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A Larger Calling Still

Lee Hardy*

I. TWO STORIES

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a pious man standing on his roof, surrounded by rising floodwaters. His neighbor came by in a rowboat and offered to take him to shore. "No thanks. God will take care of me," he informed the neighbor, with a remarkable air of calm. The waters continued to rise. Then a county sheriff came by in a motor-boat and told him to hop aboard. He refused again, saying "Don't worry about me, God is my help." And the waters rose, swelling over the eaves of his house. Finally a rescue helicopter appeared overhead and dropped him a line. But he didn't take it, calling out over the rushing torrent, "It's alright, God will save me!" In minutes the river swept him away, and he drowned. When he got to heaven he was a bit peeved, and asked God why God didn't save him. And God replied: "Didn't save you? I tried three times! First I sent your neighbor, and you refused. Then I sent the sheriff, and you refused. And then I sent a helicopter, and you refused again!"

This was one of my former pastor's favorite sermon illustrations. I think I heard it three or four times during his tenure at my church. The point, however, was well taken each time it was made: with a few notable exceptions, God chooses to work in this world through the ordinary agency of human hands. God gets things done through our work. Martin Luther once remarked that God even milks cows through the hands of the milkmaids.¹ We tend to limit God to the miraculous and the exceptional, but God has in fact resolved to care for us largely through the quotidian

* Department of Philosophy, Calvin College, *Can the Ordinary Practice of Law be a Religious Calling?* The Inaugural Conference of the Institute on Law, Religion, and Ethics, Pepperdine University School of Law, February 6 & 7, 2004.

1. 44 MARTIN LUTHER, WERKE: KRITISCHE GESAMTAUSGABE 6 (Weimar Hermann Bohlaus 1883).

activities of our neighbors. Each morning we ask God for our daily bread and already people are at work in the bakeries.

Of course, God could have created a world in which he saw to our needs directly - a world where food miraculously appears on our tables at mealtime; where a fresh set of clothes materializes in our closets at the beginning of each season; and where car repairs occur overnight in our garages, mercifully, as we sleep. But God did not choose to create that kind of world. In the first chapter of *Genesis* we find that He chose to create an even more excellent, albeit more challenging, world.² He chose to create a world where we, as His image-bearers, are involved in the on-going business of creation and the repair of creation. In this world we assume responsibility for the well-being of the earth and all who inhabit it, we exercise our minds and imaginations, we make decisions and expend our energies.³

The world that God created is also a world where we are not sufficient unto ourselves. Granted, each one of us has strengths and abilities. But we are also dependent creatures of need. Again, God could have created the world differently and made us so that we were capable of meeting all of our needs through our own efforts. But God chose to connect us to each other in a circle of need and care, to make us a society of interdependent persons who serve each other and are served by each other. Each connection in the social bond is established where human need and human ability meet. We are born ignorant, but we have parents and teachers; we are born naked, but there are those who design, make, and distribute clothing; we are born hungry, but there are those who produce, distribute, and prepare food. Soon we grow up and come to find our own place in this interconnected system of mutual support. When we do so, we begin to participate in God's way of providing for the human community. We invest ourselves in the divine economy of work.

Well, so much for the lessons to be learned from the pious man who refused the help of others when he was in need. Another story, one I think is equally instructive, might be told about this unfortunate man's neighbor, Fred. Fred was a pious man, too. He was also a plumber. But he never had a sense of God's calling in his life. For years he would pray for a sure sign that would set him to a special task in the Kingdom. But it never came. And he remained a plumber until he breathed his last. When Fred arrived in heaven he asked God why he had never received a calling. And God answered, "Remember when you tried to save your neighbor in the flood? I called you then. For I have commanded you to love your neighbor, and I gave you a boat and a neighbor in need. The call was clear, and you responded. But in fact as a plumber you were responding to my call all along - serving your neighbors in need with the talents, training, tools, and opportunities I gave you."

We tend to think that God calls people only to special tasks in spectacular ways. Like Fred in this story, it is hard for us to see the

2. *Genesis* 1:1-31.

3. *See id.*

connection between our ordinary work and the kind of life to which God calls us. They exist in separate compartments. Our work has little, if any, religious significance for us. It's hard for us to think of our professional practice as a religious calling. We tend to restrict the scope of God's call to church or temple, to family traditions, or to the inner sanctum of private life.

But we also need to recognize the call of God in the world of work, to hear the voice of the divine in the day-to-day circumstances of our lives. For there too God calls us to serve. Writing on the spirituality of work, the Catholic author Norvene Vest captured the point succinctly: "Based on our own situation and gifts, each of us is invited to lead a life illumined by these two factors: a desire to respond to God and a willingness to see daily life as the place where that response is formed."⁴

II. A LITTLE HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

Early in its history the Christian church made an outstandingly unhelpful distinction between two kinds of religious life, between two roads to heaven. The high road was for all who were willing to leave the world behind and enter the monastery for a life of prayer and meditation. They were the religiously serious, full-time Christians. They had received a call from God, a call to forsake their jobs and family in order to live the religious life. The low road was for the rest of us, either unwilling or unable to free ourselves from our secular entanglements. We live an ordinary life. We work for a living; we refrain from doing wrong as best we can; and we attend church on Sundays. We are part-time Christians with one foot in the sacred realm, the other in the secular. Apparently we never got that call from God, that special vocation.

Martin Luther, the German reformer of the 16th century, challenged this two-track version of the religious life by insisting that all have a calling from God.⁵ That calling can be, and usually is, fulfilled in the midst of our "secular" involvements. It was his view that everyday life is not secular in the least, but charged with religious significance.⁶ For our everyday life is the scene of God's providential activity, an activity in which we participate through our labor. Every day, God calls each one of us to serve our neighbors in the various roles, or earthly "stations," in which we have been placed.⁷ If I am a baker, then God has called me to meet my neighbor's need for daily bread. If I am a parent, then God has called me to care for and educate my children. If I am a citizen of a democratic country, then God has called me to participate in the political life of the nation. A religious

4. NORVENE VEST, *FRIEND OF THE SOUL: A BENEDICTINE SPIRITUALITY OF WORK* 76 (1996).

5. See generally GUSTAF WINGREN, *LUTHER ON VOCATION* 9 (1957).

6. *Id.*

7. *Id.* at 27.

vocation does not bid us to leave the world, but to engage the world for God's sake. In responding to our various callings, we are actually cooperating in God's care for humanity.

Daily life, then, has a religious standing.⁸ Our ordinary activities count as legitimate and important responses to God's call. That's the refreshing element of Luther's place-based doctrine of vocation. But there is a dark side to it as well. For Luther, the given order of social stations was a direct expression of God's will. Human sin makes it appearance only in the deviation from established social roles. Still wedded to some degree to the medieval worldview, he thought that our social stations are an immediate extension of the creation order, as good and as stable as the turning of the tides or the cycle of the seasons. Evil resides in departure from the given order of society, not in any defect in that order itself. This view lends itself all too easily to a kind of quietism in the face of distorted social roles, where error lies not in the deviation from the duties of one's station, but in the socially agreed upon duties themselves.

Shortly after Luther's time, European civilization underwent a dramatic transformation under the combined influence of a rapidly expanding market economy, accelerated urbanization, technological innovation, and vast political reorganization. In the face of these astounding changes and dislocations on all fronts of social life, it became increasingly apparent that the structure of human society is in part a product of human activity. And to the degree such activity is motivated by errant desires and worldly ambitions the society thus formed is likely to be structurally unsound and in need of transformation. The concept of vocation was accordingly modified by the second-generation reformers in ways that are important for us today. Luther taught that to discover our vocation we have only to reflect on the social positions we already occupy.⁹ Our calling is mediated by the duties that attach to our stations in life. To discover our calling, then, we need only remind ourselves of who we are. God calls us to do what is expected of us, given our various social identities. But clearly those expectations can themselves be in error. The duties and expectations attached to the social role of a father in some societies can be both dangerous and damaging. So can the duties and expectations that typically hold for those who practice corporate law.

Individuals are not the only carriers of sin. The second-generation reformers realized, during the social turmoil of the early modern era, that social institutions are in part the products of human hands, and therefore neither especially stable nor especially good. For that reason, they made two modifications to the received view of vocation. First, to discover our vocation we should look not to the duties that attach to our stations, but to

8. The historical account in this and the following paragraphs is drawn in part from a lecture given at the College of St. Benedict in October of 2003. See Lee Hardy, *Between Us, God and the World: The Trajectory of a Christian Vocation*, (2003), available at http://www.csbsju.edu/journey/Faculty_staff/Hardy%20Essay.htm.

9. 31 I MARTIN LUTHER, WERKE: KRITISCHE GESAMTAUSGABE 252 (Weimar Hermann Bohlaus 1883).

the gifts God has given us as individuals. Then we can consider how those gifts might be employed for our neighbors good within a given social structure. Second, if the given social structure - the existing pattern of practices and expectations - does not allow for the use of our gifts in ways that truly serve our neighbor and honor God, then the social structure must be changed. The reformed impulse was to bring existing social institutions into line with our vocations, not our vocations into line with existing social institutions.¹⁰

The idea of critical involvement with society in the name of a religious vocation is captured nicely by a line in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, dealing with the Vocation of the Laity: "By reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will."¹¹ In this statement one can see two emphases. First, the laity has a vocation and can fulfill its vocation by engaging the world, not forsaking it. That was Luther's point. Second, this vocation will involve a critical assessment and re-ordering of temporal affairs in the light of God's will, that is, in the light of God's demand for truth, justice, equity and reconciliation. Clearly, this goes beyond Luther.

III. VOCATIONAL INTEGRATION: MAKING OUR JOBS SMALLER

I would like to give one example of an attempt to reconfigure a social station in accordance with the rule of vocation. The example comes from a law firm in Grand Rapids. By way of introduction to this example, let me review an important normative point Luther made about the breadth of our vocation. Our vocation is larger than our profession. It embraces all the ways we are typically related to others. Being a citizen is the basis for a calling; there I am called to participate in the political process of democratic deliberation. Being a parent is the basis for a calling; there I am called to care for my children. Being a member of a faith community is the basis for a calling; there I am called to exercise my spiritual gifts for the edification of others. All of these facets of my life have the dignity of a calling, and stand shoulder to shoulder in importance with my professional career. My vocation is larger than my job. My office is only one of the places in which I respond to God's call to serve my neighbor.

The fact that our callings are multiple brings up the issue of vocational integration. How do we propose to apportion our time and energies between our various spheres of operation? I am a professor of philosophy at Calvin

10. For a fuller treatment of the reformed doctrine of vocation, see generally LEE HARDY, *THE FABRIC OF THIS WORLD*, 44-78 (1990); CHARLES TAYLOR, *SOURCES OF THE SELF*, 211-33 (1989); 2 ERNST TROELTSCH, *THE SOCIAL TEACHINGS OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES*, 576-690 (Olive Wyon trans., MacMillan 1931).

11. *CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH*, para. 898 (2d ed. 2003).

College; the son of Anne and Pat Hardy; the husband of Judith Hardy; the father of Katrina, Andrew, Ian and Grace; a member of Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church; a resident of the Easttown neighborhood; a citizen of the United States. Each one of these elements of my identity connects to my calling in life. Formally, they are consistent with each other. But I myself am finite, and how to divide my time between them is always an issue. Do I go to my daughter's high school track meet, or attend an afternoon meeting of the student philosophy club? Do I go out for coffee with my wife on Thursday night, or stay home and polish the Kant lecture for Friday? Should I go to the talk downtown about U.S. foreign policy in the Mideast, or spend more time with the Gospel of Mark?

All of us tend to slant things in one direction. To some degree, this is necessary. Our lives need focus. But we often go beyond that to the neglect of all dimensions of our life for the sake of one. And sometimes that imbalance is motivated by unchecked honor-seeking, or greed, or fear, or anxiety - possibly even a combination of all four. The legal profession is notorious for demanding unbalanced lives on the part of its practitioners. The constant push for billable hours will mean that most associates will have to put their families and communities on hold while they struggle for professional success and eventual elevation to partner hood. And there is little an individual can do to change this professional culture. He or she must either bite the bullet and make a virtual idol of work, or look for employment elsewhere. Conform, or quit. But groups of like-minded individuals acting in concert can bring about a change in a professional culture. And that's where my example comes in.

On the southeast corner of Pearl and Ottawa streets in downtown Grand Rapids stands the sturdy edifice of the Trust Building, which is the first "skyscraper" built between Detroit and Chicago. The eleventh floor houses the offices of one of the oldest law firms in the city: Wheeler, Upham, P.C. Although this traditional law firm is well established and well respected in the Grand Rapids legal community, it differs from many other law firms in several significant respects. Shaped by a succession of partners who were also active church members, it maintains a strong tradition of respect for the validity of those dimensions of life that lie outside the confines of its offices. Accordingly, it has limited its claims upon the lives of its associates and they are held accountable for fewer billable hours than the average law firm in our area. As a consequence, the salaries are also lower than the salaries one might fetch in firms that demand more hours. But many of the attorneys who now work for Wheeler, Upham have come from other firms, gladly accepting a reduction in salary in order to work for a firm that, according to its corporate statement of purpose, strives "to recognize the importance of our employee's personal development, and the family, community, religious, and other like commitments unrelated to the practice of law." Hourly workers receive similar consideration, for example secretaries are rarely asked to work overtime - a shocking abnormality in the legal profession, I am told. They are expected to make only six Saturday mornings a year

available to the firm. Secretaries are also allowed three weeks of vacation a year, while associates are encouraged to take four.

Although the way this firm limits its demands on its employees might seem to dull its competitive edge, John Roels, an attorney at the firm, maintains that the very opposite is true. Rested, attuned, focused, and personally integrated lawyers are simply sharper, fresher, and less likely to make errors than those who are tired, burned-out, overworked, and whose personal lives are falling apart due to neglect. In his experience, the quality of legal services is enhanced when the quantity is carefully controlled.

IV. VOCATIONAL ENRICHMENT: MAKING A JOB LARGER

If we are to honor the full breadth of our religious calling, there is a sense in which our jobs must get smaller. Other aspects of our lives must be honored as callings as well. There is another sense, however, in which a religious calling will make our jobs bigger. To make this point, I indulge in a little New Testament theology. Those familiar with the New Testament language of calling may wonder if there is much warrant in the Christian scriptures for the concept of work as a divine calling. Consider some of the key passages in the New Testament that speak of the Christian's calling: we are called to repentance and faith;¹² we are called into fellowship with Christ;¹³ we are called out of darkness and into the light;¹⁴ we are called to be holy¹⁵; indeed, we are called to be saints.¹⁶

I could list more. But perhaps we can already see the pattern. The vast majority of occurrences of the word calling ("*klesis*") in the New Testament do not refer to work, occupation, or paid employment at all. In these passages we are called, as the Scottish theologian Gary Badcock recently put it, not to a particular job, but to a common way of life - a life of love for God and neighbor; a life of faith, hope, kindness, patience, and charity. Here all Christians have the same calling to follow Christ, and in so doing to be conformed to his image. I will assume that in the other Abrahamic faiths there is also a sense that the devout are primarily called to a love of God that will express itself in love of neighbor; and that the adherents of the faith are thus called to a life of righteousness, whatever their jobs may be.

The concept of work as a vocation comes to the fore when we ask ourselves how we propose to respond to our primary religious vocation. God commands us to love our neighbor.¹⁷ How will we make good on that command? Here the idea of vocation in Christian circles picks up on the

12. See Acts 2:38.

13. 1 Corinthians 1:9.

14. 1 Peter 2:9.

15. 1 Peter 1:15; 1 Corinthians 1:2.

16. Romans 1:7.

17. Mark 12:31.

New Testament image of the church as a body: all are called to follow Christ, the head of the church, but each one has a special role to play in the body of believers on the basis of a particular gift.¹⁸ Those with the gift of teaching should teach; those with the gift of administration should administrate; those with the gift of prophecy should prophesy.¹⁹ The concept of work as a religious vocation in effect says that the same principle holds for society at large. Like all who live before the face of God, I am called to love my neighbor. But I respond to that call in a particular situation, on the basis of a particular gift, a particular set of abilities and passions - as a builder of houses, an automaker, a school counselor, or a trial lawyer.

The connection between the call of God and our ordinary work seems natural enough, viewed in this way. But in our culture the tendency has been to separate our sense of religious vocation from our professional practice; to separate the kind of life to which God calls us from the life demanded of us in our work. We have learned to resolve any potential conflicts between the two by relegating them to wholly separate spheres. We have become experts at compartmentalization. And what we get in return is a religion that seems irrelevant to life and a job, devoid of any real meaning. What would it look like if we re-connected our work with a sense of religious calling? What would happen if we broke down the walls of separation, if we crossed the command to love our neighbors with the opportunities for service afforded by our professional life?

Let me offer one, non-threatening example from the field of elementary education. Every year the Grand Rapids Community College gives "Giant" awards to outstanding leaders in the local African-American community. This year Ruth Jones won the Hattie Beverly Education Award.²⁰ Ms. Jones is the principal of Henry Paideia Elementary School, located in the inner city, just a couple blocks from my church. According to the *Grand Rapids Press*, before she assumed her post the school "was a mess. Test scores, attendance and staff morale were dismal. It sat in one of Grand Rapids' worst neighborhoods, neglected and scarred by drugs and vandalism. Many of its fifth graders couldn't read."²¹ "There was no hope there - it was the saddest thing," Jones remarked in the interview.²² "The children's faces were flat - no expression. Even the building was dark. It's not that the staff there was mean or terrible. They had just given up."²³ At her job interview with the school board in 1993, Jones told the board members that although she didn't want the job, she felt she was the one who was supposed to have

18. *Ephesians* 4:11-13, 15-16.

19. *Id.*

20. Terri F. Hamilton, *Ruth Jones; Hattie Beverly Education Award*, GRAND RAPIDS PRESS, Feb. 1, 2004, at J5.

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.*

it.²⁴ “She was right,” reported the *Grand Rapids Press*. Quoted below is a portion from the article, at some length:

Armed with optimism and love and God, Jones moved mountains at Henry. Test scores went up. One hundred percent of the parents showed up for conferences. Soft music plays in a quiet, respectful lunchroom.

When Jones found out she won a Giants Award, she did what she always does when she wins an award.

“I said to the children, ‘Guess what? You won another award!’”

She’ll put it in the trophy case at school. It belongs to her 350 students as much as it does to her, she says.

“I told them, ‘If you all were not outstanding, they wouldn’t have given me an award,’” she says. You should have seen their faces.”

You should see hers. Jones, 56, radiates love and optimism when she talks about her kids.

She has turned the school around

“My prime thing is to create good people,” she says. “I want to make sure my kids have a good heart. There are a lot of brilliant people in our prisons, but their hearts are not healthy. Their spirits have been broken.”

“I was created to please God,” she says.

“I please Him by becoming everything I was created to become. I was created to be a blessing to children - to kiss ‘em when nobody else does.”

Her students adore her. One sat at her bedside every day when she was hospitalized for 10 days Youngsters from Ottawa Hills

24. *Id.*

High School come to Henry every day after school, just to help her. . .

“Everybody wants me to pass out a handbook and say, ‘Here’s the model you should use,’” Jones says. “But the bottom line under all of it is love. So many kids come from a lot of pain at home. We can salvage a lot of these kids just by loving ‘em. It doesn’t cost anything.”

Children’s voices shout out on the playground outside her window. The sun glints off the snow as Jones speaks into the intercom.

“It’s good to see all you wonderful leaders,” Jones’ voice booms out on the playground. “Look at all the beautiful sunshine. Make sure you have sunshine in your heart, by being kind to each other. I love you - have fun out there.”

“I know my purpose, and that’s a wonderful thing,” Jones says with a smile. “This has made me believe I can do anything, with God helping me.”²⁵

Now there’s a shining example of a woman of faith who simply does not know how to compartmentalize, whose sense of religious vocation plays a central role in the pursuit of her profession. She could have taken the safe route and confined herself to the standard administrative duties of a school principle. She could have limited herself to the hiring and firing of teachers, to the making of teaching assignments, and to dealing with disciplinary cases when they arose. She could have fulfilled the standard list of job expectations while adopting the self-protective role of an educational bureaucrat. But she didn’t. Her sense of religious vocation wouldn’t let her. It made her job bigger. It enriched her work. She made the magic connection between work and religious calling. And in return, Ms. Jones received a faith that was alive and a job filled with significance.

The question for us is whether there are analogues to this connection to be found in the practice of law. Granted, the attorney/client relationship is different than the principle/student relationship. Moreover, the aims of the legal profession are different than the aims of education. Education is associated with care, the legal profession with combat. So it might seem that education is already closer to the values we associate with religion. But what would the practice of law look like if it were infused with a sense of religious calling, connected with the larger work of reconciliation, healing, and redemption? I will leave it to others, more familiar with the practice of law to answer this question.

25. *Id.*

Joseph Allegretti, a colleague within my field, has suggested that a sense of religious calling would indeed have a powerful impact on the practice of law, effectively moving the attorney/client relation from a purely contractual relationship to a "covenantal" relationship. This expanded relationship would enable an attorney to cover a richer repertoire of issues with her client, converting her from a morally neutral technician to a wise and trusted counselor.²⁶

V. A TOTAL RESPONSE

The basic thesis of my contribution to this volume is that the whole of life should be understood as a response to God's call. A corollary to that thesis is that if our work is also to count as a response to that call, our jobs must become smaller and larger at the same time. They have to get smaller because work is only one facet of our total vocation. A job that takes over a person's life, a job that loses all reference to the independent spheres of family, community, and faith, is a job that threatens to collapse upon itself, sucking everything into its vortex of activity without referring us to a larger moral purpose that ultimately makes that activity meaningful and significant. That job needs to get smaller; it needs to find its place in the larger scheme of things. But a sense of religious vocation at work will also make our jobs larger. Not that they will take up more of our time. Rather they will be internally enriched as we seek to align our professional activity with our best understanding of the creative and redemptive purposes of God in this world. Our job descriptions will be expanded.

We need not sell all our possessions and enter a religious community in order to respond to our religious calling. We can respond to the call of God in the midst of our ordinary lives, including our ordinary work. That makes being a person of faith both easier and harder at the same time: easier in that we do not have to give up marriage or money or even success in order to follow God's call; harder because we really do have to follow God's call at the office, as well as our place of worship. And when we are serious about that, we may find that the sacrifices required of us are just as great as the sacrifices made by the saints we admire from afar. But surely the rewards will be just as great as well.

26. JOSEPH ALLEGRETTI, *THE LAWYER'S CALLING: CHRISTIAN FAITH AND LEGAL PRACTICE* 37-50 (1996).
