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“Calling or Career”:

An Old Testament Theology of Vocation¹

RICK R. MARRS

In the Restoration tradition, especially as manifested among Churches of Christ, we have given little thought to the concept of vocation. The reasons for this may be several; two seem obvious. Although we are heavily indebted to and wholeheartedly accepting of the Protestant work ethic, we have avoided the notion of vocation, especially when linked with the language of “calling.” Because calling historically implied an external “urging” apart from the written word of God and rational consciousness, the concept made us nervous. Such talk harbored dangerous tendencies toward Baptist theology (and perhaps worse) Pentecostalism.

Further, to a significant extent, vocation is first and foremost rooted in two major areas of Scripture considered secondary (if not tertiary) in importance for us—the Old Testament and the Gospels. Because of this, we have given little discussion to the importance of calling and vocation for the Christian life. To a large extent, we often assumed calling was reserved for only a select few (e.g., the apostle Paul, the ancient prophets) and was discontinued with the advent of the written Scriptures.

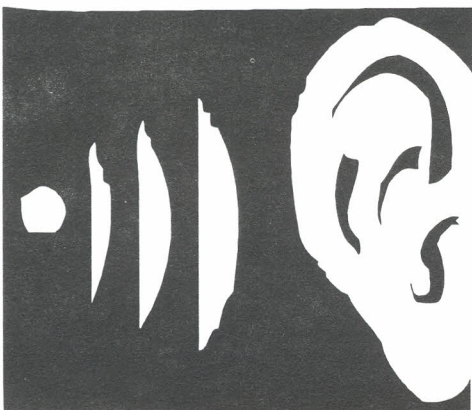
AN OLD TESTAMENT THEOLOGY OF VOCATION

We live in a world and culture increasingly given to utilitarianism. We recognize it in our ethical decisions; on our college campuses we find it prominently displayed, if not celebrated, in our promotional materials and our career advising. Current (and prospective) students regularly ask questions about their future. A significant—if not overwhelming—portion of these questions involve matters of job satisfaction and security, extrinsic and intrinsic benefits, working conditions, advancement, long-range implications and consequences of various careers, etc.

Colleges typically respond with language in kind. We pepper our vocabulary with language of marketability, success, upward mobility, advantageous positioning, etc. Students want careers that will provide them a meaningful future and sense of security; parents often want confirmation that their hard-earned investment in higher education will not be (financially) wasted. Such desires are neither inherently wrong nor a reflection of narrow self-centeredness.

However, if this is the sole vision of life and the future, such thinking becomes highly problematic. Left unexamined, we soon find ourselves justifying greed as “opportunity,” selfish accumulation as “success,” and duplicity as “political expediency.”

In contrast, vocation is first and foremost a Christian concept. It derives from the Latin term *vocare* (n. *vocatio*) “to call.” It presumes a biblical worldview. By definition, the concept of vocation assumes that we live in a world that is created rather than simply the result of spectacular chance. Creation presumes



a creator; more specifically, vocation presumes a sovereign creator who desires to have a relationship with his creation, especially his creation manifested in human form. Because of this, human life has purpose and meaning. Vocation addresses one element of the purpose and meaning of human life. In contrast to the preceding paragraph that presumes a world with humanity at the center, vocation presumes a world with God at the center and humanity in relationship to that God.

An Old Testament theology of vocation roots itself in two principal concepts: creation and covenant. Humans, as a part of God's magnificent creation, receive life that reflects God's glory and splendor. God's children, in right covenant relationship with God, live lives that possess meaning and purpose. The concept of vocation appears throughout the Old Testament materials. The following discussion simply offers a selective sampling of those materials.

VOCATION—CREATION AND COVENANT

Vocation is implicitly, if not explicitly, addressed in the opening chapters of Genesis. In Genesis 1 and 2 we encounter two panels of God's creative activity. The first chapter observes in telescopic fashion the expanse of the universe (and the place and role of humanity therein). The second chapter focuses in microscopic fashion upon the specific tasks and nature of human life within God's world.

Genesis 1 clarifies human identity—we are created in the image of God! As *imago Dei*, our lives have purpose and meaning. Inexplicably, but wonderfully, the sovereign Lord of the universe has created us in his image and empowered us with the task of overseeing the rest of the created order. As *imago Dei*, we reflect and embody God's royal sovereignty. God entrusts us with the attentive oversight and careful management of his creation.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." (Gen 1:26)

Genesis 2 addresses explicitly the concept of vocation. Having planted a lush garden, God creates a human and entrusts that human with the care and oversight of the garden. Clearly, one aspect of meaningful human life involves our work. In Genesis 2, Adam is given meaningful (and manageable) work. He is to "till and keep" the garden. Created in the image of God, he is able to reflect the divine purpose in his life through his judicious care for this garden. In this garden, God provides ample and abundant resources for his creatures. Adam's life has meaning and purpose.

On one hand, God provides for Adam those elements necessary for meaningful life. On the other hand, God articulates a vision of life for Adam that looks outward rather than inward. Because God is caring for Adam, Adam is able to direct his attention to the care of others. Tragically, we find humanity quickly distorting God's intent for human life and turning its vision inward.

When humanity determines to become its own god (Genesis 3), we are introduced to a new concept—the distinction between meaningful (and manageable) work and meaningless (and futile) work. Expelled from the garden, Adam now recognizes the impossibility of the task before him—he must "till and keep" the whole earth.

Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it," cursed is the ground because of you: in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return. (Gen 3:17-19)

Just as God provides humanity with a theology of work, so he also provides it with a theology of time. Because a significant portion of the time given us by God involves our work, it is imperative that we have a clear understanding of time. In ancient Israel, a theology of time was articulated most clearly in the practice of the Sabbath. The Sabbath grounds itself in God's two most fundamental realities--God as Creator and God as Redeemer. Integral to the creative activity of God, Sabbath observance pronounces a worldview that

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proclaims God's control and care of his universe. Each Sabbath, Israel proclaims through her rest that the world is safely in God's hands and will not disintegrate with the cessation of human activity. Conversely, human work fittingly culminates weekly in grateful acknowledgement of God's sovereign oversight of his created order (Exod 20:8-11).

The Sabbath is also rooted in the theology of God as Redeemer. Through her observance of the Sabbath, Israel reminds herself that her weekly freedom from work is the result of a divine redeemer who overthrew the despotic forces of Egypt and liberated her for meaningful life. The futility of work as slaves has been replaced by meaningful vocation in the promised land. Through her weekly observance of the Sabbath, all Israel ceases from toil, employer as well as employee, so that God's deliverance in the Exodus may be remembered (Deut 5:12-15).

The importance of recognizing the interrelatedness of work and time appears powerfully in Exod 34:21: Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even in plowing time and in harvest time you shall rest.

The Sabbath is a weekly reminder that human life consists of work and rest, or time devoted to providing for family and self and time reserved for worship of God and care for the less fortunate.

In the Old Testament, vocation is central to Israel's identity as a people and a community. With the call of Abraham, God began the task of creating for himself a people with a particular vocation. This community of faith was defined quintessentially by its relationship to the creator/redeemer and its vocation in the world.

Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." (Exod19:3-6)

This passage captures eloquently the vocation of Israel. As in Genesis 1, Israel's identity is intimately tied to her relationship with God. However, whereas Genesis 1 links human identity to God as creator (thus, humanity is in the image of God), Exodus 19 links Israel's identity to God as redeemer (thus, God's people are liberated slaves). This community of believers finds its proper identity in its grateful response to a God who entered Egypt and toppled the oppressive powers who chose to enslave those unable to protect themselves. God's beneficent care for Israel as a powerful mother eagle protecting her eaglet gives this people its fundamental identity.

However, salvation is never an end in itself. Rather, God delivers his people for a specific purpose (task). God has called this people for something special—they have a unique vocation. The God who holds the whole universe in his hands has chosen this people to be a *kingdom of priests, a holy nation*. The language of covenant could not be more stark. Israel's *unique* (holy) vocation is to be a kingdom—of priests! Linking these two terms jars the imagination. Kingdom connotes power and rule; priesthood connotes ser-

vice! These liberated slaves, created in the image of God and partaking of royal status, are called by God to serve the world rather than rule it.

The book of Deuteronomy also articulates a theology of vocation against a covenant backdrop as it addresses three fundamental questions that carry far-reaching vocational implications: Who are we? Why do we do what we do? Why do we have what we have?

The answer to the first question is obvious. Deuteronomy repeatedly reminds its listeners that they are the undeserving recipients of the magnanimous grace of the sustaining Lord of the universe. Though wholly undeserved, they have been chosen by God. Their choice has nothing whatsoever to do with any inherent qualities they possess. Rather, their choice is rooted solely in the nature and character of God. This merciful God has delivered them and is bringing them into the land beyond the Jordan for two principal reasons: He loves them, and he is keeping his promise to their ancestors (Deut 7:7-9; 9:6-7). Election reflects clearly the nature of God—he is faithful lover and promise keeper.²

Against this backdrop, the second question arises: Why do we do what we do? Deut 6:20-25 replies:

When your children ask you in time to come, “What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?” then you shall say to your children, “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. Then the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right.”

The scene is poignant. The child comes to the parent seeking a rationale for keeping the divine injunctions. Strikingly, Moses provides the parent theological instruction. In response to the question, Moses instructs the parent to begin *not* with human obligation but with the divine initiative. Theologically, Scripture *always* begins with God’s actions on our behalf.³ It is God’s saving and life-giving actions on our behalf that contextualize and make sense of our faithful response.⁴

Deuteronomy also addresses the vocational implications of the question: Why do we have what we have? In response to this question, Moses answers

Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart ... in order to make you know that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord ... Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes ... when you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God ... Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. (Deut 8:2-3, 11-12, 17-18)

This third question also carries vocational weight. How we handle our possessions inevitably corresponds to our understanding of the *source* of our possessions. Like Israel, if we succumb to the temptation to consider our wealth and belongings the result of our own endeavors, we behave differently. We see our belongings as *our* belongings and tend to hoard and behave in ways that serve ourselves.

In contrast, to see our possessions as gracious gifts from a benevolent Lord frees us to mirror the behavior of this Lord and share these gifts from God freely with others.⁵ Ultimately, our stance toward our personal resources and the resources of God's world in which we live is anchored firmly in our theological vision of God as creator and sustainer of our universe.

The Old Testament not only provides a theoretical base for vocational reflection, it also offers specific life examples of vocational integrity. The call of Jeremiah provides us powerful testimony to a life lived in service to the call of God:

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." (Jer 1:5-8)

From one angle, the call of Jeremiah may terrify us, especially when we remember the difficulties he encountered during his life. Jeremiah lived faithful to his vocation, even when that calling brought him anguish and perilous circumstances. However, Jeremiah's life was never without meaning or purpose. Through Jeremiah, God ultimately brought a people into a new relationship and fashioned a future for his people. Capturing a vision of God's calling for our lives may simultaneously prove costly and exhilarating.

From another perspective, the enigmatic book of Ecclesiastes eloquently articulates for us the dangers inherent in work ("toil") divorced from a vision of a transcendent God. In Ecclesiastes 4, the sage sketches the grim contours of a society given to the pursuit of acquisition and accumulation. Qoheleth's society, driven by greed, envy, competition, and dominance, manifests oppression and violence. Concern for the neighbor has been vanquished by the all-consuming drive to *outdo* the neighbor! In contrast, Qoheleth presents a view of work that finds meaning in community and concern for the other.⁶

The Old Testament concept of vocation was as radical then as now. In a world given to self-absorption, human self-interest, and an overwhelming human tendency to define oneself independently of any other (a tendency that creates anxiety about the meaning of life and a purposeful future), the Old Testament presents us with a decidedly different view of humanity. The Old Testament defines human life quintessentially in relation to God. The world we inhabit reflects the loving imprint of a creator fundamentally for us, a creator who longs to be in relationship with us. Because God acts with intent and purpose, human life necessarily has intent and purpose.

As creator, God has provided meaning for us and a purposive future through several avenues, not the least of which is vocation. God wills to bless our lives with meaningful activity; unfortunately human arrogance and exploitation threaten to deny our lives meaning and purpose. In response, God intervenes as redeemer to counter the despots of the world who would threaten our future. God creates community and gives that community a vocation--service.

Such a vision of vocation transforms our view of life and our future. We now envision our calling (vocation) not primarily against the backdrop of our own self but in view of the other. Confident and able to "rest" in the conviction that God is for us and wills to give meaning to our lives, we are free to turn outward and serve, rather than engage in endless and futile acts of self-absorption. Our world and future are transformed; our work no longer enslaves us; it now becomes a daily act expressing our liberation!

CONCLUSION

Viewing our future as vocation will surely be transformational. It was for ancient Israel; it will be for us. Viewing our lives and our futures in the hands of a God who creates and redeems because he desires to be in relationship with us cannot help but change us. G. Meilaender captures the sense well:

Do you want to know what is your vocation? Then the first question to ask is not, "What do I want to do with my life?" It is not as if I first come to know myself and then choose a vocation that fulfills and satisfies me. For it is only by hearing and answering the divine summons, by participating in my calling, that I can come to know who I am. We are not who we think we are; we are who God calls us to be.⁷

Viewing our vocation and our time against the backdrop of one who creates us and calls us cannot help but transform us. With our future and our work safely in the hands of the Lord of all, we experience true freedom. We are free to think creatively about how we might best utilize those gifts God has entrusted to us. We are free to choose careers that best promote human dignity and nourish the spirit. We are free to create work environments that celebrate reconciliation and peace. We are ultimately free to experience true freedom, the freedom that comes from "having the mind of Christ."⁸ In a society prone to repeatedly turning in upon itself, releasing into the marketplace persons of faith who think in terms of vocation rather than career will be an act of radical courage.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 This article is a revision of an earlier essay included in materials explaining an initiative to incorporate a theological vision of vocation among students, faculty, and staff at Pepperdine University. The initiative is the result of a generous grant from the Lilly foundation.
- 2 These passages ground vocational behavior in the nature of God. In response to the perennial question, "How then should we live?" Deuteronomy offers a resounding response--treat others as God has treated you. It is no accident and of no small significance that Jesus reintroduces such a "vocational" vision in the Sermon on the Mount.
- 3 Stated globally, in the Old Testament, the Exodus (deliverance) always precedes Sinai (obligation); in the New Testament, the cross (divine initiative) always precedes Pentecost (human response).
- 4 In Deut 4:5-8 faithful observance of the divine will is labeled "wise, discerning, and just."
- 5 Deuteronomy stands in striking contrast to the modern American view regarding possessions. For most modern Americans, possessions and wealth are the result of hard work, good education, entrepreneurial ingenuity, and self-interest. In Deuteronomy, wealth and possessions are gifts from God; hard work and responsible behavior are simply faithful responses to God's gracious bestowal of his gifts.
- 6 W. Brown, in *Ecclesiastes* (Louisville: WJKP, 2000), captures Qoheleth's vision of vocation well: "In today's market-driven economy, the exclusive focus on profit invariably reduces work to a mere job--Qoheleth's oppressive 'toil'--and a job is no vocation. With such a focus, the job itself becomes meaningless, except for the compensation one receives. More pernicious is the economic value placed on a person's job, which invariably determines the social and ethical value of that person ... For the sage, work is redeemed both by community and by its very nature as an exercise of human dignity ... Meaningful work ... is a gift and a vocation ... The secret for Qoheleth lies in recognizing that one works not for self-gain but for the thrill of applying one's gifts and talents for the sake of another without any self-driven expectations of the results." (p. 50)
- 7 G. Meilaender, "Divine Summons: Working in the Horizon of God's Call," *Christian Century* (November 1, 2000): 1112.
- 8 Meilaender, 1113-14, is again helpful at this point. He notes that we are freed from the enslaving desire of greatness, achievement, and accomplishment. We are set free not to abandon the ordinary for some presumed great quest, but so that we might enter more deeply into the ordinary and transform it through the blessings derived from our calling.

