019), 70; Stephanie Shackelford and Bill Denzel, *You on Purpose: Discover Your Calling and Create the Life You Were Meant to Live* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2021), 129.

⁹ Garber, *Visions of Vocation*.

¹⁰ Amy L. Sherman, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011), 111–12.

in the redemption of the world.”¹¹ The most common move is to suggest that in vocation we bring, enact, or anticipate the kingdom of God.¹²

A slight counterbalance to the “making a difference” narrative is that which focuses on the object of service rather than the results. Stressing that the believer’s good works are not directed to God, Michael Berg writes that through vocation, “my actions flow out of me with one target and only one target: my neighbor.”¹³ Extremely rare is the classical Lutheran view that vocation is for maintaining rather than improving the world:

Until Christ returns in glory, our world will constantly be in the throes of sin, death, and the devil. Although from time to time human society can make some external and temporary improvements, these occasional remedies remain ultimately fleeting. Rather like a dying body whose death can be slowed but not prevented and whose pain can be lessened but not removed, the agents of God’s left hand do His work of curbing the effects of sin but not its trajectory.¹⁴

If today’s writers on vocation have mostly left behind Luther’s two kingdoms, at least some are appreciative of the reformer’s insight that all honest work has dignity. This could be read as an implicit critique of the vocational hierarchies suggested elsewhere. Brent Waters devotes an entire book to the theological meaning of “common callings and ordinary virtues.”¹⁵ “Dirty jobs” are meaningful because they contribute to health and sanitation for others.¹⁶ Many books specifically combat the notion that “vocation” is reserved for religious occupations.¹⁷ A subgenre of vocation literature aims at helping people reframe work so that mere jobs become meaningful vocations.¹⁸ When this view is consistently applied (and it rarely is), impact becomes an article of faith rather than a goal to be pursued:

But all I do is shuffle papers around all day in my cubicle. I am a lonely tradesman. I flip burgers for a living. Is this really Christ’s work? Yes . . . I know it may seem like your work doesn’t “make a difference” (whatever that means) . . . [But God] sees love being carried out. Even if your heart is not in it, his is. Even if you do not seem to “make a difference,” he makes a difference.¹⁹

¹¹ Wadell and Pinches, *Living Vocationally*, 66.

¹² Sherman, *Kingdom Calling*, 18; Doug Koskela, *Calling and Clarity: Discovering What God Wants for Your Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 112; Thomas V. Frederick, *Identity, Calling, and Workplace Spirituality: Meaning Making and Developing Career Fit* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2022), 45.

¹³ Berg, *Vocation*, 71.

¹⁴ Leininger, *Callings for Life*, 76.

¹⁵ Brent Waters, *Common Callings and Ordinary Virtues: Christian Ethics for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022).

¹⁶ Drew Tucker, *4D Formation: Exploring Vocation in Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2022), 127.

¹⁷ Smith, *Courage and Calling*, 36.

¹⁸ Shundrawn A. Thomas, *Discover Joy in Work: Transforming Your Occupation into Your Vocation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2019); Robert Banks, *Transforming Daily Work into a Divine Vocation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022).

¹⁹ Berg, *Vocation*, 58.

Similar insights appear in writers examining Ecclesiastes for vocational insights. According to Tyler Atkinson, Ecclesiastes' refrain that "This is from God" testifies to the moments when, amid mundane work, "one relieves oneself of self-determination and depends upon God as the arbiter of success."²⁰

For others, vocations are primarily the venue for making disciples or bearing witness to Christ. Such writers sometimes sound in harmony with the dignity-of-all-work perspective, since a janitor can as easily testify as a humanitarian relief worker.²¹ But their orientation differs fundamentally: vocation's salience is not the inherent work of any position or relationship but its evangelistic potential. And because spreading the gospel is presumed to have great impact on the world, these writers also interpret vocation as the avenue for making a difference.²²

Much of the literature on vocation works on the assumption that readers have the social and economic freedom to pursue occupations they feel best suited for (or divinely drawn to). Some writers admit that such a mindset is a "luxury" but do not let the fact that "the majority of humans . . . have thrust upon them tasks and responsibilities about which they have no choice" deter them from the conviction that everyone—not just a blessed minority—has a vocation.²³ With this assumption, one's "dream" is synonymous with that to which one is "called."²⁴ The fundamental task is to "discern" one's vocation. This is a deeply personal responsibility, since "we each have to make the call [about our calling]; no one else can do it for us."²⁵ Especially for young people setting a life trajectory, vocation requires authenticity. "To be authentic—to author one's own life—is to dream the alternatives and make deliberate choices."²⁶ Writers commonly assume that readers are—or plan to be—college educated and often take for granted that this process will lead one to bucking conventional expectations, as frequent references to *Billy Elliot* illustrate.²⁷ At the same time, input from a (generally self-selected) community is essential; several writers recommend Parker Palmer's Quaker practice of a "clearness committee."²⁸ Writers do not promise certainty when making vocational choices but assurance that with the Spirit's guidance you can't get "too far off course."²⁹

²⁰ Tyler Atkinson, *Singing at the Winepress: Ecclesiastes and the Ethics of Work* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 223.

²¹ Wilson, *More*, 133.

²² Jonathan Pearson, *Be the Switch: Living Your Calling While Living Your Life* (Spring Hill, TN: Rainer, 2018), 63.

²³ Gordon T. Smith, *Your Calling Here and Now: Making Sense of Vocation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2022), 7.

²⁴ Susan Harris Howell, *Buried Talents: Overcoming Gendered Socialization to Answer God's Call* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 71.

²⁵ Gordon T. Smith, *Consider Your Calling: Six Questions for Discerning Your Vocation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 10.

²⁶ David F. White, *Dreamcare: A Theology of Youth, Spirit, and Vocation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), xvii.

²⁷ Smith, *Consider Your Calling*, 56; Koskela, *Calling and Clarity*, xiv; Shackelford and Denzel, *You on Purpose*, 84; White, *Dreamcare*, 1, 123.

²⁸ Tucker, *4D Formation*, 152; Shackelford and Denzel, *You on Purpose*, 133; Koskela, *Calling and Clarity*, 38.

²⁹ Susan Lynn Maros, *Calling in Context: Social Location and Vocational Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 65, 184; Shackelford and Denzel, *You on Purpose*, 141, 178, 138.

For most writers, crucial data for vocational discernment comes from determining how one is uniquely “wired” by God.³⁰ This applies to abilities or gifts as well as “passions.”³¹ Several invoke Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s “flow state,” the ecstatic condition of perfect focus and internal motivation.³² Although not discounting social influences, the literature emphasizes the idea that each person is created with a “birth competency” for flourishing in particular arenas.³³ As Todd Wilson writes, God “gives each of us a custom design that helps uniquely shape our sweet spot.”³⁴ Given the time and maturity necessary to determine one’s God-given skills and passions, some writers focus on stages of adult vocational discernment, and some state explicitly that children do not have vocations.³⁵

According to the literature, faithfully living in this sweet spot is not the only ethical imperative, but it is the greater goal to which our lives should bend. Commitments and responsibilities that don’t align with one’s sweet spot—including family needs—are “constraints” that must be actively reframed as positives or simply waited out.³⁶ As Smith argues, these responsibilities may rightly demand a person’s attention temporarily, but “then I must trust, with patience and humility, for the opportunities and responsibilities that might come down the road and that reflect more fundamentally who I am being called to be and what I am being called to do.”³⁷

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Closely connected to the idea of passions is the claim that vocation must entail a sense of personal fulfillment. Readers are directed to ask themselves, “Are you happy?” as a diagnostic tool.³⁸ If you don’t look forward to and even “daydream about it,” you should question whether it is your true vocation.³⁹ On the whole, your calling should contribute to your “happiness, contentment, and peace.”⁴⁰ For others, finding joy is not the prerequisite but the task of vocation: through “introspective search” and self-improvement, one’s *occupation* can become one’s *vocation*.⁴¹

³⁰ Maros, *Calling in Context*, 199, 206.

³¹ Rob Wegner and Brian Phipps, *Find Your Place: Locating Your Calling through Your Gifts, Passions, and Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 82.

³² White, *Dreamcare*, 29; Thomas, *Discover Joy in Work*, 132–33.

³³ Smith, *Courage and Calling*, 56.

³⁴ Wilson, *More*, 89.

³⁵ Smith, *Courage and Calling*, 104; Wadell and Pinches, *Living Vocationally*, 89.

³⁶ Wilson, *More*, 183–87.

³⁷ Smith, *Courage and Calling*, 103.

³⁸ Garber, *Visions of Vocation*, 238.

³⁹ Wegner and Phipps, *Find Your Place*, 164.

⁴⁰ Wadell and Pinches, *Living Vocationally*, 125.

⁴¹ Thomas, *Discover Joy in Work*, 3.

The presumption of choice is nuanced by the sense that one is obligated to follow God's call. Since discernment is more art than science, the obligation is relative to the clarity of the calling. Writers generally consider personal, specific callings clearer when God speaks directly to individuals, but not all draw a fine line between God's direct and indirect speech. God may speak through the advice of friends or thoughtful reflection on your gifts and passions; some argue that vocations require hearing the divine voice both internally and externally. But writers especially urge caution not to confuse human authority with the "prompting of the Spirit."⁴² If my gift is clear, for instance, I would be "disobeying Jesus if I didn't acknowledge the gift and use it."⁴³ Still, the notion that God communicates supernaturally and mystically is common.⁴⁴ Although this experience is not universal, it is prized, and several writers assume that gospel ministers are supposed to have a direct or inner call.⁴⁵

Some push against these dominant messages of discernment. Waters challenges the introspective thrust by arguing that "we do not find ourselves in ourselves, but in our interactions with others."⁴⁶ Similarly, one's gifts are not found by looking inside ourselves but when we serve others.⁴⁷ Sometimes the same authors who stress future-oriented discernment try to balance this preoccupation with attention to the "here and now."⁴⁸ Others are more direct. Gordon Fee notes that the common presumption of choice is "elitist" and lacks biblical support.⁴⁹ Jeffrey Leininger critiques what he calls the "myth of the one great calling," which believers are supposed to devote time and energy to discerning.⁵⁰ Susan Maros is both accurate in her observations and piercing in her critique:

Much of the literature on vocation published in the last twenty years in the United States demonstrates a fundamental underlying assumption: that individuals are free to choose their vocational path. Among other things, this assumption establishes the relative socioeconomic privilege of the authors and their intended audience. To be able to consider one's inclinations, passions, and desires as a primary factor of guidance assumes few economic pressures at work. This approach to vocational discernment also ignores all the ways that people are connected and the fact that vocational choices affect more than just the individual making them.⁵¹

⁴² Smith, *Courage and Calling*, 138.

⁴³ Wegner and Phipps, *Find Your Place*, 78.

⁴⁴ Shackelford and Denzel, *You on Purpose*, 27; Wegner and Phipps, *Find Your Place*, 173.

⁴⁵ Banks, *Transforming Daily Work*, 22.

⁴⁶ Waters, *Common Callings and Ordinary Virtues*, 65.

⁴⁷ Banks, *Transforming Daily Work*, 115.

⁴⁸ Smith, *Your Calling Here and Now*.

⁴⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *Offer Yourselves to God: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Paul's Epistles* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019), 5.

⁵⁰ Leininger, *Callings for Life*, 1–2.

⁵¹ Maros, *Calling in Context*, 114.

Echoing this critique, Richard Kronk argues that the common notion of calling denies this experience to those who are disabled, live in abject poverty, or are bound by cultural values such as filial piety.⁵²

The fulfillment narrative also comes under some scrutiny. Despite Frederick Buechner's best efforts to marry your gladness with the world's hunger, some writers feel the need to declare ultimate allegiance to one. As Amy Sherman writes, "We are called to resist the modern assumption that personal happiness and satisfaction are the highest and most important criteria when considering vocational decisions."⁵³ Others try to distinguish between a laudable search for meaning or purpose and the baser pursuit of "self-fulfillment, self-interests, or self-realization."⁵⁴ Likewise, some walk the tightrope of condemning the "quest for personal happiness" while arguing that living "with purpose" is "the secret to what people call 'happiness.'"⁵⁵ A more biblically tethered approach comes from a study of Ecclesiastes, which yields the conclusion that "vocation properly understood infuses secular life—the 'ordinary'—with meaning and significance."⁵⁶

Several writers also challenge the expectation of a supernatural or inner call. Fee bemoans that "if you're always waiting for a voice from heaven, you may not ever do anything."⁵⁷ Sometimes this swings the emphasis back to discerning God's will through inventories of self.⁵⁸ Others simply seek to soften the drama of supernatural communication, preferring to speak of divine "whispers" and "guidance" rather than "discovery."⁵⁹ Kronk argues, however, that many believers claim unwarranted indirect divine communication in order to fit a predetermined narrative.⁶⁰ He would rather agree with Berg, for whom confidence in God's providence displaces all concern for "hearing" God's voice.⁶¹

Vocation is also an arena of personal behavior. Some writers take a developmental approach to the role of vocation in the life of faith. "Vocation," writes Robert Banks, "is where sanctification happens as Christians grow spiritually in faith and in good works."⁶² With appreciation for the emphasis on believers' holiness emerging from Vatican II, Wadell and Pinches argue that vocations give us "opportunity to grow, to deepen, and to be morally and spiritually transformed."⁶³ With typical Lutheran reluctance to put sanctification in growth terms, Berg claims that "vocation is the ring in which the old man and the new man spar, where the old

⁵² Richard Kronk, *Not Called: Recovering the Biblical Framework of Divine Guidance* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022).

⁵³ Sherman, *Kingdom Calling*, 48; see also pp. 105–06.

⁵⁴ Frederick, *Identity, Calling, and Workplace Spirituality*, 68.

⁵⁵ Shackelford and Denzel, *You on Purpose*, 35, 37.

⁵⁶ J. Daryl Charles, *Wisdom and Work: Theological Reflections on Human Labor from Ecclesiastes* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021), 14.

⁵⁷ Fee, *Offer Yourselves to God*, 10.

⁵⁸ Smith, *Courage and Calling*, 54.

⁵⁹ Charles, *Wisdom and Work*, 163–64.

⁶⁰ Kronk, *Not Called*, 97.

⁶¹ Berg, *Vocation*, 119; see also Kronk, *Not Called*, 298.

⁶² Banks, *Transforming Daily Work*, 58.

⁶³ Wadell and Pinches, *Living Vocationally*, 30.

dies and the new rises.”⁶⁴ Also coming from the Lutheran perspective, Leininger offers a rebuttal of any simplistic sanctification-in-vocation narrative. “The more we grow in awareness of God’s callings upon us,” he writes, “the more sin we will recognize,” calling “for an even deeper awareness of His grace.”⁶⁵

A few writers are less willing to assume vocation’s positive role in sanctification, arguing instead that character and virtues must be actively fostered for and through vocations. “Although vocational proficiencies are important in pursuing our callings, they are not enough,” writes Waters. “There is also the question of character. Being skillful is not the same as being good. This is where *virtue* plays a crucial role.”⁶⁶ One thorough proposal identifies virtues for beginning the vocational journey (attentiveness, humility, and gratitude), continuing the journey (fidelity, justice, and courage), and completing the journey (hope and patience).⁶⁷

The substance of this article is identifying and describing important themes of recent vocation literature. Yet the purpose is to equip readers with material for critical engagement in the context of their own faith communities. A few examples should indicate the range of possible critiques.

- The claim that passions and talents are embedded in us at birth ignores recent research on passion development and growth mindset.
- The treatment of vocations largely under the rubric of occupations downplays family relationships.
- The typical discernment narrative, with its focus on fulfillment, would, if universally followed, leave hardly anyone to clean bathrooms, transport food, or answer customer-service queries.

As one model of this critical engagement, I can address in more depth the inadequacy of this literature’s consideration of one aspect of vocation that is fundamental to Reformation teaching. Vocation cannot be understood without reference to *suffering*. Yet, suffering is not a major theme in these books, and those that address it do so glibly. Some deflect suffering by doubling down on “satisfaction and joy” in vocations.⁶⁸ Some subsume suffering to the self-discovery motif.⁶⁹ Others demand that any “sacrificial service for the other” wait in line behind “tend[ing] to our personal wellbeing.”⁷⁰ Discussions of suffering in vocation often end on an unearned high note, confident that “we will never seem more dead than alive.”⁷¹ Even a more sober commentator asserts that vocations “often involve . . . even suffering,” as though holding out for some different outcome.⁷²

⁶⁴ Berg, *Vocation*, 74.

⁶⁵ Leininger, *Callings for Life*, 130.

⁶⁶ Waters, *Common Callings and Ordinary Virtues*, 14.

⁶⁷ Wadell and Pinches, *Living Vocationally*, chaps. 7–9.

⁶⁸ Wilson, *More*, 23.

⁶⁹ Maros, *Calling in Context*, 69; Wegner and Phipps, *Find Your Place*, 142.

⁷⁰ Smith, *Your Calling Here and Now*, 50.

⁷¹ Wadell and Pinches, *Living Vocationally*, 14.

⁷² Waters, *Common Callings and Ordinary Virtues*, 24.

More faithfully, writers occasionally relate suffering to sanctification. Having God-given callings means the “burdens are *good*. God is at work through them in shaping us, disciplining us, and ultimately drawing us closer to him.”⁷³ Despite Smith’s questionable claim that some may justifiably avoid suffering they feel is not consistent with “the fundamental character” of their calling, he refers to suffering as a “means of grace” that, as with Paul’s thorn, becomes a lesson on “lean[ing] into the grace of God.”⁷⁴ As with any appeal to sanctification, however, the devil is in the theological details, which are sparse in most of these works. A promising engagement is Atkinson’s study of Ecclesiastes in conversation with Bonaventure and Luther. Here Ecclesiastes’ ruminations on work’s “unhappy business” signify the “crosses and curses of work” prompting us to repentance and reliance on God.⁷⁵

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Despite these few constructive glimmers, the literature offers little for those whose suffering is chronic, consuming, or unaccompanied by a sense of joy, purpose, sanctification, or self-actualization. The fundamental error is the failure to acknowledge that in the dominion of sin, suffering is integral to vocation. Under God’s curse, relationships are pain (Gen 3:16), and labor is toil (Gen 3:17–19). Vocation is the shape of personal suffering. Family members self-destruct, friends betray, loved ones die, employers write pink slips. Nearly every suffering can easily be connected to vocation. Those who think they can escape suffering—say, by ending an unhappy marriage—find that unhappiness follows in their new situation.⁷⁶ Believers experience the additional weight of the cross in vocation; certain of the resurrection, they continually sacrifice their bodies in service to others (Rom 12). This is not to equate all suffering or make suffering a virtue. Rather, it is to recognize a wide swath of human—that is, vocational—experience under the category of suffering, so that we encounter even the most grievous trials as a familiar foe who is finally not victorious over God’s elect (Rom 8:31–38). ☩

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⁷³ Leininger, *Callings for Life*, 146 (emphasis in original).

⁷⁴ Smith, *Consider Your Calling*, 99, 93.

⁷⁵ Atkinson, *Singing at the Winepress*, 137, 183.

⁷⁶ Linda J. Waite et al., *Does Divorce Make People Happy?: Findings from a Study of Unhappy Marriages* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2002).