

Vocation
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There has been of late much discussion about vocation and calling, with the terms often used interchangeably.¹ The discussion often begins with the reformers. Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther argued that we have two responsibilities as Christians – two callings.² The first call is the call from God to come and follow;³ it is the call to discipleship. And until a person answers that call, she is not really a Christian. But as soon as she answers God’s first call, a second call comes hard on its heels. The second call is the call to our neighbor – to love and serve that neighbor. The call to God always involves the call to our neighbor. Luther tied the two calls to the two great commandments: to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and spirit, and to love your neighbor as yourself. And he said they create the obligations that define us. To God we owe faith; and to our neighbor we owe love. And this love propels us out into the world as ambassadors to stand between God and the people God calls us to serve. “The Christian life,” Luther said, “sends you to people, to those that need your works.”⁴ God does not send us out to some generic, impersonal entity that we will collectively call a “neighbor.” God sends us out – just as God sent Jesus – to a particular people in a particular time and a particular place (as, for example, Jesus sent the seventy in Luke 10). That is why the Bible calls every one of us ambassadors, because we are all sent from God to a people. No matter your station in life – and not just if you are a minister – God invites you to be an ambassador, with people entrusted to your care.

This call from God changes, then, our mental model of “vocation.” My vocation is not about me and your vocation is not about you. Luther suggests that our calling is not defined by our giftedness or our interests or our “passions.” Our calling as Christians is defined by “those that need our works.” A theology of vocation that begins with my interests (e.g. “Find your passion.”) or even with my strengths (e.g. StrengthFinders) can too easily become focused on me. It can too easily become about fulfilling my interests. This is dangerous because it often promises something that the Christian life cannot deliver. Students and young Christians who hear that there is a vocation for them built around their passions and their strengths often hear that statement as a promise that the fulfilling Christian life will not be difficult. They mistakenly think that the Christian life will consist of doing only what they love. I hear students, for example, talk about how disillusioning an internship experience can be because it was too hard. The people were difficult; the work was painful; and there were not enough public accolades to justify the labor. And, I know high school and college-aged Christians who agonize over picking a major or a job because they think that they have to find one that will involve doing only things that they want to do. In short, they have believed the Big Lie that pursuing their passion meant never having to do something that they did not enjoy or find fulfilling. So what started out being a calling to serve others ended up being about serving the comfort of the one being called. Focusing on my passions and my strengths too easily becomes focusing on me.

There is, however, another way to describe vocation. Your vocation is a calling to a people entrusted to your care. Christian leaders do not have “followers”;⁵ only Jesus has followers. Instead, they have people entrusted to their care. There are three theological reasons for recasting the mental models of leadership and vocation to be about a people entrusted to your care. First, it emphasizes God’s role as the one doing the entrusting. The Second Corinthians passage that names

us each as ambassadors begins by emphasizing that God was in the world reconciling the world in Christ Jesus. Everything we do derives from what God has done, is doing, and will do. And by entrusting those people to us God calls us to imitate God by caring for them. Second, it emphasizes that we are stewards of people who already belong to God. The people entrusted to our care are God's people, made in the image of God. They are not my people, made to accomplish my goals. They belong to God. And, third, it says that the measure of good work is not my intentions. It is the effect my work has on the people entrusted to my care. My grandfather the citrus farmer recognized, as a steward, that the trees did not belong to him and that his labor would be measured by the fruit his trees produced. He stood between the owner and the trees. In the same way, a Christian leader recognizes that God may have called Paul to plant and Apollos to water, but the Corinthians were not Paul's people nor were they Apollos' people. The people belong to God and it is God who gives the increase.

Let me illustrate how this notion of vocation involves having someone entrusted to your care. The first Pixar movie to gain attention was a short called *Tin Toy* (you can find it on YouTube⁶). It won Pixar's first Academy Award. It is the story of a very-alive wind-up toy that is a one-man band. When it walks, its arms bang a drum and its feet clang a cymbal while its mouth blows a trumpet. The story unfolds as the wary toy encounters a toddling baby. The lumbering child towers over the toy. As the baby approaches, we can see from the look on the toy's face that it is not sure what to do. And because the toy is frightened, it starts to run away – clattering as it walks. But then it notices that the baby enjoys the boisterous sounds. So the toy turns and entertains the child. After all, that is what the toy was created to do. But then the baby, who does not know any better, begins to threaten the toy, grabbing the toy roughly, chewing on it. Dripping with slobber, the toy flees under a sofa. Huffing with exhaustion and relief, the tin toy turns to find many other toys cowering in fear of the destructive child. There is a moment of peace, but only a moment. In the distance the toys can hear the baby stumble, fall and begin to cry. Now comes the turning point in the story. The cartoon won so many awards because it captures with only facial expressions the dilemma the toy faces. The toy can stay under the sofa where it is safe or it can face its fears and do what it was created to do – to entertain the child. The audience identifies with the toy. We know what it is like when the right thing to do is not the safe thing to do. It is part of what it means to be human. Not everyone is willing to face those fears; that is why so many other toys cower under the couch. But the heroic tin toy sets its shoulders and marches out to entertain the wailing child. He has placed his longings before his losses and embraced his calling. He has exercised his vocation in spite of the danger and placed the needs of the child entrusted to his care ahead of his own. For a moment, the tin toy is a hero.

But that is not how the short story ends. At first the toy is triumphant. The crying baby directs its attention to the toy and coos in delight. The crying child is transformed by the heroic toy. But then the giant baby becomes the danger that the tin toy feared. The towering toddler grabs the little toy, puts it in its slobbery mouth, and discards the now dented and dripping toy. And then, to add insult to injury, the baby becomes distracted by the box that once wrapped the toy. The story ends with the mangled toy looking at the camera. The look is an invitation to the audience, an invitation to contemplate with the toy the longings and losses of the encounter. Was it worth it? Is it worth it to exercise your vocation – to respond to the crying baby entrusted to his care – knowing that doing what you are called to do will temporarily help the child and permanently damage the toy? These

are questions of the human condition. The animated short is so powerful because it asks a question that resonates for all of us.

Thus, a person's vocation or a congregation's mission becomes a calling not to a task but to a people. The people may be a large group – in the way that a missionary might be called to the Berber people of North Africa. Or the people might be a parish – in the way that a congregation might be called to the people of the west end of a town or the neighborhood around a particular inner-city park.⁷ Or it might be more of an individual call. I might be called to care for the co-workers who share the cubicle space in my department at my company. Or I might be called to parent the children entrusted to my cares – or to care for a group of elderly people. There are as many kinds of callings as there are groups of people. But either way, the calling is not about my gifts, my passions, or my tasks; it is about the people entrusted to my care. My purpose derives from my people not my plans.

For example, God gave me daughters. Long before I was married, I pictured some day playing sports (especially basketball) with my children. But my two daughters looked at their mom and they looked at their dad, and they decided that Mom was much more interesting (I agree). So they have no interest in sports. Instead they like fashion and food. So what did I do as a dad? I had to follow the interests of the children entrusted to my care. I had to cultivate strengths that did not come naturally to me. That means that when we talk together about fashion, I can now participate in a conversation about pencil skirts, ruched sleeves, and boyfriend jackets (although not together). And I can talk about jewel tones and the important distinctions between seven different shades of white – although I still fail to distinguish warm versus cool colors. If God had given us sons, my wife would know how a basketball player should hedge a pick-and-roll. Instead, I can extoll the virtues of *addi Turbo* knitting needles. These are the children that God entrusted to my care. I did not pick them; God gave them to me as a gift, and that gift created for me an obligation. So my calling to be a father and my passion for the daughters entrusted to my care required me to develop “passions” that did not come naturally. My calling is not about me. It is about the people entrusted to my care.

A similar example of becoming who your people need you to be comes from the movie *The Incredibles 2*. The movie includes a set of scenes where the superhero father is home with the children and feeling totally out of his element. He is accustomed to duties where he can rely on his super-strength. But instead he has to figure out how to teach his elementary-aged son (Dash) how to do New Math. At first, the dad is exasperated and together the father and son fail to do the math. But then, after tossing and turning in bed, the dad gets up in the middle of the night, turns on the light, picks up the book off the kitchen table, and wrestles with New Math. By morning, he has it figured out and can teach it before the son heads off to school for the test. At first the dad said that he did not have the gifts or the inclination to teach his son. But then he realized that it was his job to become whoever his son needed him to be. That is what it means to have a people entrusted to your care. You figure out what they need and then you become who they need you to be. I did not expect to have to learn why espadrilles are better than pumps for an outdoor wedding, and Mr. Incredible did not expect to have to learn New Math. But we are each called to become who our people need us to be – even if that does not fit naturally with our gifts and passions. It is not about me. It's about the people entrusted to my care.

¹ ***Summarize literature .

² Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of this World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990) p. 46

³ Mark Labberton's book, *Calling* (IVP, 2014) is particularly articulate in explaining how the first calling placed on any Christian is the call to discipleship.

⁴ Quoted in Hardy, *Fabric of this World*, p. 51; Miroslav Volf argues that Luther inappropriately intertwines a calling with a job – creating what Jurgen Moltmann calls “the consecration of the *vocational-occupational structure*.” Volf, *The Work of the Spirit* (Wipf & Stock, 1991) 107, 108, quoting Moltmann, *On Human Dignity* (Fortress Press, 1984) 47; William Placher points out that Luther's notion of station is rooted in a static view of society that related women and peasants to marginal status and baptized a wealthy man's standing. We will then need to reference his work but shift the usage of the word “station” so that it takes on a more contemporary meaning that allows for social mobility. Thus, we draw inspiration from Luther without adopting all of his assumptions. William Placher, *Callings* (Eerdmans, 2005) 206.

⁵ Barbara Kellerman, *Follower* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2008)

⁶ The video is usually available on YouTube. See, e.g., www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtFYP4t9TG0 (accessed Feb 2015)

⁷ cf. Ammerman on the distinction between “niche congregations” and “parish congregations.” Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Congregation & Community* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997) 34-36, cf. 384n58

⁸ Kate Harris, “Motherhood as Vocation,” <http://qideas.org/articles/motherhood-as-vocation> ; cf. Kate Harris, “Navigating the Challenges of Career, Motherhood, and Identity,” <https://vimeo.com/121758875> ;