
In part 1 of Henry IV, Shakespeare has Falstaff defend his nefarious practice of robbing travelers by protesting—ingenuously, of course—"Why Hal, 'tis my
vocation, Hal; ‘tis no sin for a man to labour in his vocation.” Thomas Case, a Puritan preacher, in a famous sermon (1641), called on the English House of Commons to evoke a vision of Christian vocation that would transform every area of ecclesiastical and national life. However, even Falstaff’s protest signals new currents concerning the idea of calling that was generated by the Protestant Reformation. Luther’s decision to leave the cloister and enter the larger world shook the very foundations of the late medieval church and initiated profound changes in church and society. Luther proclaimed to all who would listen that the papacy was having a harmful effect on society and the church; that any honest work that benefits the world is holy, sacred, incarnational, and sacramental; and that all of life, not just the religious offices, constitute the believers’ vocation. Calvin was at one with Luther on these principles: “a vocation is the principle part of human life and the part that means most to God” (61).

The author, a professor at St. Olaf College, finds this comprehensive sense of vocation in trouble. His opponents are formidable: Jacques Ellul, who contends that work has no intrinsic worth beyond a means of survival; Stanley Hauerwas, who contends that as resident aliens we must not expect much success in transforming the world of vocation; Gary Badcock, who still limits God’s callings to sacred rather than secular roles and advocates a break with natural human existence; Parker Palmer, whose emphasis falls on self-fulfillment; and Miroslav Volf, who prefers to deal with gifts rather than callings. Still others have given up on our world and advocate a sharp separation from it. Schuurman gives all these their due but demonstrates robustly how each one falls short of the comprehensive vision of the human drama and God’s gracious invitation for people everywhere to participate in the noble work of redirecting our fallen world to its original purpose. Schuurman can also call on staunch allies for support: Robert Bellah; Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Karl Barth (whom he quotes frequently); and pastoral letters by American Catholic bishops, Dorothy Sayers and Albert Schweitzer. All these, in one way or another, agree with the Reformers that the Christian faith calls us to exercise our commitment actively, in love, to God, his people, and his world through our callings; thus reminding us of wisdom rooted in creation itself, “from him and through him and to him are all things” (Rom. 11:36).

Schuurman conducts his discourse with painstaking thoroughness, meaningful nuances, and theological sophistication. This is not a how-to book with seven ways of determining for what sort of work one is best qualified. The chapter divisions disclose his approach. After an introduction outlining his hopes that the believing community can salvage the Reformation idea of calling, he outlines the biblical basis for these principles in both the Old and the New Testament. He proceeds next to supply the theological justification for vocation and follows that with a chapter on “Abuses and Proper Uses of Vocation.” He spends sixty-five pages discussing, in two parts, “Vocation, Decisions, and the Moral Life.” In that section, he deals in a practical way with the relationship
between needs, gifts, priorities, and career changes. He also discusses the implications of vocation—how vocation creates meaning, how to insure a proper context for one’s work, how to evaluate the product of one’s work, and how one should exercise stewardship over the income he derives from his work. He follows each of these sections with thoughts on the transformation required in each of these areas. He concedes to some of his opponents that our world is badly in need of transformation if we are to carry out our vocation with integrity and meaning. A brief concluding chapter calls us to spread the power of these ideas to the churches and, indeed, to the whole world.

Schuurman’s discourse has a liberating emphasis. A basic contention, of course, is the notion that all legitimate activities, not only religious work, or one’s paid work, constitute one’s vocation in the sight of God. He also calls on us to challenge the polarities we often live by: secular and sacred (although in other contexts he would surely approve of the recruitment of capable young men and women for the pastoral life); manual labor and the contemplative life; gender differences (women are the beneficiaries of a proper sense of calling); church and world (“people carried the church with them”); body and soul; and this world and other-worldliness. Moreover, one is liberated from the formula that God has a plan for your life—in the sense that God has a well-laid-out plan that one is obliged to discover and pursue. We have the “freedom of obedience”—(Barth’s phrase)—to use, along with the gifts, the opportunities and circumstances that are the givens of our lives: “In the pull of conscience, faith hears the voice of God calling individuals and groups to particular acts of obedience within the varied contexts of life”(63). It is liberating as well for us to remember that we are called first of all to become members of the believing community and that all our work must benefit that community as well as the larger world of humanity—wisdom, which is largely ignored in the modern world. Not only paid work but also every major response to the human situation represents our vocation, our very life. Thus, Luther strongly emphasizes marriage and fatherhood as callings, admitting that he is not worthy “to rock the little babe or wash its diapers, or to be entrusted with the care of the child or its mother.” (91) A Christian idea of vocation also constitutes a stay against the corrosive effect of modern culture by encouraging the idea of a Christian lifestyle consistent with biblical wisdom. Additionally, the freedom God permits relieves us of anxieties—anxieties within our work, as well as those that arise with changes in our work. We need not experience a searing remorse about what may appear to be unwise decisions if we made the decisions with integrity.

To be sure, pitfalls abound as we try to carry out our vocational mandate. “Abuses of vocation seem as slippery and treacherous as sin itself” (78). This being so, we need to acquire discernment and avail ourselves of all the wisdom the community has to offer. Despite the ambiguities of our world, God’s program, in Reformation terms, has not changed. He has not abandoned that world, nor are we justified in renouncing it. Rather, he calls us to exert our full energies to transform it, to redeem it, to be agents of his shalom, and he
promises us that when he provides gifts and opportunities, he will also equip us for the work.

—Steve J. Van Der Weele