

# Calling in a Post-Pandemic Economy: Rethinking What we Teach about Life After Graduation

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No Comments

In a matter of months, our graduating seniors will be looking to land in the places where their “deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”<sup>1</sup> If economists are right, however, the post Covid-19 job market will likely resemble the one encountered by graduates just a decade earlier. Following the “Great Recession” (2007-09), one of my department’s top students (who has since gone on to an Ivy League graduate degree and to several highly competitive positions), settled

for work driving a fork-lift. This was honorable work to be sure, but not remotely close to where he expected to find his calling.

His story may be more common than we dare imagine, leading me to fear that what we teach our students about vocation may lead them to feel like they've failed. Very few workers enjoy the luxury of vocational choice, especially when historical and global contexts are considered. Even during boom times, most students accept jobs despite our best efforts to inspire them to follow callings. Economic downturns may just make the problem, and our awareness of it, more acute. Recent trends like increasing educational debt, declining availability of work that pays middle class wages and more first-generation enrollees may increasingly make a calling (at least contemporary renditions of the concept) something only a privileged minority can find or accept.<sup>2</sup>

The pandemic may be offering us a rich opportunity to re-think what we're teaching about this important topic. I'd like to offer some thoughts about how we might make the concept of calling more meaningful, expansive and inclusive. In the spirit of confession, these are ideas I have stumbled across and used in attempts to rectify my own mistakes teaching on the subject.

**1) Emphasize the nobility, dignity and contributions made by all workers.** Covid-19 has opened our eyes to the fact that “essential workers” don't exclusively hold positions with job characteristics we've often associated with calling — high levels of agency, meaning and impact. Thus, we should be clear that students who accept work like food prep, construction, package delivery (and driving forklifts!), whether for a

season or a lifetime, are indeed serving God and neighbor. This is something Luther clearly understood in his well known description of the “masks of God.”

## **2) Continue to level spiritual hierarchies.**

Despite repeated attempts since the Reformation to close the sacred-secular gap, some forms of work are still subtly, but surely, elevated over others. Students going on summer missions or service trips are often “commissioned,” but hands are rarely laid on those about to do internships in fields like business, technology or politics. My university’s career center recently advertised an event with the provocative question “Looking for a Career with Purpose?”

Predictably, it was a job fair for those seeking work in the *non-profit* sector. Much work remains to reinforce the idea that all kinds of work can contribute toward the reconciliation of all things. A good place to start is by “sending out” students to all corners of the *vocational* world during a late spring convocation.

## **3) De-romanticize calling.**

While well-meaning, statements like “find your calling and you’ll never have to work a day in your life” may lead students to dismiss the possibility that God wants them in the employment they eventually do find when the work proves difficult. As Margaret Diddams and Denise Daniels point out, toil is a part of a Biblical portrayal of work, although we should work to minimize it.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it is best to prepare students to expect to “work” many days in their lives, *because* they have found their calling.

#### **4) Awaken students to the formative aspects of work.**

If Dallas Willard's assertion that spiritual formation happens during the course of our everyday lives is accurate, it's somewhat surprising that the topic receives so little emphasis in existing literature on vocation.<sup>4</sup> Given the amount of time we spend working (roughly 90,000 hours by some estimates), it seems clear that God can use the conflicts, successes and failures we experience for spiritual growth. Recognizing spiritual formation at work allows for a broader understanding of how what we do participates in the *missio dei* and may thereby, allow more people to see their work as vocational.

#### **5) Emphasize work as one (of many) callings.**

Several scholars have pointed out that work and calling are not synonymous. Instead, we have many callings.<sup>5</sup> Many of our students may never find employment that feels like their "life's work." However, we can encourage them to see their paid work as a means to support roles they are called to do, like family, church, community and volunteer activities. We can also point them to the possibility (employer permitting) of making their current work a calling (or at least more meaningful) through strategies like job crafting.<sup>6</sup>

I share these ideas with the hope that we can better serve our current and future students. To be certain, the points I raise are far from comprehensive and are only meant as starting places for further conversation. I know there are many good (likely better than mine) ideas out there. For the sake of our students, please share them.

#### **Footnotes**

1. This often used definition of calling comes from Frederick Buechner's *Wishful Thinking: A Seekers ABC* (San Francisco: Harper-One, 1993), 118-9.
2. Scott Waalkes has insightfully addressed several flaws in prevalent conceptions of vocation in his article, "Rethinking Work as Vocation: From Protestant Advice to Gospel Corrective." *Christian Scholars Review* 44 (March 2015) 135-53.
3. Margaret Diddams and Denise Daniels. "Good Work with Toil: A Paradigm for Redeemed Work." *Christian Scholars Review* 37 (Fall 2008): 61-82.
4. Dallas Willard. *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998).
5. See for example, Lee Hardy. *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice and the Design of Human Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990). Doug Koskela adds a third type of calling – "direct" (like the one received by Moses). See Doug Koskela, *Calling and Clarity: Discovering what God wants for your life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).
6. See Bryan Dik and Ryan Duffy. *Make Your Work a Calling: How the Psychology of Vocation can Change Your Life at Work* (Philadelphia: Templeton Press, 2013).