

The Enduring Power of Vocation: From the Reformation to 2017

Calum Samuelson MA MPhil

Today, most use the term ‘vocation’ interchangeably with others such as ‘occupation’, ‘profession’, and ‘career’. While mere etymology cannot unravel the present conflation of these terms, it is important to observe the distinct historical connotation of ‘vocation’, which comes from *vocatio*—‘a call or summons’. Whereas words such as ‘profession’ (what one professes to do¹) and ‘career’ (where one is going in life²) imply an active choice on behalf of an individual, the term ‘vocation’ denotes an external invitation to which the individual must respond.

In the 16th century, the understanding of vocation was radically transformed by the Reformers—especially Martin Luther and John Calvin. The greatest thrust of this change was that it made vocation a universal reality for all members of society, not just for priests and monks. It made everyone equal before God.

Today in the West³, there is no consensus about what exactly constitutes a career—much less what it means to be ‘called’. Perhaps the most common view is either pragmatic or Epicurean: whatever is *most useful* or whatever is *most satisfying*. This fragmented understanding of work, along with recent geopolitical discussions around employment and immigration,⁴ suggests that our world is ripe for a re-envisioning of what it means to have a *vocation* in life.

Accordingly, this paper will offer suggestions for how a doctrine of vocation can transform our perceptions of employment today. This paper does not endorse a simple return to a former period of history, but it is crucial to review how our understandings of work and service have

¹ Latin, *professio*.

² Latin, *carrus*, ‘a wheeled vehicle’.

³ This does not discount the importance of calling in other parts of the world, but we can only focus on so much here. Furthermore, although the continents of Africa, South America, and Asia have been significantly impacted by the Reformation (for example, the largest Lutheran church in the world is the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus), the most immediate correlations are found in Europe and North America.

⁴ Consider, for instance, much of the discourse involved in the decisions for Brexit and President Trump.

evolved in the past 500 years in order to understand the precedents for the situation today. Therefore, the first half of this paper will: 1) examine the doctrine of vocation during the Reformation; 2) consider to what extent this doctrine was applied, modified, and abandoned in subsequent centuries. The second half will then attempt to provide some points of application for today.

Vocation for the Reformers

The first 1500 years of Christianity largely viewed vocation as the prerogative of clerics and monks.⁵ One was only ‘called’ if one served God to the exclusion of all other possible work. This understanding is sometimes traced back to St. Antony.⁶ Upon hearing about the interchange between Jesus and the rich man,⁷ Antony decided that he too must leave everything behind to follow Jesus. Antony’s lifestyle attracted many others and he eventually organised a monastic community.

It has been suggested that the vocation of monasticism mushroomed in Late Antiquity (c. 3rd – 7th centuries) as a new expression of faith for zealous Christians.⁸ As the argument goes, the Edict of Milan (under Constantine) and subsequent promotion of Christianity to the state religion (by Theodosius), meant that Christians could no longer demonstrate their devotion by means of martyrdom. Monasticism helped fill this void by offering an intense exercise or training (*asketis*) for Christians. Consequently, spiritual hierarchy was intrinsic to monasticism from the beginning, and increasingly favoured *vita contemplativa* (life of meditation/prayer) over *vita activa* (life of manual labour).

Throughout the Middle Ages, monasticism continued to evolve in complex ways across Europe and the Near East as monasteries developed localised customs, practices, and rituals.⁹

⁵ For a helpful survey of this history see K. Holl, ‘The History of the Word Vocation (Beruf)’, H. Peacock (trans.), *Review and Expositor* 55 (1958): 126-54.

⁶ Also called Antony the Great or Antony of Egypt. He is commonly viewed as the ‘Father of Monasticism’, although it is clear from Athanasius’ biography and other sources that there were many other monks before him.

⁷ Luke 18:18–30.

⁸ For a nuanced discussion of this transition see the landmark work by P. Brown, ‘The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity’, *The Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 80–101.

⁹ The *Rules* of St. Benedict is one example of a system that radically impacted monasticism in the West, emphasising more communal living and the value of manual labor... ‘*ora et labora*’ prayer and work. The Cluny Reform in 909 provided more solidarity among monasteries. In the Church more broadly, John Wycliffe, Jan Hus, and Erasmus all criticised the status quo in various ways.

Unsurprisingly, by the early 16th century, monasticism was far from homogenous, and many had already challenged and revised it in various ways.¹⁰ However, as we look back on the historical record, the particular objections of a rural German monk named Martin Luther (1483–1546) occurred in such a time and manner that they sent tremendous shockwaves throughout the continent.¹¹

Luther became a monk of the Augustinian order in response to feelings of deep existential anguish regarding his salvation. Scholars differ as to the extent and nature of Luther's *anfechtungen* (spiritual trials), but one thing is clear: he was grossly aware of his sinfulness before God. Gradually, by studying and teaching the Bible, he rediscovered in a profoundly personal way that salvation was entirely dependent on the justice of God rather than man's own efforts.¹² This idea would form the bedrock upon which all of Luther's work thereafter rested.

Although it is clear that various abuses were present in the monastic system in Luther's day, it would be wrong to conclude that all monasteries were filled with monks in as much turmoil as Luther. Nevertheless, after his 'born again' experience, Luther could only view the monastic system with disgust, describing them as fundamentally sinful.¹³ This assessment focused largely on monastic vows, which locked monks into an impossible life of duty in order to gain favour with God. Thus, Luther began his *Avoiding the Doctrines of Men* by stating that his goal was to save 'those poor consciences who are held captive in monasteries and convents'.¹⁴

This thinking overflowed into Luther's understanding of life for the common man. If it was impossible to be justified through good works, then there was no difference between the 'good works' of monks and the menial, daily labour of farmers. On this note, he wrote, 'What would the nuns and monks do if they heard that in the sight of God they are not a bit better than married people and mud-stained farmers?'¹⁵

¹⁰ The Dominican order is an excellent example of monks who wanted to be more involved with common people, and is thus referred to as a 'preaching' order.

¹¹ As many have often observed, Luther's ideas simply could not have spread without the aid of the recently invented printing press, which John Fox famously praised as a divine tool of liberation and salvation. See A. Walsham, 'Unclasping the Book? Post-Reformation English Catholicism and the Vernacular Bible', *Journal of British Studies* 42 (2003): 142–43.

¹² Previously, Luther had interpreted Romans 1:17, 'The righteous will live by faith', as a *duty* that he had to fulfil. But one day he finally realised that the context of the passage actually demonstrated that the believer is a passive recipient of salvation who is completely dependent upon God's own justice and the merits of Christ.

¹³ G. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Philadelphia, 1957), 3.

¹⁴ Helmut Lehmann (Gen. Ed.), *Luther's Works* Vol. 35, 'Avoiding the Doctrines of Men' (Philadelphia: Fortress Press) 131.

¹⁵ Lehmann, *Luther's Works* Vol. 44, 'Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows,' 305.

Luther's writings addressed a plethora of contemporary issues—ranging from the role of soldiers to the legitimacy of marriage—and at first glance, the doctrine of vocation may seem like a peripheral one. But it is actually a central component of Luther's theology as the 'locus of the Christian life'.¹⁶ Luther believed that one's primary calling was to serve God as a Christian (*vocatio spiritualis*) and that from there flows the call to serve everyone in the world (*vocatio externa*).¹⁷ Since external vocation for Luther was not to be directed towards God, it is the neighbour who lies at the heart of Luther's ethics.¹⁸ In essence, 'God does not need our good works, but our neighbour does.'¹⁹

In line with this logic, Luther interpreted 1 Cor. 7:20 to mean that one must stay in the type of work he was doing when he became a Christian.²⁰ This did not limit the individual to only *one* vocation, however, for Luther conceived multiple spheres of responsibility in relationship to spouse, family, community, and customer.²¹ Simply put, any and every role in which one has consistent interaction with other individuals is a vocation. Accordingly, Luther believed we are called to serve specifically the people with whom we daily interact, for 'the clearest sign in God's providence is the fact that we have the neighbour we actually have'.²²

This was not necessarily a joyful task, and Luther fundamentally viewed vocation as the way in which the Christian bears their cross. But in faithfully fulfilling our vocation, humanity acts as a conduit for the love of God; or in one of Luther's favourite phrases, the *larvae Dei* (mask of God).²³ Ultimately, Luther's denial of the monastic lifestyle was not simply a restoration of the fundamental value of work. Much more powerfully, Luther's ideas affirmed that the only true way to serve God was to serve common people through normal and often menial tasks. He famously viewed changing nappies and other household chores as more valuable than the work of monks and nuns, thus deconstructing the pervasive sacred/secular distinctions of the Medieval age.

Although Luther wrote far more about the specific doctrine of vocation than any other

¹⁶ Gene Veith, *Martin Luther on Vocation and Serving Our Neighbors*.
<https://acton.org/pub/commentary/2016/03/30/martin-luther-vocation-and-serving-our-neighbors>.

¹⁷ For spiritual calling and external calling see Luther, WA, 34, II, 300.

¹⁸ Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 46.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁰ Most exegetes now agree that Luther misinterpreted this verse. The verse uses forms of *klesis* twice. Literally, 'Stay in the *calling* in which you were *called*.' It is worth noting how much Luther connects this idea to the fourth commandment, 'Obey your father and mother'.

²¹ Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 5.

²² *Ibid.*, 72.

²³ *Ibid.*, 91; 117, 180.

Reformer, it is important to note how his ideas were adapted by others. In general, Luther's thinking was narrowly focused on ecclesiastical issues. In contrast to Luther's intensely personal theology, which emphasised that the individual stands in isolation before God, others held more corporate and integrated views of the Christian faith. This was especially true of the Reformers in Switzerland, which led them to more dynamic understandings of vocation. This can be partly explained by geography and context. Luther operated from a monastic setting that was much more rural than the growing urban economies of cities like Zurich and Geneva.

John Calvin (1509–1564) worked within the context of the communal Swiss identity in Geneva, and produced what became by far the most thorough theology of any Reformer.²⁴ Building on Luther's basic ideas of personal salvation, Calvin was fundamentally concerned with Christian involvement in public welfare. His training in civil law and work with Martin Bucer in Strasburg gave him the experience and confidence he needed to help make radical changes to the relationship between churches and government in Geneva.²⁵ The issue of interest (or usury) provides a good example of Calvin's more dynamic thinking in contrast to that of Luther. With the influx of immigrants and growing economy in Geneva, quick access to large amounts of capital was vital. By exercising the Protestant/Reformed tenet of biblical interpretation, Calvin concluded that the ultimate motivation for the Old Testament prohibition on interest was a concern for the poor and disadvantaged. Because his society was radically different from the primitive society of Israel, he decided that this core concern could be maintained in other more reasonable ways while allowing limited interest to be charged.

Calvin's careful and creative thinking significantly impacted his understanding of vocation. Unlike Luther, he did not insist that people must remain in the specific type of job they had when they became Christians. This placed far more importance on the selection of employment and broadened its implications. Thus, for Calvin, the idea of Christian vocation evolved from Luther's basic ideas of passive submission to the state and began to embody the belief that Christians are to some extent responsible for shaping society. Far from hiding in their pulpits, Calvin and the other pastors of Geneva were deeply concerned about all facets of society, including the welfare of immigrants, the wages of workers, and the education of children. They strove to provide work for

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: in Two Volumes [1559]*, F. Battles (trans.) (Philadelphia, 1960).

²⁵ Although Calvin was one of the main thinkers, the city council of Geneva remained in control for the entire time.

the unemployed and believed that part of helping sick people *fully recover* from their stay in the hospital was to make sure they had a job when they were released.²⁶ Far from creating monotonous jobs out of thin air, Calvin and the pastors of Geneva worked hard to create work and help people learn the skills necessary to develop a meaningful trade through a sophisticated system of stipends, training, and mutual aid.²⁷ It was simply impossible for Calvin to exclude his Christianity from the public square. If Luther justified the spiritual significance of work, it was Calvin who made it dignified and glorious.

Vocation since the Reformation

‘Getting inside the head’ of the common man at any given period is one of the most elusive and perennial struggles of the historian. Accordingly, tracking how Luther’s doctrine of vocation impacted average workers is quite difficult. It should be no surprise, however, that Luther’s radical thoughts gradually cooled and crystallised as they were adapted in subsequent generations to fill the particular theology of various groups.²⁸ The sociologist, Max Weber, called this the ‘routinization of charisma’,²⁹ and the sociology of religion in general repeatedly demonstrates this pattern.³⁰

There have certainly been passionate individuals since Luther who have embodied a radical sense of Christian vocation in their lives. Names such as Wilberforce, William Booth, and Mother Teresa quickly come to mind. But such examples are often the result of personality just as much as a specific theological conviction, and are generally unhelpful in the sense that they perpetuate the idea that the devout fulfilling of Christian vocation should receive public recognition. Therefore, one should avoid focusing on the *output* of exceptional Christians if one hopes to understand how the doctrine of vocation was perceived in various periods.

Generally speaking, Luther’s distinction between spiritual and external vocation was increasingly minimised and basically reduced to the latter. Furthermore, Luther’s understanding of multiple external vocations was largely neglected and reduced to a singular focus on employment. For good or ill, this had the effect of prioritising a Christian’s occupation or

²⁶ A. Bieler, *Calvin’s Economic and Social Thought* (Geneva, 2005), 137.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 137–38.

²⁸ It could be said that this begins already with Philip Melancthon and what has been called ‘Lutheran Scholasticism’.

²⁹ M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, E. Frischoff (trans.) (London, 1971), 60–79.

³⁰ A. Walsham, ‘Migrations of the Holy’, 262; see also Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*.

profession as the ideal way to serve God. Several developments can be noted in the process of this increasing change.

The erosion of serfdom, growth of merchant classes, discovery of the New World, and various political dynamics towards the end of the Middle Ages all contributed to higher flexibility and freedom in establishing one's own work or trade. Consequently, many Christians realised that they could serve God better by selecting work which gave them more influence in society. A good case study is found in a coterie of Elizabethan lawyers: William Fulbecke (1560–1603?), Thomas Crewe (1565–1634), Nicholas Fuller (fl. 1604–14), and Simonds D'Ewes (1602–50). These Christian men struggled to work out how their general calling as Christians was to be reconciled with their specific calling to be lawyers. For a profession that involved up to eight years of reading common law *after* a normal course of study at Cambridge or Oxford, the counsel to stay in an 'original occupation' did hold much sway for these men. Simply put, one had to make a concerted effort to *become* a lawyer. D'Ewes was certainly not alone when he wrote: 'I found still the study of the law so difficult and unpleasant . . . and may justly account the two years last past amongst the unhappiest days of my life...' ³¹ How could one be sure that God had called him to such a specific and difficult external vocation? These four lawyers began to link their own skills with the idea of a particular vocation. The practice of law required 'a nimble wit, perseverance, good memory, courage, a love for debate, and a desire for study and knowledge.' ³² Because these men viewed themselves as possessing these gifts, they believed that God had ordained them to be lawyers. In this they maintained a key distinction between their general and particular call: everyone was called first to be a Christian, and secondly to serve their neighbour as best they could with the gifts God had given them. This caused them to exercise a measure of honesty and integrity that stood out from their secular peers. Thus, while lawyers such as Edward Coke freely plucked passages from the Bible to support their cases, these Christian lawyers believed that it was their responsibility to diligently argue without proof-texting the 'book of Life'.

Much of this thinking is encapsulated by the work of William Perkins (1558–1602), the 'architect of Elizabethan Puritanism'. ³³ As evidenced by the practice of the above lawyers, the idea

³¹ *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Sir Simonds D'Ewes*, ed. James O. Halliwell (London: 1845), Vol. 1, 220.

³² J. D. Eusden, 'Christian Vocation among Elizabethan Lawyers', *The Christian Scholar* 45 (1962): 139–140.

³³ R. S. Michaelsen, 'Changes in the Puritan Concept of Calling or Vocation', *The New England Quarterly* 26 (1953): 137.

of ‘double calling’ was especially important to Perkins. He insisted that everyone is called first to be a Christian and then to live out their faith in a certain sector of society. But Perkins was also very concerned with the methods by which Christians could be confident of their elect status: a person’s *general call* as a Christian could be assessed by the quality and fruit of their *particular call*.³⁴ Still, he was careful to maintain an intimate connection between the value of work and serving God. Thus, he wrote: ‘The true end of our lives is to do service to God in serving of man.’³⁵ However, while Perkins and the early Puritans maintained a stronger connection between the two calls, the later Puritans mostly bifurcated this link.³⁶ Alexandra Walsham helpfully observes that ‘by this means something resembling a new works righteousness reentered Protestantism by the back door’.³⁷ The values of hard work and diligence, which had previously been valued for the ways they enabled Christians to serve God, now became virtues to be praised in and of themselves.

It seems that the farther one moves on the timeline from Luther, the less frequently his particular ideas about vocation appear. We’ve already noted how difficult this is to measure, and the project is complicated by language. In the English literature, the idea of ‘calling’ is not uncommon, but it seems mostly to refer to Luther’s first sense of *vocatio spiritualis*; that is the general call of all to be Christians. In contrast to the general contours of the Puritans, an increased emphasis was eventually placed on the *inward calling* of heartfelt devotion. This movement is usually called Pietism and began under Jakob Spener (1635–1705). Through Count Zinzendorf and the Moravians, the Wesley brothers were deeply impacted by the focus of heartfelt devotion and purity of life. John Wesley (1703–1791) had very strong sense of calling on his life,³⁸ which influenced his involvement in social issues such as universal education and prison reform. He believed ‘Christian perfection’ should be reflected in the love of neighbour and encouraged laypeople to become preachers while maintaining their work. Many other important English social reformers fought for better working conditions for the lower classes,³⁹ but seldom used the idea of calling in order to construct a new, positive paradigm for how they could function as Christians in

³⁴ See William Perkins, *Callings of men, with the sorts and kinds of them, and the right use of them* (Cambridge, 1605).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, § 2, Rule 3.

³⁶ R. S. Michaelsen, ‘Changes in the Puritan Concept of Calling or Vocation’, *The New England Quarterly* 26 (1953): 137.

³⁷ Walsham, ‘Migrations of the Holy: Explaining Religious Change in Medieval and Early Modern Europe’, 262.

³⁸ Wesley often described himself as a ‘brand plucked from the burning’. Cf. Zech 3:2.

³⁹ Especially Lord Shaftesbury (1801–1885). See G. Battiscombe, *Shaftesbury: A Biography of the Seventh Earl*. 1801–1885 (London: Constable, 1974).

society.

As the capitalistic economies of the West continued to evolve and the diversification of labour with them, Christians felt a growing need to address the plight of the disadvantaged. Walter Rauschenbush (1861–1918) helped lead what was known as the Social Gospel movement. With reference to vocation, however, this group failed to integrate the service of neighbour through the normal means of one's daily work and made social justice something that was distinct from one's normative and daily tasks as a Christian. Similarly, Pope Leo XIII produced his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) in response to the societal problems brought about by the Industrial Revolution. In particular, he addresses the deplorable conditions of the poor and commands employers to take more responsibility for their workers, but does not draw on a doctrine of vocation.⁴⁰

Not many years later, Max Weber (1864–1920) produced his famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.⁴¹ Although many have criticised the conclusions of his work, his basic observations still hold a certain weight. Weber saw strong connections between the Protestant mind-set of work—especially in its Calvinistic and Puritan expressions—and the birth of capitalism. He even went so far as to posit that many Reformed Christians under the influence of the doctrine of 'double predestination' were driven to work in order to *prove* their own elect status; commercial success could be interpreted as God blessing his Chosen.

Regardless of the finer points of Weber's thesis, it aptly demonstrates two important points for our study of vocation: 1) the understanding of external or particular vocation had been largely separated from the gracious and universal calling of God; 2) this effectively conflated vocation with an *economic* understanding of labour rather than a holistic and integrated biblical model of work as an extension of God's love in service to neighbour.

Vocation Today

For Luther, vocation encompassed all activities of life. Without forgetting the weight of this teaching, here we will focus specifically on the *workplace* and attempt to provide some practical applications for today.⁴² This does not mean we are reducing vocation to work, but rather

⁴⁰ Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (Rome, 1891); http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html.

⁴¹ M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), T. Parsons (trans.) (New York, 1930); <https://archive.org/stream/protestantethics00webe#page/n7/mode/2up>.

⁴² For a broader contemporary treatment of vocation in relation to the Reformation see N. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion* (San Francisco, 2016). Here, Wright

that work is a primary area in which Christians today can consider and apply a doctrine of vocation.

Generally speaking, the past three centuries have seen work through the eyes of two greatly influential economic thinkers: Adam Smith (1723–1790) and Karl Marx (1818–1883).⁴³ In the thought of Smith, work is essentially an unpleasant but necessary means to economic growth and prosperity. In this model, the drawbacks (even evils) of work can be tolerated if they ultimately contribute to the greatest happiness for all. For Marx, on the other hand, work was seen as an end in itself. He saw work as the essence of humanity, the central anthropological expression of meaning, purpose, and development. Although several variations of these two ideas have been presented, many people today implicitly adhere to one of these basic ideologies.

In recent decades, Christians have shown renewed interest in the role of work in life. Indicative of this shift are publications such as the papal encyclical *Exercens Laborem* (1981) and the *Oxford declaration on Christian Faith and Economics* (1990).⁴⁴ Both of these documents emphasise the importance of the ‘creation mandate’ (Gen. 1:28; 2:15) in understanding work as a good and essential task of man *before* the Fall.⁴⁵ In Gen. 1:28, we read:

God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.

A complementary perspective is provided in Gen. 2:15, which informs us that God intended that Adam should ‘work and take care of’ the created world. Together, these crucial passages oppose neo-platonic views about the ignobility of physical matter that have so frequently pervaded Christian thinking, which we saw earlier in the tendency to elevate *vita contemplativa* over *vita activa*. Unfortunately, the creation mandate of Gen. 1–2 was often neglected from focused discussions of vocation because the word ‘call’ is not explicitly featured. Additionally, the growing influence of biblical ‘higher criticism’ since the 19th century has probably contributed to the interpretation of Gen. 1:28 as a *description* of cosmic order rather than a *command* to preserve, maintain, and even transform the creation in which we exist.

employs the phrase ‘covenant of vocation’ (p. 76) to communicate the all-encompassing nature of vocation for the people of God.

⁴³ See A. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (London, 1776) and K. Marx, *Das Kapital* (Hamburg, 1867–94).

⁴⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Exercens Laborem* (Rome, 1981), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html; www.ocms.ac.uk/transformation/articles/0702.1_various.pdf.

⁴⁵ We might also remark that Adam’s task of naming the animals (Gen. 2:19–20) can be fundamentally understand as *taxonomy* (classification), which is the necessary basis for every type of science, research, and learning.

Balancing both the indicative and imperative elements of Gen 1–2 is vital for grasping the role of work for humanity. On this point Pope John Paul II writes:

*Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfilment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes ‘more a human being’.*⁴⁶

Because humanity is created in the likeness of a Creator God, we are in some way acting according to our nature when we work. This does not mean that work is the *sole essence* of what it means to be human (Marx), but rather that work is a vital part of our ‘humanness’. From a biblical perspective, work should not be valued on its own, but rather *in relation* to God, fellow man, and the created world. In other words, work is a transitive activity directed *towards something meaningful* rather than an intransitive action valuable in itself.⁴⁷

In order to grasp fully this biblical truth, it is important to reject a Deist view—which posits that God is uninvolved in his Creation—and uphold the *ongoing creational activity of God*.⁴⁸ In the words of Albert Wolters, ‘Nothing moves or exists or develops except in response to God’s creational demands. God’s ordinances make themselves felt in even the most perverse human distortion.’⁴⁹ Furthermore, this means we should not exaggerate the affinity between God’s creational activity and the current connotations connected to the word ‘creative’. Simply put, one need not be artistic, profound, original, or innovative to exercise the human capacity of creativity. Instead, seemingly mundane tasks such as data entry, refuse collection, and driving public transport exhibit the important human ability of preserving order in creation.

Of course, we cannot ignore the Fall, which fundamentally altered work so that it came to be identified with ‘painful toil’.⁵⁰ Thus, we must remember that there will always be aspects of work that are unpleasant, monotonous, broken, or unjust. But we must not stop there, for the biblical narrative eventually reveals that God’s redemption of the world was inaugurated by Jesus. Therefore, although some parts of work may still be painful, we can rejoice in the privilege we have of being ‘co-workers’ with Jesus in the redemption of creation.⁵¹ By combining the best aspects from Christian history with a dynamic understanding of our role in God’s on-going

⁴⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, § 9.

⁴⁷ *Laborem Exercens*, § 4.

⁴⁸ See Job 38:33–37; Psalm 104:10–32; Acts 17:28; 2 Pet. 3:7.

⁴⁹ A. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (1985), 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, 2005), 93.

⁵⁰ Gen. 3:17.

⁵¹ John 20:21; 1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 5:18.

creational and redemptive work, a doctrine of vocation can provide solutions for several of problems with work in today's society.

1) The idolisation and glamorisation of work

Whether one envisions the idolisation of work as a *means* to a comfortable and luxurious lifestyle or as an exciting and fulfilling *end* on its own, several signs suggest that the last few generations have placed unprecedented hope in the idea of work as an ultimate source of gratification. The prevalence of the colloquial term 'dream job' is one indicator of this shift. Far more telling, however, is a quote that now epitomises the paragon of the age: 'If you love what you do, you'll never work a day in your life.'⁵² At the root of this sentiment is a longing for the nature of work before the Fall and as Christians we can affirm the basic desire of people to find meaning and fulfilment in their work. However, it is also our duty to hold in tension a recognition of the Fallen world in which we live and, when necessary, highlight the reality that despite the redemptive work of Jesus work is still not equal to its original state.

More and more people believe work should be fun. Employers such as Google go to extreme lengths to ensure that their employees enjoy their work environment.⁵³ Notwithstanding the reported success of such methods, mind-sets of this type demonstrate a fundamental confusion of several biblical principles.

First is the transitive nature of work. Adam's work in naming the animals was significant and meaningful due to its connection in continuing and extending God's creation. This means that Christians must think deeply and honestly about how their work affects creation and not just about the way it provides an income.

Luther was adamant that work should benefit our neighbours. With the monastic world in mind he wrote, 'If you find yourself in a work by which you accomplish something good for God, or the holy, or yourself, but not for your neighbour alone, then you should know that that work is not a good work.'⁵⁴ On one level this is a noble and important perspective, but it neglects the wider implications of caring for creation found in Gen. 2. For instance, a large range of work in our

⁵² It is probably best to attribute this quote to Princeton professor, Arthur Szathmary. See <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/09/02/job-love/>.

⁵³ See <http://uk.businessinsider.com/google-is-the-best-company-to-work-for-in-america-2016-4>; <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/16/business/at-google-a-place-to-work-and-play.html>.

⁵⁴ Luther, *Adventspostille* (1522); cf. Wingren, *Luther on Vocations*, 120.

modern world involves the preservation and protection of order and structure but probably does not have an immediately obvious or tangible impact ‘for your neighbour alone’. Furthermore, the growing number of self-employed workers and jobs in the information industry means that vast amounts of business and trade occur with little or no personal contact with our ‘neighbour.’ Sometimes workers can justify how their work may benefit wider society, but even this is often nebulous.⁵⁵ Consequently, it is crucial for Christians to conceive of work not *merely* in the ways that it blesses or serves their neighbour but also how it helps recover, maintain, or extend the created world in which we live. Although it is easy to understand these principles in relation to conservation or environmental work, we must train ourselves to think much more broadly about how plumbing, agriculture, engineering, maintenance, law, public service, education, and even sanitation are all important in caring for creation.

Second is the necessary toil and strain involved in work. Western culture’s growing obsession with celebrities and self-made stars seems to betray a universal desire to achieve a life where one no longer has to deal with the pressures of work, even though we simultaneously witness incessant breakdowns from these people due to various stresses and anxieties. It may be salutary to consider our own participation in such cultural projections.

Luther repeatedly described external vocation as the primary means by which Christians ‘bear the cross’ because it requires them to interact with their neighbour. We may not want to go quite so far in affirming this ‘inevitability of desperation’⁵⁶ in the workplace, but it is worth considering how a Fallen world affects a variety of jobs: educators are confronted with the damages of divorce on children, retailers guard against theft, travel industries account for terrorism, insurance agencies deal with fraud, etc. We should remember Paul’s command to slaves: ‘Obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ... Serve wholeheartedly, as serving the Lord, not people’.⁵⁷ The solution is surely not to try to escape the strain of work but to embrace it with a robust understanding of how the Holy Spirit can use our efforts in the redemption of the world.

Third is the Sabbath. Although rest is a vital component of the Sabbath, it is not the only

⁵⁵ Additionally, we might add that employees may value the significance of their work in relation to their own company rather than wider society. A person performing data entry for an international bank in Canary Wharf will probably feel like their worth is more valuable than somebody performing the same task at a small company in the countryside.

⁵⁶ Wingren, *Luther on Vocations*, 145.

⁵⁷ Ephesians 6:5,7.

reason for its existence. For instance, it was day to tend to family matters, foster relationships, and worship God. Perhaps most important, it was a day where Israel trusted in the sustenance and sovereignty of God. This helped Israel maintain a proper perspective of their dominion over the earth in relation to God's dominion over them and would act as a means of humbling those who had become too confident in their own sustenance. Thinking about work today, this means that a week of seven 'enjoyable' working days should not be valued over a week of six working days. Even if people do not feel that they need to 'rest' from their work, there is a strong case for taking a day off from work. Quite simply, it is a time to tend to things that do not fall into any description of 'work'. Spending meaningful time with family is one of the most obvious implications of the biblical descriptions of Sabbath,⁵⁸ but we could extend the idea to modern activities such as practicing hobbies, admiring creation, and enjoying all kinds of arts. It may at times be difficult to limit ourselves from work, just as it seems was the case for certain Israelites in their collection of Manna,⁵⁹ but ultimately we should remember that 'the Sabbath was made for man'⁶⁰ and so these limitations are healthy and good.⁶¹

2) The fragmented nature of work

Both Smith and Marx addressed the 'alienation' of workers in contexts such as factories, but the situation today is far more complex. Various advances in communications and travel now enable many people to work at any time and from any place they wish. While these advances can and have been used to benefit communities and strengthen families, more often they tend to cause individuals to work in ways that infringe upon, harm, and even destroy relationships. The great irony is that for all the advances in technology and professional standards, people now work more than ever before.⁶² In addition to long hours, people commute long distances, relocate, travel internationally, compete for results, and accept promotions primarily based upon their own needs and interests. This fragmented, inward-looking mind-set can also be held collectively. Large banks

⁵⁸ See Ex 20:8-10. The fact that sons, daughters, servants, and even guests are mentioned suggests that the entire household would have rested together, possibly even in the same space.

⁵⁹ Cf. Ex. 16.

⁶⁰ Mark 2:27.

⁶¹ See C. Townsend and M. Schluter, 'Why Keep Sunday Special', Jubilee Centre Paper No. 5, *The Jubilee Centre* (Cambridge, 1985).

⁶² M. Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Oxford, 1991), 135. It is also instructive to note the occurrence of *karōshi* (過勞死) or 'overwork death' in Japan; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/18/death-from-overwork-japans-karoshi-culture-blamed-young-mans-heart-failure>.

and companies can seek unrealistic profit margins by means of increasingly complex manoeuvres, which often infringe upon local communities and smaller business—both domestically and abroad.⁶³ There are multiple reasons for Christians to oppose such attitudes.

To begin, the biblical portrait of work as vocation intrinsically assumes a relationship with the one who is calling, which challenges the concept of the worker as an entirely autonomous individual.⁶⁴ Furthermore, a right understanding of vocation also *orders* this relationship in a way that positions the called person as a subordinate. This simultaneously humbles the individual and requires them to think about the Caller.

Next, we see from Gen. 2 that it was ‘not good for Adam to be alone’.⁶⁵ Contrary to some interpretations, this does not mean that Adam was ‘lonely’.⁶⁶ Rather, the fact that he ‘needed a more suitable helper’ demonstrates that it was not good for him to *work alone*. In relation to our fragmented and individualistic practices of work today, this should remind us that our creational responsibilities are not intended to be carried out in isolation from others. God the Father did not create the world in isolation, but did so *through* the Son with the Holy Spirit at his side.⁶⁷ Therefore, we should not hope to create anything ‘good’ entirely by ourselves. This understanding of cooperative work need not be limited to physical or concurrent collaboration. For example, a solitary computer programmer only accomplishes their work with the aid of tools such as a computer (invented, designed, and manufactured by others), knowledge (given to him from either physical or remote teachers), and emotional support of loved ones (which may or may not be present at the time). Most who convince themselves that they can work by themselves will eventually realize their desperate need for different perspectives and help: ‘Two are better than one... if either of them falls down, one can help the other up.’⁶⁸

Finally, there is an increasing trend that attempts to compensate for the negative effects of self-interested work by means of financial giving to various charities. Ironically, some of the individuals and groups giving such generous gifts are indirectly responsible for the social and

⁶³ See P. Mills, ‘Globalization and the World Economy’, vol. 14, 1, *Cambridge Papers* (Cambridge, 2005).

⁶⁴ O. Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (London, 1998).

⁶⁵ Gen. 2:18.

⁶⁶ See ‘Married for a Purpose’ in C. Ash, *Married for God: Making Your Marriage the Best it Can Be* (Nottingham, 2007).

⁶⁷ See Col. 1:16; Prov. 8:22–31; John 1:3.

⁶⁸ Eccl. 4:9–10.

economic inequalities in question.⁶⁹ The danger, of course, is that the abstract virtue of philanthropy is exalted while the real problems of fragmented work are ignored. A chilling testimony comes from Father Zosima: ‘I love mankind... but I am amazed at myself: the more I love mankind in general, the less I love man in particular, that is, individually, as separate persons.’⁷⁰ We are reminded—in contrast to Smith—that Luther saw vocation not primarily as a means of social benefit, but as an issue of *personal salvation*. A doctrine of vocation binds us necessarily to our neighbour and encourages consistent, obedient submission as opposed to perpetual improvements of one’s own interests.

The efforts of the pastors in Geneva serve as a good reminder regarding the need for cooperation. Although Calvin is rightly viewed as the mastermind behind the reform of Geneva he did not initiate the work in that city, nor did he work in isolation after he arrived. The other pastors were constant sources of insight and encouragement for him and he certainly would not have accomplished what he did on his own. Likewise, William Wilberforce is often remembered as the unrelenting voice for the abolition of the slave trade in Parliament, but relied on a whole team of people who were constantly working ‘behind the scenes’ to sustain the movement.

3) Dehumanisation

The problem of dehumanisation in work today is perhaps the most serious, but also the most difficult to resolve. Therefore, while issues such as exploitation and work safety in child and slave labour are hugely important, we here limit our focus to jobs in the Western world that are legal by the standards of authorities, but fundamentally unethical in the ways they require employees to work.

Much admirable progress has been made regarding acceptable working hours, but governments and businesses are only beginning to consider the unethical psychological, relational, and existential impacts of dehumanising work. As the logic goes, if employees feel safe and fairly paid, other factors are peripheral and insignificant. This situation can lead to a cyclical process in which workers justify dehumanising work by the salary they receive, but then end up spending a large portion of their earnings in attempts to cope with the dehumanising work they do.

⁶⁹ For an interesting perspective on this irony see ‘What to Make of the ‘Davos Class’ in the Trump Era’. www.nytimes.com/2017/01/16/business/dealbook/world-economic-forum-davos-trump.html? r=0.

⁷⁰ F. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamozov*, Peavear and Volokhonsky (trans) (New York, 1990), 57.

Here we can again recall the importance of Sabbath balance. In the Old Testament, work primarily consisted of manual labour.⁷¹ Today, however, much of the work in the West consists primarily of mental activity. In such jobs, it is insufficient to provide employees with a day away from their normal workplace if the stresses of work still reach and affect them mentally. Possible solutions include blocking employee access during weekends to servers and email clients that contain their work-related content.

Much recent discussion about work revolves around Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the potential for robots to replace humans in many job areas.⁷² As Christians we must recognise the ambiguous nature of robots replacing humans in work, which may not so much eliminate the number of jobs as it changes the *types* of jobs available. On the one hand, it is a good thing that robots can perform many of the monotonous, repetitive jobs that could be described as dehumanising. On the other hand, the new jobs created in exchange deal largely with the construction, maintenance, and programming of robots. Here, we must seriously consider how humans working with and for robots may be dehumanising in the way it substitutes human interaction with machine interaction. In what is known as Moravec's Paradox,⁷³ we see that most easy tasks that humans subconsciously perform are actually very difficult to 'reverse engineer', but that we are increasingly relying on robots and computers to do tasks for us that require more amounts of energy or work. Therefore, we should be careful regarding the extent to which we allow our actions, training, and habits to be shaped to accommodate the role of robotics rather than humans, although this will certainly be difficult to avoid.

Notwithstanding the Fall, a doctrine of vocation should not only seek to eliminate dehumanising factors from work environments, but actually create environments where workers become *more human*. As we saw with the Elizabethan Lawyers in the second section, this could mean giving workers the space and freedom to determine how their particular skills can best be applied to a project or task. Therefore, just as workers can find *redemptive* purpose in the unpleasant toil of their work, so also can workers transform dehumanising work by connecting it with the unique gifts that God has given them to fulfil their Christian calling. Crucially, robots

⁷¹ Excluding, perhaps, the Levites. See Num. 18.

⁷² See V. Ramachandra, 'Robotics and Artificial Intelligence: Secular Eschatologies' at <https://www.faraday.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk> and <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/02/artificial-intelligence-christianity/515463/>.

⁷³ See M. Minsky, *The Society of the Mind* (New York, 1986); H. Moravec, *Mind Children* (Cambridge, MA, 1988).

have absolutely no sense of calling to motivate or energise their work. A task is merely performed, and can only be measured by its efficiency. Christians, however, are urged to do all things ‘as serving the Lord’⁷⁴ and will therefore always be able to do jobs more humanly than robots. A robot cannot produce an algorithm ‘as serving the Lord’. A genuine sense of calling *humanises* work because humans are made to work *in response to the call of God*.

Deciphering one’s Vocation

These concepts of vocation may seem good in theory, but if they remain in abstract form they are really no better than the existing variants of Smith and Marx. Although some groups and systems of thought provide helpful insight and guidelines—such as Catholic Social Teaching and Relational Thinking⁷⁵—none offers a specific doctrine of vocation for the common Christian to apply to their own situation. Again, many books can be found on this subject and often give helpful advice and insight, but fall short of providing a holistic paradigm by which one can understand how the all-encompassing idea of vocation relates to one’s daily work.⁷⁶

Perhaps the best piece for reinterpreting vocation today is *Work in the Spirit*, authored by the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf.⁷⁷ He critiques the ease with which Luther’s idea of work can be used to justify dehumanising labour (because one should ‘remain in their original occupation’ and ‘bear the cross’) and its plain inability to accommodate the ‘*diachronic plurality of employments*’ in our world (by which he means the tendency of people to have different jobs, simultaneously or throughout life).⁷⁸ Consequently, Volf links work not to a function in society but rather to one’s skills and competencies. Specifically, Volf claims that the *charismata* (gifts) of the Spirit as described in the Pauline Epistles provide the best understanding of Christian work today.⁷⁹ Here it is helpful to quote a passage from his book:

In the vocational understanding of work, God addresses human beings, calling them to work, and they respond to God’s call primarily by obedience. They work out of a sense of duty. In a pneumatological understanding of work, God does not first and foremost

⁷⁴ Col. 3:23.

⁷⁵ For a recent publication comparing Catholic Social Teaching and Relational Thinking see M. Nebel et al., *Two perspectives on Christian social engagement: Catholic Social Teaching and Relational Thinking* (Cambridge, 2017).

⁷⁶ See S. Garber, *Visions of Vocation: Common Grace for the Common Good* (Downers Grove, 2014); L. Ryken, *Work and Leisure in Christian Perspective* (Eugene, 2002).

⁷⁷ Volf, *Work in the Spirit* (Oxford, 1991).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁷⁹ See Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12, and Eph. 4.

command human beings to work, but empowers and gifts them for work... The appropriate response to such an experience of grace is not so much naked (though thankful!) obedience as it is joyful willingness to employ the capabilities conferred in the entrusted “project.” Though not fully absent, the sense of duty gives way to the sense of inspiration.⁸⁰

Volf is certainly right to assert that the gifts of the Spirit are given for the purpose of serving others,⁸¹ but his understanding of possessing multiple gifts seems like he has stretched the exegesis in order to fit the predicament of ‘*diachronic plurality of employments*’. For this reason, it may be valuable to recover Luther’s understanding of multiple *vocations*, which Volf seems to overlook. Then, an individual can focus on using their *charismata* in all spheres of life and will maintain far more consistency of a sense of calling through sustained service to family members and community that do not fall within the strict category of work. Furthermore, Volf’s thesis, seems slightly unrealistic in its optimism and does not leave enough room for frustration, stress, and despair in work (as Luther achieves through the concept of bearing one’s cross).

We should also acknowledge the dangers associated with focusing too heavily on particular gifts. Historically, people possessing gifts such as leadership, teaching, and exhortation have been able to misuse their gifts and manipulate others much easier than those possessing gifts such as mercy, hospitality, and administration. Even Paul seems to think some gifts more important than others.⁸² Therefore, we must be careful that in emphasising skills and abilities for this age of ‘diachronic plurality’ we do not slip into a new type of idolisation. Individual giftings are important and can drastically improve one’s sense of fulfilling a calling in life, but the most important aspect is still *faithful obedience* to that call—‘to whom much is given much will be required’.⁸³ We should recall how Puritans sometimes emphasised the value of hard work for its own sake, and must remember not to prioritise the enjoyment of our abilities over the willingness to obey the call of God when it rubs against our own desires.

To most people today who view Calvin’s life retrospectively it seems that his skills and training in law were the ideal fit for his work in Geneva. But many forget that Calvin himself was extremely reticent to obey this ‘call’. His work in Geneva was twice obstructed, and when he finally agreed to help at his third opportunity this was his response: ‘I would prefer a hundred other deaths to this cross on which I would have to die a thousand times each day... I know well that

⁸⁰ Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 125.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁸² See 1 Cor. 12:28.

⁸³ Luke 12:48.

wherever I go I must always expect to meet with suffering, and that, if I will live for Christ, life must be a conflict.’⁸⁴ We must always place obedience to our vocation above the desire to feel useful.

Conclusion

As Luther declared so boldly, *everyone* is called by God to a life of valuable and meaningful work. To his rigid paradigm of God and fellow human we should add the need to care for the physical world more broadly as well as the need to tend to the more abstract aspects of Creation such as order, justice, and truth. We have seen that Christians since the Reformation have understood vocation in various ways, but that any view is inadequate which does not take the entire biblical narrative (Creation, Fall, Redemption) into consideration. Therefore, we can support Luther’s statements regarding work as passively ‘bearing our cross’ while simultaneously endorsing Calvin’s insistence that we must actively strive for the common good.⁸⁵ Along with Volf, we should affirm that every Christian has been uniquely gifted by God. Consequently, there is value in considering how one can best use their gifts to serve God, fellow man, and Creation, just as the Puritans believed it was right to consider carefully one’s occupation if allowed that freedom.

There is absolutely no reason that Christians should shy away from conversations about work in today’s society. To the contrary, the biblical emphases on the goodness of Creation, the importance of the Sabbath, the primacy of relationships, and all humanity’s participation in the *imago Dei* still provide arguably the most robust foundation for understanding work in our world today. Ultimately, we are not called to toil in vain, but to work ‘*as serving the Lord*’, in *collaboration with him* and our fellow creatures, *towards* the anticipated New Creation in which all things will be made new.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ *Corpus Reformatorum*, 39:214.

⁸⁵ Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Edinburgh, 1973), 457.

⁸⁶ Rev. 21:5.