

## Vocation and the Reformation

By Jesse Phillips

In recent days we have moved away from a traditional view of relationships in which people decided who they should marry through the process of dating. This practice was very acceptable in the church for the last several decades, and still remains acceptable throughout much of the world. My parents dated and turned out to be great believers, people and parents. But with the emergence of a great body of teaching on courtship, we have seen some of the dangers and unbiblical nature of dating as it is often practiced. Joshua Harris taught us to kiss dating goodbye. Douglas Wilson presented a biblical view of courtship in the modern world in his pivotal book *Her Hand in Marriage*.

One of the problems with dating is that it asks the wrong question. In essence, recreational dating asks the question, “Should I get married?” In other words, a dating man may begin to act as if he is married to a woman, ignoring many of the scriptural directives as to how an unmarried couple should relate, all the while trying to decide if marriage in general is in his future. If and when he decides that marriage really is in his future, he might as well marry the person he has been dating.

Courtship, on the other hand, asks the question, “*Is this the person I should marry?*” and refrains from certain behaviors until the question is answered. It’s amazing how asking the right question corrects so many errors.

Dating leads to heartache and failure. If a dating couple decides to breakup, there is always disappointment and heartache. It is viewed as a failure because of the premature investment and assumptions that have been made. Courtship, however, can end successfully even if it does not end in marriage. The goal of courtship is not to determine the calling to marriage, but the specific question of an individual prospect for marriage. Courtship is only successful if clarity is brought to what the will of God is. If Joe courts Amy with an open mind, he will view his courtship as a success only if God tells him

whether or not he is to marry Amy, regardless of what God's answer is. Joe seeks the will of God concerning Amy, and when he finds the answer is no, he can joyfully obey without wrestling with whether he has failed or if he is not called to be married at all.

Why bring up courtship in a discussion on vocation? I believe that we may be in need of an adjustment in terms of how we talk about *calling* in a similar way that we have been served by adjustments in the realm of relationships. The parallels are many.

People ask the question "Am I called?" But like with dating, I think this is the wrong question. Pastoral ministry is one particular occupation among many that God calls us to. The courtship question would be better, "Am I called *to this one in particular?*" Like dating, many men who find out that they are "not called" (to use this poor language) face a great temptation to view themselves as having failed or needing to settle for a calling that is only second rate. A man seeking his calling is only successful if he finds the will of God, not if he becomes a pastor. Should a woman, having courted three or four times before finding a husband, going through the rest of her life with a cloud of guilt over her head due to her failure? Should she assume she must be stuck with the third or fourth best man for her? Men who find they are not called to pastoral ministry should not go about their lives as failures stuck in a second-tier occupation. An inquiry into potential pastoral ministry can end equally successfully two different ways.

I believe that using the question "Am I called?" can be a bit misleading. Obviously, the possibility that this question may be answered "no" forces a conclusion that some men are not called, period.<sup>1</sup> This language—I presume unintentionally in the vast majority of cases—unfortunately and carelessly puts evaluation of pastoral calling in the realm of pass or fail. This, like relationships and courtship, is decidedly not an issue of pass or fail, but an issue of God's sovereign will and our obedience to it. Although this language, like dating, has been acceptable over the last few decades, it is time for a switch

and a return to a more biblical view on vocation that will spare the “uncalled” the life of disappointment and shame their failure has apparently earned for them.

## **A. Luther on Vocation**

Luther’s view of vocation was broad. It was not limited to one’s job or occupation. Later, as we will see, the Puritans expounded upon this teaching, but we can credit Luther for broadening the category of vocational call beyond the traditional clerical occupations offered by the Catholic Church. According to Luther, our vocation as Christians includes all aspects of our daily lives from the time we are saved until the return of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Why are we talking about Martin Luther when it comes to calling to ministry? Luther is best known for his theology of the will and the doctrine of justification by faith, which became the fundamental beliefs of the reformation. So how much can really be made about Luther’s comments on vocation? Are these simply passing comments on which we should not try to build an entire vocational theology? Or are these more than passing comments? I contend that although Luther’s teaching on vocation was not the central theme of his theology, they are nevertheless more than passing comments. Luther’s teaching on vocation is the well-thought-out application of his doctrines. If Luther made correct application of his theology, then there is no better starting point for us as we seek to apply the same doctrines to our lives.

For Luther there was a connection between his understanding of the doctrine of redemption and vocation. Furthermore, this particular issue of how *believers who hold this doctrine are to live everyday life* was very important to him, and brings to light one of the primary grievances he had with the Catholic Church. Luther saw no difference between daily living and vocation. We have managed to differentiate certain kinds of vocations when Luther saw one broad category. Though it might be an over-

simplification, we could say that Luther saw the world in two categories: doctrine and vocation (the closest parallels we have today may be the related terms truth and application). Vocation was to Luther what application is to us. A Christian's vocation was his life, which included but was not limited to his occupation. This life, or vocation, must be lived in light of the doctrines of scripture and the revealed will of God. Therefore, all Christians were called, though the specific occupations within those vocations varied. This seems to be much more in line with Paul's teaching on calling, which we will examine in later chapters.

### **Attacking the Monastic Myth**

As we know, much of Luther's theology had an aim at correcting heresy and malpractice of the Catholic Church. His teaching on vocation does nothing less. The prevailing idea of the day was that religious piety was inherently tied to the institutional church. In our day we might say that the only people who are *truly* called are those who are called to be pastors. In Luther's day it was the "idea that one had to leave one's previous way of life and become a member of a religious order or a priest in order to serve God truly."<sup>3</sup> The myth was that the monastery somehow uniquely housed the true servants of God, or that God was somehow inherently more glorified by the lifestyle of a monk or priest than by a 'commoner'. Wayne Grudem addresses a modern day version of the monastic myth when he says, "When students ask, 'How can I serve God with my life?' they don't often hear the answer, 'Go into business.'"<sup>4</sup>

So Luther speaks to us today. Our churches have replaced the monasteries. The modern term pastor has replaced the term use of the word priest. But the *idea* remains. From Luther's day until this day the strange idea has existed that somehow those whose occupation is more closely tied to a religious

body or institution are more pleasing to God, greater servants of God. I would contend that a true servant is one who does what his master tells him, regardless what the task may happen to be. Therefore, Luther's teaching on vocation could not be more relevant to our discussion of vocational theology. Vocation is not an obscure topic that should sit and collect dust in a dark corner of reformed theology. It strikes at the heart of how we apply the core truths of scripture. Misconceptions surrounding this doctrine have crept into today's church just like the old Catholic Church.

Luther accomplished nothing less than radical social and ecclesiastic reform. His writings on the nature of man and the errors of the church galvanized the masses. His teaching on vocation also empowered believers during his time and in later eras (see below on the Puritans). *Luther's theology of calling lies at the very heart of this drastic reform.*

"Luther's understanding of vocation flows from his way of thinking about the Christian faith. His most basic assumption in this regard is that the world is God's good creation...especially in terms of God's ongoing creative work in upholding and directing all that is and in constantly doing new things. The call to follow Christ leads not to any religious vocation removed from daily life [as the monks and priests would have done], but instead it transforms the attitude and understanding one has of the situation *in which one already is.*"<sup>5</sup> This was a drastic claim that served both to correct the over-spiritualization of monastic offices and revive the "ordinary" person to new zeal in the jobs that we might call mundane.

The chasm of separation between clerical and secular occupations had become so vast that the clergy actually formed a separate social and economic class. To move from the peasantry to the clergy was in many cases desirable social promotion, aside from any religious aspiration. This was no small peeve for Luther. He dedicated himself to the effort of translating the Bible into the common tongue so that all people could read the word of God, thereby breaking down the dividing wall between clergy and peasantry by taking away the one distinct advantage of the clergy: the sole possession of scripture.

But the aim of the reformer was not primarily reform in the church, or reform in the way the people viewed the church. Make no mistake—he did desire ecclesiastic reform. But his goal was nothing less than complete social reform. He envisioned a society where the gospel was lived and preached by all members of working society; a society where piety and religious zeal was no longer a term that described the lives to a few isolated monks and priests, but all believers everywhere. Luther’s ideal society was an Acts-like community where believers shared everything in common, fundamental vocational unity.

This type of society, only, would bring the most praise to God. The arguments in this quote by Luther make it seem utterly foolish to say that God is more glorified by certain occupations (which would make certain vocations more desirable): “It looks like a great thing when a monk renounces everything and goes into a cloister, carries on a life of asceticism, fasts, watches, prays, etc... On the other hand, it looks like a small thing when a maid cooks and cleans and does her housework. But because God’s command is there, even such a small work must be praised as service to God far surpassing the holiness and asceticism of all monks and nuns.”

The religious elite would have scoffed at this claim. How can a simple kitchen maid bring more glory to God than religious leaders? The key was obedience. If “God’s command is there” then her housework is her sacred vocation. God is maximally pleased by wholehearted obedience to specific calling, regardless of the occupation might be.

So how would Luther have counseled a young man who came and said, “Am I called?” In a blunt manner that only he could get away with, he says, “How is it possible that you are not called? You have always been in some state or station. Are you a husband and you think that you have not enough to do in that sphere to govern your wife, children, domestics and property so that all may be obedient to God and you do no one any harm? Yea, if you had five heads and ten hands, even then you would be too weak for

your task, so that you would never dare to think of making a pilgrimage, or doing any kind of saintly work.”<sup>6</sup>

Luther very plainly observes that God has called all believers. We are all called and thereby possess a unique vocation. We have been given two hands, and both of those hands are needed to perform the tasks at hand in the condition that we are called. Our goal in life should be to serve God in the areas that we have been called to serve him without questioning him by speculating whether or not we have been called at all. Even if we had ten hands worth of gifting, we should never “dare to think...of any kind of saintly work” if God has not called us to it. Speculation on this matter could be nothing more than premeditated rebellion against God. Why speculate as to if and when you should disobey? We should not very easily question our calling, but assume it and seek God for direction in it, remembering the admonition of Paul to live as we are called (1 Cor. 7:17,24).

Think about what Luther is saying here. It could very well be offensive. I believe far too many men premeditate disobedience by asking themselves the questions about calling to pastoral ministry. For some, it is a legitimate question that needs answering. But for many, I think the question of calling is taken up with far too much frivolity, as if all of the gifting, character, drive and inner ‘sense’ in the world is an adequate excuse to disobey God. Let each man glorify God in the condition in which he was called to do so.

In today’s world we see men with passion for God and gifts and we say, “Surely, he’s called to be a pastor. Look at the fruit his life is bearing!” It is true that if a man can bear fruit in one occupation then he could possibly bear fruit in another. There’s no reason to suspect he could not. But might it also be true—and perhaps more likely—that his gifting and fruitfulness in a non-pastoral occupation could be evidence that *he is exactly where God would have him remain?* “Oh Frank, you’re producing so much fruit as a lawyer, winning so many cases, thereby proving that you are in fact called to be a doctor!” We

would never look at a man's fruitfulness as a pastor and suspect that this very fruitfulness proves his calling as a salesman. Should we be willing to move a man from fruitfulness in business to pastoral ministry? Yes, but only to the degree that we would be willing to move a fruitful pastor to some other occupation. In either case, both should be done singularly motivated by obedience to God, considering "if God's command is there."

I know there are many who disagree that we should be no more willing to make a man a pastor as we are to ask a man to stop being a pastor. But assuming that the command of God is present in both, the fact that we would more readily obey God in one act than we would in another act reveals that we more highly value pastoral ministry than any other occupation. For example, let's say that John is a pastor that God is leading into some other occupation, and Frank is a plumber that God is calling to be a pastor. Assuming that God is leading both men in the change (through the expected means of spiritual authority, evaluation of gifting and character qualifications) we should be no less willing to ask John to make the switch as we are to ask Frank. What we're asking both men to do is non-negotiable—to obey God! Why the reluctance (or not, in the other case)? Again, assuming that obedience to God requires both of these changes, the fact that we would more happily ask fruitful businessmen to become pastors than fruitful pastors to become businessmen (which almost never happens) reveals a functional hierarchy that God did not create. Granted, we could observe that God does not lead pastors to become businessmen quite as often as he asks businessmen to become pastors for obvious reasons pertaining to the care of the flock. What I am addressing however that the discrepancy in our eagerness to follow God in these two different cases reveals that we are operating under a dangerous pretext that God does not care as much about certain worldly occupations or actions. John Calvin will warn us about in the next section.

## **B. John Calvin on Vocation**

John Calvin lived about the same time that Martin Luther did. He is best known for the doctrine that has his name, Calvinism. This doctrine is the heart of reformed theology, best known for its acronym TULIP, which means total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints. Like Luther, Calvin was interested in doctrine and holy living (see his writing on the Christian Life). For the reformers, sound doctrine was their highest priority, and right living was their chief aim. They aimed for such accurate doctrine for the sake of defending the truth<sup>7</sup>, and because the truth always leads to right living.

What does Calvin add to this conversation about the call of God? I think we can learn from how Calvin uses the word call. He uses the term 'call' to refer to God's *saving* work, and yet so effortlessly transitions to the realm of obedience and service to the Lord. We would all agree that in one sense we are all *called* as Christians to lives of service, while only some have a sense of a *call* to be pastors. In reading Luther and Calvin, there are times where we (if we are thinking under the two-types-of-calls paradigm) must discern "what does he mean by call here? Does he mean 'called' as in elected or 'called' to a particular service?" This is where reading Calvin gets difficult. Take for example, the following section of Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book III, Chapter XI, section 6: *The Lord's calling a basis of our way of life*:

"Finally, this point is to be noted: the Lord bids each one of us in all life's actions to look to his calling. For he knows with what great restlessness human nature flames, with what fickleness it is borne hither and thither, how its ambition longs to embrace various things at once. Therefore, lest through our stupidity and rashness everything be turned topsy-turvy, he has appointed duties for every man in his particular way of life. And that no one may thoughtlessly transgress his limits, he has named these various kinds of livings 'callings.' Therefore each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wander about throughout life. Now, so

necessary is this distinction that all our actions are judged in his sight by it, often indeed far otherwise than in the judgment of human and philosophical reason. No deed is considered more noble, even among philosophers, than to free one's country from tyranny. Yet a private citizen who lays his hand upon a tyrant is openly condemned by the heavenly judge [1 Sam. 24:7, 11; 26:9].

“But I will not delay to list examples. It is enough if we know that the Lord's calling is in everything the beginning and foundation of well-doing. And if there is anyone who will not direct himself to it, he will never hold to the straight path in his duties. Accordingly, your life will then be best ordered when it is directed to this goal. For no one, impelled by his own rashness, will attempt more than his calling will permit, because he will know that it is not lawful to exceed its bounds. A man of obscure station will lead a private life ungrudgingly so as not to leave the rank in which he has been placed by God. Again, it will be no slight relief from cares, labors, troubles, and other burdens for a man to know that God is his guide in all these things. The magistrate will discharge his functions more willingly; the head of the household will confine himself to his duty; each man will bear and swallow the discomforts, vexations, weariness, and anxieties in his way of life, when he has been persuaded that the burden was laid upon him by God. From this will arise also a singular consolation: that no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight.”

I hope that the length of the quote does not rob it of impact. Calvin is essentially building on the claims of Luther and making application of the truths of God's sovereignty. The call of God is a sovereign call that determines who is saved. The call of God is extended and actually includes how those who are saved are supposed to live. Luther and Calvin did not understand that God was sovereign to call to salvation, but once saved, each called person was free to live how he wanted. The call of God

seamlessly transitioned from election, and included how those who were called should live. Essentially, this selection from Calvin makes the following points.

**A. *Nobody can stumble upon the type of life they should live.*** Selfish ambition and human ignorance will always prevent us from discovering the type of life we should live. Just like we could not “find God” by chance, we cannot “find our call” by chance. Both the call to salvation and our way of life are strongly tied to sovereignty and matters of obedience. “Therefore each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him” so that he will not “wander aimlessly” through his life. The reformers saw both salvation and vocation equally as matters of sovereign assignment.

**B. *We are judged in light of obedience, not station.*** God has called us all to various occupational stations. Service to the Lord is not valuable simply because it has some degree of outward piety<sup>8</sup>. Our actions are only worth something to God if they are carried out as acts of obedience to the Lord. Calvin uses the example of freeing a country from tyranny. A declaration of war and political assassination are quite different things, though they may both result in the same “act” of killing a particular leader. The motivation is more important than the action, and actually determines how the action is judged. When the action becomes more important than the motivation, what you get is legalistic piety. When the motivation is more important than the action you get grace-motivated obedience, which will always please God more than legalistic performance of religious duties.

**C. *Harmony is not tied to any particular station, but to obedience.*** People long to please God, to bring him honor and to experience the fulfillment of knowing that your life counts for something. Men and women also long for order. There is nothing worse than an aimless existence of chaos and failed goals. Because of the nature of pride, we all face the temptation to find significance in what we do. For much of the church, given the high levels of respect with which pastors are appropriately held, this is no subtle temptation. Calvin recognized that “impelled by his own rashness” a person may “attempt more

than his calling will permit". We must hold the calling of God in high respect, knowing that "it is not lawful to exceed its bounds." God will always frustrate mans attempts to break the law. This should lead us to talk about the potential of our calling with the appropriate level of trepidation and respect for the caller.

***D. God is not glorified by a particular station, but by obedience.*** The willing magistrate and the head of the household both glorify God. The pastor and the businessman both glorify God. The water boy and the star athlete are both singularly important, provided that each is doing what he was called to do. Who can fault the water boy for not scoring? Who can fault the pastor for not excelling in business? Who can fault the businessman for not shepherding the flock? Is God less glorified by diversity than if all parts of the body were the same? He would be less glorified if all were mouths and there were no eyes. Like Luther, Calvin emphasized obedience. God is pleased by obedience, regardless of the station in which the obedience is carried out. Indeed, God must be pleased in the most mundane tasks, if they are acts of obedience. He must be pleased with them, because he is the one who ordered them in the first place. I believe this quote serves as a soothing balm to the vexed, frustrated, and wandering Christians in the church today who struggle under the cloud of guilt over their respective callings: "no task will be so sordid and base, *provided you obey your calling in it*, that it will not shine and be reckoned *very precious* in God's sight."

### **C. The Puritans on Vocation**

The writings of Calvin had given rise to a protestant reformation, which led to the establishment of the Puritans. The Puritans were a group of people sought to break much of the traditionalism and unbiblical doctrines that had been established in the church. The name Puritan referred to their desire to purify the church and their own lives. Calling someone a Puritan is a statement about how that person

lives every bit as much as it is a statement about what that person believes. “If ever a group of Christians sought to glorify God in everything they did, it was the Puritans. Although the term ‘Puritan’ has often been used as an insult, the Puritans themselves were simply Christians who wanted to honor God in their worship and doctrine. The Puritans learned this God-centered lifestyle from John Calvin.”<sup>9</sup>

Not only did the Puritans embrace the doctrines of John Calvin and Martin Luther, they also embraced their application of that doctrine. The Puritans followed the logical inferences of the doctrines of Luther and Calvin out to their conclusion. Doctrinal statements have practical inferences. A thinking community will be able to follow the path of inferences and arrive at a certain life-style destination.

This is significant because the teaching of Luther and Calvin on vocation encapsulated almost in its entirety the application of their doctrine. In other words, Luther and Calvin—each in their own unique way—wrapped up everything they believed about how people should live and packaged it under the word vocation. The historical significance of the Puritans is that they actually opened the package and lived that way. In the history of Christianity, there has never been a group of people that have more closely lived the doctrines of the reformation than the Puritans themselves. This is not an insult to many people these days that are honoring God in how they live. This is quite simply a commendation of the exemplary lifestyle of many Puritans.<sup>10</sup> The point of Boice and Ryken above should suffice here.

There was never a people who had so sanctified the ordinary as the Puritans. Few people so cherished the glory of God that they were able to find it in the mundane. Luther had spoken of the maid who cooked and cleaned being worthy of praise far surpassing all the holiness of monks and nuns. Calvin had said that there was no task so “sordid and base” that is not “very precious in God’s sight.” The Puritans in effect said, “Okay, so let’s live that way.”

This is how Thomas Manton could say, “every creature is God’s servant, and hath his work to do wherein to glorify God; some in one calling, some in another.” This is how William Tyndale could say,

“there is [external] difference betwixt washing of dishes, and preaching of the Word of God; but as touching to please God, none at all.” For, as Richard Baxter says, “For God looketh not principally at the external part of the work, but much more at the heart of him that doth it.”<sup>11</sup>

Take Brother Lawrence for example. “The most effective way Brother Lawrence had for communicating with God was to simply do his ordinary work. He did this obediently out of a pure love of God, purifying it as much as was humanly possible. He believed it was a serious mistake to think of our prayer time as being different from any other. Our actions should unite us with God when we are involved in our daily activities, just as prayer unites us with Him in our quiet time.”<sup>12</sup>

We may object, “Prayer time as no different than any other? You may forget to wash the dishes, but do not forget to pray!” Brother Lawrence and the other Puritans simply saw both praying and chores as different means to the same end. Ask a Puritan which is more important and you may hear that nothing is more important than glorifying God. Ask him which task, prayer or daily activities, bring more glory to God, and he will warn you against such a dichotomy.

How could God be just as pleased by changing the oil of a car than he would be pleased by a passionate devotional time of worship, prayer and repentance of sin? It’s called the doctrine of justification and the Puritans simply thought it through. In justification we not only have our sins removed but we also receive the merit of Christ. There is not just an absence of negative, but an infinite presence of the positive. Not only are we out of debt, we actually own something. Therefore, having received all the merit of Christ, it would be impossible for us to be any more pleasing to God than we already are. Thus, our acts of obedience do not please God in the sense that they earn us some favor that we did not already have. Our acts please God in the sense that it is *us who are acting*.

A father is more pleased with how *his* daughter dances in the ballet than how any other girl dances. Certainly other girls are more talented and accomplished dancers, but are they more pleasing to

him? No, he is pleased with how his daughter dances because it is *his daughter* that is dancing. In this manner, our acts of obedience are pleasing to our heavenly Father because we have already been declared his children, brothers and sisters of Christ, found to have obtained the righteousness of Christ.

This is how cleaning a kitchen can be just as pleasing to God as prayer or any other action. Obedience pleases God because regardless of what the command of God is. It is God who chooses the command, which we are to obey. We please him by obeying.

The fact that the Puritans embraced Calvin and Luther's broad view of vocation is significant for two reasons. 1) It showed the reformer's application of his theology was not a short-term application that was uniquely tied to the circumstances of *his* day alone. 2) Given the profound dedication of the Puritans to the localized expression of the church, it should calm any fears that this way of thinking leads away from commitment to a particular church.

***1. The acceptance of application is urgent for the church today.*** In some movements the basic truths they promote linger, while their particular applications of it change. The Pentecostal movement, for example, established the basic truth that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are still in operation even in circles where the application regarding how the gifts are dispersed is challenged.

In some movements the applications made are noted even if some of the basic assertions are challenged. An example of this is the present day Emergent Church. The basic assertion is some form of an argument against absolute truth. The movement's motive, greater reality and evangelism, is duly noted even promoted in circles that reject its basic premise.

In which of these categories does the reformation fall? The Puritan movement is historic evidence of the longevity of the reformation, both its doctrine and its application. The fact that the Puritans embraced not only the central teaching of the reformation on justification, but also its inferences regarding vocation, proves that Luther's application of his doctrine was not a nearsighted or opportunistic

stab at his enemy. Rather, it was the only natural conclusion possible. When writing on vocation, Luther was not twisting the arm of justification to give himself a convenient tool to attack the church. He was simply expounding upon its inherent meaning. Having a broad view of vocation was not a choice Luther and Calvin made because the doctrine of justification simply *allowed* for it. It was a requirement because justification *forces* it.

So we do not have a choice whether or not to accept a reformed view on vocation. We can only reject this broad view of vocation if we first reject the full weight of Calvin and Luther's teaching on justification. The Puritan acceptance of a broad vocation was out of necessity, not choice, because they had already embraced the core doctrinal teaching. The Puritans are best understood, then, from a historical perspective, as people who truly lived the type of lives the sovereignty of God requires. We would do well to embrace the truths of the reformation as they did, including a broad view of vocation.

***2. There is no competition between a broad view of vocation and commitment to the church.***

One very large argument against a broad view of vocation may be that this line of thinking leads away from involvement in the church. If God can be just as pleased with a kitchen maid doing her chores as with a preacher giving a sermon, on what grounds can we promote involvement in the church as an absolute necessity? Simple: the grounds of obedience.

The fear expressed above of a move away from the centrality of the local church, reveals an ignorance of the affect that this line of thinking has had in history. There was never a group more committed to the church and to God than the Puritans. Their entire weeks were built around the church. The Puritan lifestyle was one controlled by God. The church was not just one competing priority among many. God controlled everything. This was only possible because they had managed to sanctify the ordinary, making every action an act of service to the Lord.

## **D. *Where Am I called?***

“Throughout our history, we humans have proven quite adept at finding any presumed needle of superiority—whether race, class, income, education, position, or something else—in our haystack of similarities. Yet into this menagerie of competing classes, the Caller introduces a revolutionary idea: leaders and followers who, though called to different roles, are equally loved and equally valued by the Caller.”<sup>13</sup> Harvey hits the nail on the head. All are called. Roles are different. The caller equally values all vocations.

Harvey also points out that one of the “great doctrines recovered during the Reformation, was the priesthood of all believers.” The Apostle Peter writes, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you”. Luther, Calvin and the Puritans all agreed on one thing: the “priesthood of all believers” did not mean that all believers had opportunities to function as pseudo-priests inasmuch as they took advantage of ministry opportunities within the church. Rather, all believers *truly are* priests called by God, and for each priest, his occupation *was* his ministry. The Reformation challenged the prevailing mindset of the day that pulled men out of God-glorifying vocations and into the monastery. We would do well not to stifle potentially God-glorifying vocational ministry by suggesting that it can only be glorifying to God to the degree that it resembles recognizable forms of pastoral ministry.

For the pastor, his occupation is his ministry. Pastors are members of the royal priesthood who happen to serve as pastors. Carpenters, and plumbers, businessmen and tradesmen, are members of the same royal-priesthood who happen to serve *as* carpenters, *as* plumbers, *as* businessmen and *as* other tradesmen. God doesn’t differentiate between priests and pseudo-priests. We shouldn’t make the distinction between pastors and pseudo-pastors. All are priests. Some priests are pastors. Each fulfills the occupational ministry God has assigned.

It is not too strange to hear someone these days use the term *vocational calling* to refer to pastoral ministry. “Am I called vocationally?” some might ask, inquiring as to whether or not they have been called by God to serve in full-time supported pastoral ministry (or something comparable) within the church. Other similar phrases include ‘full-time ministry’ and ‘vocational ministry.’ My concerns with this type of language are that it is redundant and rhetorical and not a little misleading.

First, the language is redundant. The word vocation has two related connotations. In the fifteenth century it meant, “spiritual calling” from the Latin *vocatio* which means “calling”. Over the next century the word was more broadly defined as “ones occupation or profession”.<sup>14</sup> The words vocation and calling are intrinsically united in this working definition: *vocation is a spiritual calling, which determines ones occupation or profession.*

Therefore, using the word ‘vocational’ to describe ones calling or ministry is redundant, similar to speaking of an “ATM machine.” Asking the question, “Am I called vocationally?” or “Am I called to ministry?” is a circular question, because a vocation is the ministry to which someone has been called. It’s like asking the question, “Was I asked that question that was posed to me?” Well, if you were asked a question, it was posed to you, and if a question was posed to you, then you were asked it. So are you vocationally called (or called into ministry)? If you are called, you have a vocation. If you have a ministry then you are called. Therefore, this language is nonsensical.

Second, the question is rhetorical. Another way of asking the question is “Am I called?” This form of the question makes more sense logically because it removes the redundancy. But another way of asking the *am I called* question is “Do I have a vocation?” Even though this form of the question removes the redundancy, it remains a rhetorical question, which cannot really lead to any conversation of substance without further clarification.

In commenting on Luther's use of the word vocation, Kolden notices that for the reformer, vocation "refers to more than mere dedicated service in ones occupation. It refers to the whole theatre of personal, communal, and historical relationships in which one lives."<sup>15</sup>

With regards to vocation, therefore, there is a degree of profound commonality and remarkable diversity across the body of Christ. We all have vocations—occupations, personal and community relationships and historic roles and perspectives. Yet our occupations and relationships, in this sense, are as diverse as the people who have been called to them. In either case, the question "Am I called?" or "Do I have a vocation?" is rhetorical. Yes and yes. As we already heard from Luther, "How is it possible that you are not called?" Meaningful discussion can only take place with regards to specific details of a particular calling or vocation. According to the reformers and Puritans, the question "Am I called?" in general was equivalent to asking, "Am I a Christian?" This question is better suited for our membership courses than leadership development.

To put it another way, discerning the summons to pastoral ministry is not a matter of deciding if you are called, but *where* you are called. You have been summoned to ministry as evidenced by the fact that you are saved and thereby called into a royal priesthood. This may or may not include various elements of recognizable pastoral ministry.

"The devil has so blinded men that he has persuaded them to believe that in little things they do not have to worry whether God is honored or served: and this he accomplished on the pretext that such things are of the world. When a man works in his labor to earn his living, when a woman does her housework, and when a servant does his duty, one thinks that God does not pay attention to such things, and one says they are secular affairs. Yes, it is true that such work is proper to this present and fleeting life; however, that does not mean that we must separate it from service to God."<sup>16</sup>

The distinction between sacred and worldly callings is a dangerous pretext. We must not separate our work and duties from our service to God. Calvin says that the devil is the inventor of the lie that says any non-pastoral occupation is different than pastoral ministry in terms of its value as service to God. Wayne Grudem agrees with Calvin on the source of the lie when he says, “And so I suspect that a profoundly negative attitude toward business in itself is ultimately a lie of the Enemy who wants to keep God’s people from fulfilling his purposes.”<sup>17</sup>

According to Peter we are all called members of a royal priesthood. But on what basis can Peter make this claim? It should be enough that Peter made this claim and that it is in itself an authoritative teaching of scripture. But this line of thinking does not originate with Peter. The Old Testament contains hints that all believers are anointed and sanctified servants of God<sup>18</sup>. “All flesh” has received spiritual anointing for holy service and even sons, daughters and servants are counted among “those whom the Lord calls”<sup>19</sup> (Joel 2:28-29, 32). The baptism of the Holy Spirit on the entire church throughout Acts advances this claim. Even a donkey was at one point anointed to serve the purpose of God (Numbers 22:22-41). But we, unlike Balaam’s donkey, are permanent residents of the royal priesthood, regardless of our level of gifting, because it is based on the fact that we have been called out of darkness and into his glorious light.

In the Old Testament, there was a Levitical priesthood that was established under God’s law<sup>20</sup>. The tribe of Levi was sanctified for holy service as priests to the Lord. But it was not just the Levites that were to serve the Lord as holy servants. God repeatedly says *to the entire nation* of Israel, “I am the Lord who sanctifies you” (Leviticus 20:8, 21:8, 22:32 Exodus 31:13, Ezekiel 37:28). In the footnote of the ESV it is noted that this word for sanctify literally means to set apart for holy service.<sup>21</sup> In other words, the sanctity of the Levites did not require that the other tribes be considered impious or pagan. In this sense, the Levites were no more sanctified in the temple than the other tribes were in the fields. Every act

of obedience to the commandment of the Lord was holy service (Leviticus 22:31-33). Even the food that the Israelites ate was an issue of sanctity, being set apart for holy service (Leviticus 11:43-44). So the Puritan idea that God is glorified by our priestly service to him *in our homes and workplaces* is not a reformed idea, but an Old Testament one, in which the people of God were set apart for noble service *in what they ate* in their homes.

Christ confirms this for us. Jesus was a high priest greater than Melchizedek who made us all priests like Melchizedek in his High Priestly prayer: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word”.<sup>22</sup>

Even as Christ our great high priest was set apart for holy service (“I consecrate myself”) and glorified God by obediently carrying out his calling (“I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do”<sup>23</sup>), so now we are royal priests (1 Peter 2:9) who have also been set apart for holy service (“that they may also be sanctified in truth”) to glorify God by obediently carrying out our calling. This is true not just of apostles and pastors, but all “those who believe in me through their word.”

Our sanctity, being set apart for holy service, does not only mean that all believers are now eligible for various opportunities for service in the church. True, but it means more than that. What it means is that every act of obedience *is the* ministry of the word. Wives at home are ministers of the word as evidenced by their ministry in the home. Businessmen performing tasks of business are ministers of the word as evidenced by their ministry of business. Pastors performing tasks of the pastorate are ministers of the word, as evidenced by their ministry in the church. Everyone, even in the mundane tasks of every day life and occupation, is a sanctified (set apart for holy service) minister of the word of truth. Business is ministry. Homemaking is ministry. Why? Not because certain tasks are more sanctified in themselves,

but because the *people doing* those tasks have been sanctified to do them, and are obediently fulfilling the various ministries to which each has been called.

Let us do all for the glory of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Obviously many would contend that we do not mean that men are not called, period, only that they are not called into pastoral ministry. I am not attempting to stereotype or judge the heart and intention of every pastor that has used this phrase. Undoubtedly, pastors use this phrase in a variety of different ways. I am simply pointing out the carelessness of the language. There is a difference between how a phrase may be used and what a phrase actually means and implies. Good intention does not fix the destruction caused by a rash tongue and the meaning of our words. We will later see how far short this language falls of a biblical and reformed view on calling.

<sup>2</sup> Luther on Vocation, Mark Kolden, pg. 383.

<sup>3</sup> Luther on Vocation, pg. 386

<sup>4</sup> Business for the Glory of God, Grudem, pg. 11

<sup>5</sup> Kolden, pg. 386

<sup>6</sup> The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther, John Lenker, cited by Kolden, pg. 386.

<sup>7</sup> In his introduction to *Bondage of the Will*, J.I. Packer quotes Luther as having said “I am not concerned with the life, but with doctrines.”

<sup>8</sup> By piety I mean having some righteousness by virtue of being religious. Someone who is pious has a desire and willingness to perform some religious duty. Service to the Lord is not valuable to God to the extent that it can be described as religious, or simply because the person doing the work has some desire to be religious.

<sup>9</sup> *The Doctrines of Grace*, Boice, Ryken, pg. 44

<sup>10</sup> Of course we must avoid stereotypes. As with any sweeping generalization, there is fault to be found in the fact that not all Puritans lived this exemplary lifestyle. There are those in any community of believers that live to varying degrees of obedience. This point has been duly noted, but should not take away from the truth that by and large the Puritan community very closely followed the teachings of Luther and Calvin on vocation and daily living, perhaps more so than many churches today.

<sup>11</sup> *The Original Puritan Work Ethic*, Christianity Today, Winter 2006, Leland Ryken

<sup>12</sup> *The Practice of the Presence of God*, Brother Lawrence, pg. 20

<sup>13</sup> *Am I Called? Discerning the Summons to Ministry*, Dave Harvey, pg. 9

<sup>14</sup> Online Etymology Dictionary

<sup>15</sup> Luther on Vocation, pg. 383

<sup>16</sup> From Calvin’s sermon on 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1-1

<sup>17</sup> *Business for the Glory of God*, Wayne Grudem, pg. 82-83

<sup>18</sup> This view, interestingly enough, is not exclusively reformed. St. Ambrose was cited by Gerald Vann in *The Divine Pity* to have said, “We are all anointed...Christians are likewise servants, the Pope the ‘servant of the servants of God.’”

<sup>19</sup> The last sentence of Joel 2:32 reads: “For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.” Again, not all those who the Lord calls are called specifically to be pastors, but all that ‘escape’ are nonetheless called of God, and—given the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh—anointed and sanctified (i.e. set apart for holy service) as a result of being called.

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<sup>20</sup> Hebrews 7:11

<sup>21</sup> The ESV makes this comment in the footnote of John 17:17 after the phrase “Sanctify them”: “Greek *Set them apart* (for holy service to God)”

<sup>22</sup> John 17:17-21

<sup>23</sup> John 17:4

This paper was written by Jesse Phillips. Copying and distribution allowed. Please contact me at [me@jessephillips.net](mailto:me@jessephillips.net) for questions or comments.