

Call and Occupation

BY PAUL J. CONTINO

In common parlance, “vocation” refers to one’s job or career. But Christians understand vocation, or calling, in a more encompassing way and with a keen ear for Who it is that calls. The books reviewed here provide a tool-chest for anyone who wishes to think through the relation between God’s calling and our daily tasks.

In common parlance, “vocation” often refers to one’s job, or the career one has chosen to pursue. But the root meaning of vocation is calling: can we say that we are “called” to our particular jobs? Christians understand calling in a more encompassing way and with a keen ear for Who it is that calls. We are called by God, whose summons we hear in Scripture. The Lord’s words summon us to love God with all our strength; love our neighbor as ourselves; and pick up our cross and follow him who made it the symbol of sacrificial, redemptive love. Does this divine calling to discipleship and to sanctity point us to a specific occupation?

No, insists Gary D. Badcock. In his fine book *The Way of Life: A Theology of Christian Vocation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998, 128 pp., \$17.50), Badcock rejects the notion that God has drafted personal career blueprints and emphasizes instead the universal vocation to which all Christians are called. He observes that in “the Bible...the Christian calling refers to the reorientation of human life to God through repentance, faith, and obedience; to participation in God’s saving purpose in history; and to the heavenly goal: ‘I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus’ (Philippians 3:14)” (p. 10). The word “participation” in this sentence suggests a recurring theme in Badcock’s book: human freedom is exercised in response to God’s call, and “vocation...is best understood in terms of the human response to God” (p. 30).

In developing this vocational “theology of response,” Badcock turns an attentive ear to both Scripture and theology, especially the theological work of Hans Urs von Balthasar, who assists Badcock in developing his thesis: “A vocation is something lived, something enacted in a concrete life story.... God does not act out the details of my living for me, or even in me; instead my existence is one of created freedom. Even though my entire being is dependent on God, I nevertheless choose and act, and I build my own life story through the decisions and projects I undertake” (p. 53). He draws on Balthasar’s *Theo-drama*, which highlights the way in which the Biblical story—especially the gospel of Christ’s incarnation—reveals a God who “makes a place for the whole human story in the salvation-historical drama precisely by entering the world of space and time” (p. 59).

Here, too, Badcock accentuates “the universal principle of love” as opposed to “the particular mode of life by which [a person] will ‘plunge into the breach’ in and with Christ on behalf of others” (p. 116). Elsewhere in his book, however, he *does* attend to particular modes. Indeed, in his sole criticism of the theologian, he claims that Balthasar “seems unable to give an adequate account of the way in which it might be possible for the *individual* to hear the voice of God calling and the *individual* as such to respond” (p. 70, emphasis added). The charge is a bit unfair: among Balthasar’s numerous works are biographical studies of the particular vocations of the Carmelite nun Therese of Lisieux and the twentieth-century novelist Georges Bernanos. Indeed, Badcock draws on Balthasar to underscore the way Biblical figures like Jeremiah and Paul are called to “a specific plan or purpose” (p. 82). In his concluding chapter, Badcock draws from virtue ethics, which stresses that in seeking a narrative unity to the pilgrimage of life, the decisive question is not “What ought I do?” but “What kind of person ought I to be?” Be it firefighter, fisherman, or philosopher, “I ought to be a person for whom love, service, and obedience to God are the major priorities” (p. 136).

In *The Fabric of this World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1990, 231 pp., \$16.00) Lee Hardy also offers fine counsel, especially to young people discerning their career path. Hardy draws upon the Puritan distinction between the “general” calling of all people to the Christian way of life and the “particular” calling of an individual to certain occupational tasks. William Perkins, perhaps one of the most eloquent voices in this tradition, argues that we serve God by serving our neighbor in our work. We thus join the general calling with the particular. With confidence and vigor, Hardy defends this thesis; he offers wise principles to guide both the discerning of a particular vocation and integrating it with the general. First, we must ask not only “What are my interests?” but, realistically, “What are my gifts?” The judgment of others can be indispensable here. Second, we

must ask: “When can I meet genuine human needs with my gifts?” Given our consumerist-driven society, Hardy notes Yves Simon’s caution against “illusory services” which “assert that any and every desire is an expression of genuine need” (p. 94). Genuine service, to and for “the common good,” must take precedence (pp. 97-98). Further, as Hardy illustrates with real-life examples of doctors and lawyers, volunteer work—work for which we

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aren’t paid—may prove the most vital fulfillment of my particular calling to serve.

The first half of Hardy’s book is a very readable history of the way that work has been understood in Western civilization. For the ancient Greeks, work was a burden lifted by the many

to enable the god-like leisure of the few. Not that leisure is to be confused with laziness: for Aristotle, leisure provides the occasion for the receptive activity of contemplation, the wonder-infused study of the world. The medieval imagination sustains this view: it disparages ordinary human toil, except, perhaps, as a spiritual exercise to keep idleness at bay, and privileges monastic, contemplative prayer, which seeks union with God. In his discussion of monasticism, however, Hardy relies on historical accounts which tend to reduce the monastic life to its worst abuses. As Badcock—who, like Hardy, draws extensively on Luther’s valuable theology of vocation—observes, Luther “was deeply unfair to the ideal of religious community,” especially as that ideal was exemplified in his own monastic advisor, John Staupitz (p. 117). Here I recommend Jean Le Clerq’s wonderful study, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study in Monastic Culture* (Fordham University Press), which provides a fuller picture of the way the medieval monks rooted the tasks of reading and writing in the first and greatest commandment, and, as Hardy too observes, fulfilled the second commandment in their intercessory prayer for others.

The Italian Renaissance ushers in a revaluing of human industry, an elevation of creative toil to a godlike status, a presumption which reaches an atheistic apex in the thought of Karl Marx. The Reformation also affirms the great value of human work, but sees it more soberly in the service of God and neighbor. Here Hardy finds Lutheran, Reformed, and more recent Catholic traditions forming an integrated whole, “a remarkable ecumenical convergence in the practical theology of work” (p. 76). In his lectures on Galatians, Luther insists that every human station, and the most

humble and ordinary tasks, dutifully and diligently accomplished, “are fruits of the Spirit” (p. 47). The Calvinist tradition ushers in a broader dimension of social critique, and develops the notion that “not only people’s personal lives but also human society be reformed according to the Word of God” (p. 65). Finally, Pope John Paul II, in *Laborem Exercens*, following upon a century of Catholic social thought, affirms the dignity and duty of the human worker: “the word of God’s revelation is profoundly marked by the fundamental truth that man, created in the image of God, shares by his work in the activity of the Creator” (pp. 72-73). Hardy approvingly cites John Paul even further: “by enduring the toil of work in union with Christ crucified for us, man in a way collaborates with the Son of God for the redemption of humanity. He shows himself a true disciple of Christ by carrying the cross in his turn every day in the activity that he is called upon to perform” (p. 74). In this vision the general and the particular callings mystically intertwine. So too does the image of work presented in Genesis. Genesis 1 holds out a vision in which humankind, made in God’s image, is granted dominion over creation. On the other hand, Genesis 3, in which humankind must suffer toil in the wake of the fall, presents work as painful. A unified vision, such as that affirmed by Hardy, sees both images of work as offering a redemptive dimension.

Both passages from Genesis are included in the wonderful anthology *Working: Its Meaning and Limits* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001, 272 pp., \$15.00). In this portable library, Gil Meilaender presents a compendium of thought on this subject. In a splendid introduction which articulates the issues at stake, Meilaender divides his selections into three broad categories: “The Meaning of Work,” “The Limits of Work,” and “Rest.” Readers of *Christian Reflection* will find especially valuable—and provocative—the differing ways in which Christian thinkers have understood work in relation to vocation. For Dorothy Sayers, work *is* vocation, “the natural exercise and function of man—the creature who is made in the image of his Creator” (p. 43). Such a view, objects Joseph Pieper, defines a person solely in terms of his or her function and leaves no freedom for leisure. For Pieper, leisure means something very precious: “An attitude of total receptivity toward, and willing immersion in, reality”; it is “that precise way of being silent which is a prerequisite for listening in order to hear” (p. 63). Without leisure, we may be deaf to God’s calling. Jacques Ellul goes so far as to claim that modern work has become so debased by mechanization and commodification that, barring a miracle, “work can no longer be a vocation” (p. 102).

After encountering such vexing differences, it’s helpful to return to voices from the Reformation, which soberly appraise work as neither God-like co-creation nor fallen toil but, rather, as a sanctified vocation to be pursued “dutifully and diligently” (p. 11). Here, along with passages

from Calvin and Perkins, the reader will find a hymn by Wesley and a poem by George Herbert, in which ordinary work understood as vocation becomes “the Elixir” which “turns the base metal of drudgery into the gold of something divine” (p. 11).

Perhaps parts two and three are the most revealing sections of Meilaender’s book. Work has its limits; meaningful as it may be, we simply can’t work all the time. Thus St. Augustine reflects on a life that tacks between “sanctified leisure” and “the compulsion of love that undertakes righteous engagement in affairs” (p. 132). Karl Barth renders the way work changes in the developing stages of life—as, for example, the middle-aged man who has sown and now must reap, who “see[s] at a distance the end, ‘the night when no man can work’” and is thus stir[red]...to measured haste” (p. 134). And Leo Tolstoy, in the searing novella *Death of Ivan Ilych*, depicts a man who makes an idol of his work and faces a night that comes sooner than expected.

For Jews and Christians, the sabbath imposes a divinely-ordained limit upon human work. God rested on the seventh day of creation; God commands us to do the same. But if the sabbath is thus devoted to leisure, its center is worship. Fittingly, Meilaender closes his book with the reminder that all work must be grounded in and give way to worship. The reflection of Anglican theologian Kenneth Kirk proves especially memorable here. One might ask: “Shouldn’t worship give way to acts of charity?” Kirk responds that true charity is impossible without humility, and worship (in which we gather before the Creator with gratitude and praise) is a school of humility, as long as we approach it as a holy end in itself. Both leisure (in its root sense of receptive wonder and contemplation) and worship provide a foretaste of the ultimate end to which we are called: resting, actively and eternally, in God’s love.

Of the three books, Meilaender’s best lends itself to a more leisurely pace: its excerpts can be read randomly and reflectively. Together these books provide a tool-chest for anyone who wishes to think through the relation between God’s calling and our daily tasks.



PAUL J. CONTINO

is Associate Professor of Great Books and Associate Director of the Center for Faith and Learning at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California.