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Don Thompson  
don.thompson@pepperdine.edu

Cindy Miller-Perrin  
cindy.miller-perrin@pepperdine.edu

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# Understanding Vocation: Discerning and Responding to God's Call

DON THOMPSON & CINDY MILLER-PERRIN

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I have been crucified with Christ; and  
it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.  
Gal 2:19-20

Vocation is a concept familiar to both the sacred and secular constituents of society. Those holding the secular perspective define vocation as one's work, career, or occupation. In contrast, Christians view vocation as a calling from God.

God calls a person "with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace" (2 Tim 1:9). This holy calling refers to hearing and understanding God's voice in one's life and obeying the summons given. Thus, vocation—or one's calling—brings divine meaning and purpose to the life of a Christian.

In this article, we provide an overview of our understanding of Christian vocation based on a number of recent resources including books, book chapters, and articles published primarily since 1990. Initially, we focus on understanding the concept of Christian vocation itself, attempting to provide a view that does justice to the magnitude of the concept. We then discuss the process of discerning one's vocation as well as the potential barriers that may hinder an individual from hearing and responding to his or her calling. We conclude with a discussion of the costs associated with both discerning and embracing one's Christian vocation.

## UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF CHRISTIAN VOCATION

Most authors who attempt to define the concept of Christian vocation state that it is first and foremost a general call to the religious life, and secondly a more specific call to a particular occupation. Although many authors acknowledge that in defining vocation we should be careful not to equate it with occupation, job, or career, the clear emphasis in many sources is on Christian vocation as one's particular occupation. One such popular resource is Lee Hardy's *The Fabric of This World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), which states, "The particular calling, on the other hand, is the call to a specific occupation—an occupation to which not all Christians are called."

The concept of Christian vocation, however, extends far beyond career or occupation to virtually every domain of one's life. As Farnham and her colleagues note in *Listening Hearts*,

God calls the entirety of my life ... A call might lead us to pursue a certain occupation or career ... But a call can never be reduced to such activities ... The same counselor may also be called to care for family, friends, and community as well as clients and thus must balance all of these in order to be faithful to the call. (Suzanne Farnham, Joseph Gill, Taylor McLean, Susan Ward, *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community*, Harrisburg: Morehouse, 1991)



Indeed, Jesus was a carpenter (Mark 6:3) and Paul a tentmaker (Acts 18:3), but these occupations were neither man's vocation.

In *Courage and Calling* (Downer's Grove: Intervarsity, 1999), Gordon Smith makes a distinction between three levels of vocational calling: general, specific, and immediate. According to this conceptualization, Christians receive a *general* calling to know and love God and to love and serve others. A Christian's *specific* calling refers to his or her defining mission or purpose in life. Finally, an *immediate* calling refers to one's immediate duties and responsibilities—those things placed before an individual each day by God. Accordingly, Christians receive from God one call having many levels and forms of response.

In understanding one's vocational callings, then, the key question is, "What am I supposed to do with my life?" Paul addresses this very question in 1 Cor 15:58: "... be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." Here the focus is on *the work of the Lord*. Work in this context is not necessarily equivalent to job or career. Vocation, broadly defined, refers to one's *lifework*, a term coined by Harvey Huntley—in his chapter in *Connections Between Spirit and Work in Career Development*—to include any human activity that gives meaning, purpose, and direction to life (eds. Deborah Bloch and Lee Richmond, Palo Alto: Davies-Black, 1997).

In addition to recognizing the multidimensional nature of Christian vocation, authors also frequently mention two other critical elements important to understanding the concept of vocation. First is the command to *love and serve others*, and second, the imperative to use *the gifts that God has bestowed upon us* (Farnham et al., 1991; Hardy, 1990; Huntley, 1997; Smith, 1999). Smith discusses the importance of recognizing the world's need by identifying specific forms of pain and brokenness that move us. Thus, Christian vocation includes a calling from God to love and serve others in their specific needs. This moves the calling away from our personal motives and will to the unmet needs present in our neighborhoods.

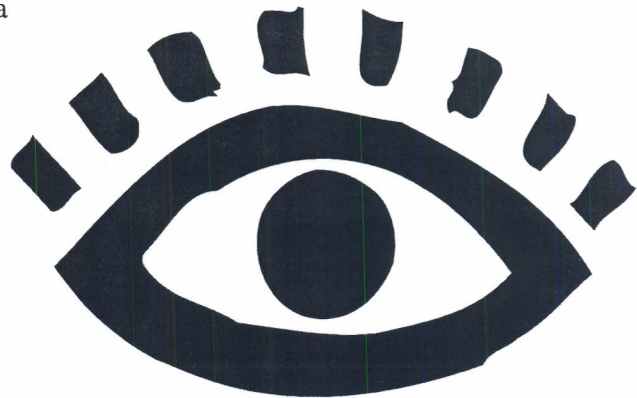
Frederick Buechner eloquently describes this view in *Wishful Thinking*, stating, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993). With regard to the second common element of giftedness, each of us is able to address uniquely the needs of the world through our specific gifts and abilities. Most sources on vocation emphasize the interplay between recognizing our gifts and talents and the process of discovering our self-identities (Farnham, 1991; Hardy, 1990; Smith, 1999).

### THE PROCESS OF VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT

Vocational discernment is the core of living within God's call. In essence, it is a complex process made up of three distinct components: listening for God's purpose and will for our lives, acting upon it through service to others, and maintaining vocational integrity through interaction with our earthly mentors. Indeed, God calls us by first speaking to us. God vocalizes his will for our life, and thus, we must be attentive to his voice.

Vocational discernment is a dynamic process that involves participating in God's call through active listening aimed at understanding the nature of the call followed by verification of our understanding through active obedience. The momentum of the discernment process is then sustained by mentoring via God's earthly messengers and encouragers.

Hearing is a deceptively simple practice when it comes to music, the spoken word, or common noises in our daily lives. By contrast, this is not the case when it comes to God's voice, for God chooses to speak





to us in subtle yet focused ways. In order to follow God's call we must hear it, which means we need to acquire the skills of listening. This type of hearing and listening is largely foreign to our senses and so takes practice and continual awareness. Because God calls each of us in a unique, individual way, it is clear that his voice must be able to speak to only one set of eardrums with pinpoint accuracy. This is not a problem for God, but it may be a problem for us if we are unable to tune into the frequency unique to our giftedness and life purpose. We must learn to tune in to discern his instructions and expectations.

One of the most accessible resources on this kind of hearing—both in terms of the discussion of what God's voice sounds like and how we are to practice our ear training—is Parker Palmer's *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000). Palmer elucidates the importance of listening to one's life:

Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about—quite apart from what I would like it to be about—or my life will never represent anything real in the world, no matter how earnest my intentions.

For Palmer, listening requires the rigorous Quaker practice of silence, which is "God's first language." It is in the language of silence that we ultimately hear his voice. Thus, we must learn to pray silently and contemplatively, anticipating God's speech within our inner, poised silence. This inner journey requires that we await God's voice by asking what he wants of us, and then practice the discipline of prayer to hear the directive. Often, this silent voice will itself be silent, demanding our greatest patience as we take the downward journey of humility, of emptying, in order to be filled by his word.

Silence would be enough of a challenge to maintain and to "hear" even without the background din of competing voices. Another accessible resource on hearing is Farnham and colleagues' *Listening Hearts*, which provides the reader with the tools to discern God's call over the noisy background of the world's myriad voices and sounds. These authors write that the "ability to discern comes from living the life of the Spirit, a process of growth involving an ever-greater integration of desires, feelings, reactions, and choices with a continuing commitment to abide in Christ." Discernment is a function of faith and subsequent obedience. "Ultimately, discernment requires our willingness to act in faith on our sense of what God wants us to do." If we can recommend a single, comprehensive work on discernment, this is the one. This work covers many perspectives and experiences of discernment, drawing from a bibliography of such spiritual guides as St. Benedict, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Buber, T.S. Eliot, St. John of the Cross, Rainer Maria Rilke, and dozens more. This is the discernment encyclopedia.

Vocational discernment is not a passive process. Hearing and understanding God's call means moving from contemplation to action. Vocational discernment, therefore, must result in action that serves others' needs and provides a means of testing the validity of the call, as God will bless the work that is carried out. The best resource we have found that deals with this critical "get involved" step is Michael J. Himes' *Doing the Truth in Love* (New York: Paulist, 1995). He writes,

But how do we find the best way to give ourselves away? What are some criteria that we can use in decision making? How do we discern our individual vocations? How do we discover what the call to service means for each of us concretely?

Himes answers his own questions about verifying our discernment by stating that as we live within our call, we receive joy, growth, and *agape*. Another definitive feature of living within one's call, according to Himes, is service. Without service, there is no calling. Unless we are moved to act on behalf of those who are hungry, thirsty, and estranged, we are not heeding God's call. In this regard, Himes challenges the reader by provocative reflections on such passages as Matt 25:31-46, the account of the sheep and goats at the final



judgment. These are tough words, but they describe still tougher consequences for those of us goats who do not listen and heed God's call.

Beyond understanding God's call through hearing his voice and verifying the call through action, God places in our lives wise elders, men and women of vision who encourage us to pursue the call and who offer counsel when we need feedback and prod-  
ding to continue. These individuals are our mentors. Although there are no "how to be a mentor" or "how to work with a mentor" resources to mention here, there are works and life examples that provide models of the mentoring relationship.

Prime examples are evident in the great mythologies and allegories of the grail legend. Both Arthur and Parzival engaged in searches for the holy grail that were impossible without their mentors (Merlyn for Arthur, and Gournamand for Parzival) to guide their internal and external paths. Similarly, our calling's quest requires us to listen to earthly mentor figures who sustain God's message to us through daily encouragement and guidance.

A wonderful contemporary example of this is the mentoring relationship between Martin Luther King Jr. and Howard Thurman. Thurman was King's spiritual adviser in body, spirit, and word. King reportedly read Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1949) at critical moments before his own civil rights marches and events. Thus, King's call and subsequent actions were informed by Thurman's guidance and earthly voice. Without mentors, we are left alone in God's echo-chamber, wondering if his voice is true and if we are doing the right thing.

### BARRIERS TO VOCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Several of the authors who address the process of vocational discernment also describe various barriers that may potentially interfere with our ability to discern vocational calling at the levels of hearing, understanding, and responding to the call. Discussions about these various barriers can be found in many of the aforementioned resources such as Hardy's *The Fabric of This World*, Farnham and colleagues' *Listening Hearts*, and Smith's *Courage and Calling*. Carole Rayburn also describes various barriers to vocational calling in her chapter on vocation as calling in *Connections Between Spirit and Work in Career Development*.

Barriers to hearing and understanding our vocational calling include a variety of obstacles such as personal values and beliefs that may obscure our ability to hear God's voice. A central barrier in this regard may be our disbelief that God even plays a role in our vocational discernment. If we cling to a secular view of vocation—vocation as simply one's work or career in the absence of a divine summons—we eliminate the impact of any divine guidance along our journey.

In addition to disbelief in divine guidance, another barrier may be our failure to recognize that the Christian call involves a life of service to oth-

ers. This lack of recognition may increase our vulnerability to barriers created through personal values and beliefs such as self-interest, self-absorption, and self-righteousness, further hampering our ability to hear God (Farnham et al., 1991; Hardy, 1990; Rayburn, 1997).

Other personal values and beliefs may also serve as barriers to vocational discernment according to Farnham and her colleagues (1991). Self-doubt, for example, can serve as an obstacle when we doubt our own abilities or believe that we are not good enough to be useful for God's purposes. In addition, our human perspectives on the appropriate timing for the events in our lives might reduce our flexibility and thus our ability to discern God's divine timing for our call to purpose and service.

**. . . our calling's quest requires us to listen to earthly mentor figures who sustain God's message to us through daily encouragement and guidance.**

**[One] potential barrier to responding to our vocational calling is a sense of fear.**



Various cultural values may also serve as barriers to hearing and understanding our call. Cultural values that place importance on material success, competition, and productivity may impede our ability to discern God's call (Farnham et al., 1991; Hardy, 1990; Smith, 1999), perhaps because such values are antithetical to the Christian message. Western values of self-sufficiency and individualism may also limit our ability to heed our Christian call to community and service to others.

Several authors mention the potential for personal or psychological needs to interfere with our ability to discern our calling. Our human needs for security, control, and certainty can limit our willingness and freedom to hear God's call (Farnham et al., 1991). Both Hardy (1990) and Smith (1999) also note our personal needs for power and social prestige as potential barriers. We may miss God's calling because we are more

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concerned with our own needs for respect, praise, admiration, fame, and status. Smith (1999) reminds us that the temptations of power and prestige are the very same temptations that Jesus faced in the desert (Luke 4:1-13) and warns that these temptations may be the death of our vocation.

Barriers to responding to our vocational calling also exist. Indeed, it is possible that barriers might limit our ability to *respond* to vocational calling, despite our ability to effectively *hear and*

*understand*. Undue influence by authority figures (e.g., parents) or various social mores (e.g., gender and racial stereotypes) may obstruct, for example, our ability to embrace our vocational calling (Rayburn, 1997). Parents who control the purse strings for their children's college educations may subtly pressure their sons and daughters to take specific vocational paths that are not consistent with their personal calling.

Men as well as women may be hindered from carrying out a particular vocation because of the impact of gender stereotypes that make it difficult for individuals to deviate from traditional roles. As a result, women may not respond to a vocational call to a historically male-dominated occupation such as ministry. Likewise, men may not respond to vocational callings related to occupations and activities typically dominated by women, activities such as nursing or being a primary childcare provider.

Another potential barrier to responding to our vocational calling is a sense of fear. We may fear the rejection or disappointment of family and friends should our vocational path fail to meet their expectations (Hardy, 1990; Rayburn, 1997). We may also fear the sacrifices that might be associated with a particular vocation, such as an undesirable job location, limited social prestige, or low income. As Rayburn (1997) notes, we may fear "following in faith, hesitating to go along spiritual paths because of feeling unworthy of such a vocation ... or feeling that the world would not reward such a vocation ... very highly."

### THE PRICE OF LIVING ONE'S CALLING

The genre of vocation literature changes when we consider how a person's life changes in response to God's call. Indeed, where else would we expect this journey to lead, if not to the individual human being, the unique and singular frequency to which God tunes in order to deliver his call and to which we respond. There are certainly universal qualities about the way God conveys the call and what the call will entail, but eventually, it is a personal matter. It is ultimately not about the life of a group, denomination, institution, or enterprise. God inhabits souls and individual lives as stated in the Galatians 2 passage at the opening of this article. What will happen to *my* life if *I* hear, listen, and respond to the call? What can *I* expect? What can *I* count on?

All of the biographical evidence from great testimonial journeys, such as Dorothy Day's *The Long Loneliness* (New York: Harper, 1952), Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), or Helen Prejean's *Dead Man Walking* (New York: Vintage, 1993), show that there are two ingre-

dients to the life change that God brings about with his call. The cost of following God's call is change in both location and self. We will be asked to move to where God wants us, where he calls us, and we will be asked to give our selves, our lifelong selves. We must count on giving up both of these in response to God's personal broadcast to our soul. In return, these challenges come with the wonderful benefit that we are paid back in full.

Dorothy Day found her calling in the founding of the Catholic Worker Movement. This required her living and working and serving in New York, away from her Berkeley roots. Her life currency was her back and her energy, poured into the lives of the poor and uneducated. In losing herself this way, she gained God's richest blessings.

Bonhoeffer also describes the costly grace that God bestows upon us as a part of the call to discipleship. He writes: "The call goes forth, and is at once followed by the response of obedience. The response of the disciples is an act of obedience, not a confession of faith in Jesus." Bonhoeffer's obedience cost him his life as he gave it up in martyrdom in response to God's call.

Finally, Sister Helen Prejean describes her own journey from New Orleans parishes to its prisons and ultimately to the death row cells of prisons across America, including that of Patrick Sonnier. She sacrificed her own safety and now sacrifices her own privacy and time as she fights for the repeal of capital punishment at the national level. Her epiphanal moment describes how God changed her life forever: "there was a flash and I realized that my spiritual life had been too ethereal, too disconnected. I left the meeting and began seeking out the poor." Her subsequent ministry with death row inmates is also wonderfully chronicled in the 1995 Polygram film starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn. Sister Prejean pours out her life as a drink offering, while God continually replenishes her empty jar.

Jesus tells us that in order to gain life we must lose our own. The vocational paths of all three of these authors share common elements of such sacrifice: a change in location and the spending of selves. Such sacrifice requires great faith.

The vocational journey requires us to lose our lives, our selves, in God's echo chamber, an echo chamber that resonates within our souls. Although the price of living one's calling is high, the benefit is that God saves us through his call. Our calling is always personal and always costly. Indeed, following our vocational calling means sacrificing our life. The payoff is a life surrendered, obedient, and at work in him.

DON THOMPSON

Dr. Thompson teaches mathematics and serves as the associate dean of Seaver College at Pepperdine University, Malibu, California.

CINDY MILLER-PERRIN

Dr. Miller-Perrin teaches psychology at Pepperdine University and is a licensed clinical psychologist.

