

Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of this World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work*  
Chapter Two: Our Work, God's Providence:  
The Christian Conception of Vocation

### **Introduction:**

1. The survey of the history of work has revealed two extremes:
  - Work is debased to mere animal existence, scratching out a mere existence from the face of the earth; work is brutish.
  - Work is elevated to the level of deity proudly ruling over a cultural world of its own making; work is divine.
2. The Reformed view of Martin Luther and John Calvin on vocation, and contemporary social teaching of the RCC strike a balance between these two extremes.

### **Luther: God's Providential Presence in the Work of our Hands**

3. Luther's concept of vocation was worked out in reaction to the medieval monastic ideal and its religious devaluation of all earthly occupations. Luther's own discovery of the grace of God and salvation by faith alone not only freed him from his religious anxieties but also gave him the framework for thinking about the meaning of work and the basis for a strong critique of the spiritual/social hierarchy among vocations.
4. Luther distinguished between the kingdom of heaven which entails our relationship with God via faith, and the kingdom of the earth which entails our relationships with neighbors based on love. Vocations have to do with the kingdom of the earth, namely our responsibility to love our neighbor in our social place or STATION in the earthly kingdom (as husband, wife, parent, child, magistrate, subject, master, servant, butcher, baker, candlestick maker). Hence, callings or vocations represent specific ways of serving our neighbor and to serve others in all our work (paid or not).
5. Hence, when asked what they were to do with their lives, ML told his parishioners not to enter the monastery, but to serve God and neighbor in the stations of life to which they were called. Such activity was not fleshly or secular or worldly, but godly--the fruit of the Spirit. Work is therefore a divine vocation!

6. What is accomplished when we carry out our callings in our work engendered by our stations in life? It is God's means by which the needs of humanity are met: hungry fed, naked clothed, sick healed, ignorant enlightened, weak protected, etc. BY WORKING WE ACTUALLY PARTICIPATE IN GOD'S ON-GOING PROVIDENCE FOR THE HUMAN RACE!!!
7. Luther affirms the religious significance of work on the basis of the doctrine of creation. God extends his creative activity via human work and people are brought under His providential care. Stations in life and social places and their respective callings are channels of God's love by providing all that we need. Hence, work is charged with religious significance, a significance ignored or perverted by the Greeks and the Medievals as demeaning, and exalted into self glorification as in Marx.
8. Herein lies the reason for ML's criticism of monasticism: in the kingdom of heaven, monks are relying on their own works for salvation and not God's grace. Hence, it was necessary to enter the monastery with all of its requirements in the hopes of eternal salvation; all other kinds of work were thereby denigrated. But salvation by grace and faith engenders a response of gratitude and good works not to be saved but because one is saved and to have a good conscience. Not only this but monastic life was essentially selfish for the monk directed all his efforts to his own benefit and self-salvation to the woeful neglect of neighbor in need.
9. Instead, ML showed it is possible to respond to God's call in the lowly activities and occupations of life. Christian faith does not send you to the monastery or desert, but into the world, to people who are to be served. All vocations, except usurer, prostitute, and monk, are full time Christian service, not just those pursued by the spiritual specialists.

Since the Christian has received the meaning and value of his life through God's gracious act of justification, all tasks and works of life are equally important and holy because they have been assigned to him by God's direction of his life. There are no particular holy works. Everything that we do is secular [or holy]. However, if all becomes holy when it is done in obedience to God's command and in the certainty that he will be pleased, that is, when it is done in faith." Paul Althaus

10. Furthermore, the monastery was not necessary for the experience of religious suffering (pillar saints, psalm recitation on a frozen lake in bare feet), but rather genuine religious sufferings comes in everyday life in every vocation with its cross to bear. Also, love of God and love of neighbor are not separated as if in competition, but rather through loving one's neighbor it is possible to love God: ". . . you did it unto Me."

### **The Calvinist Elaboration: Work and the Organic**

## Structure of Social Life

11. John Calvin (JC) took up ML's vision of vocation and extended it into Northern Europe and the British isles, and made several important contributions to the theme of his own.
12. Calvin's commentary on the Mary/Martha story of Luke 10: 38-42 exhibits his view of work, esp. over against Thomas Aquinas who believed the story exalted the contemplative life over the active life. Not so says JC. Rather, Jesus faulted Martha not for working per se, but for working at the wrong time. He was not recommending one form of life over another. If a big reception is given for a prophet, the thing to do at that time is listen to what he has to say, not to work! What is at stake here is not just alternative understandings of a single biblical text, but rather fundamentally different visions of the purpose of human life (the Aristotelian in its valorization of contemplation, and the Hebraic in its call to employment in labor of various kinds in service to God and man).
13. Aristotle's view of God was of the divine as wrapped up in itself and thought in peace and inactivity and to be like this God required contemplation; Calvin's view of God is an active God engaged in ceaseless activity and that to be like God demanded the active, fruitful life. According to U. Zwingli, those who serve the common good, the Christian community, the state and individuals are most like God in his own activity of creation, providence, and redemption.
14. For Calvin, monasticism was not the ideal, but rather service to God in purity in the context of one's calling. "God prefers devoted care in ruling a household, where the devout householder, clear and free of all greed, ambition, and other lusts of the flesh, keeps before him the purpose of serving God in a definite calling."

The last thing to be observed is, that the Lord enjoins every one of us, in all the actions of life, to have respect to our own calling. He knows the boiling restlessness of the human mind, the fickleness with which it is borne hither and thither, its eagerness to hold opposites at one time in its grasp, its ambition.

Therefore, lest all things should be thrown into confusion by our folly and rashness, he has assigned distinct duties to each in the different modes of life. And that no one may presume to overstep his proper limits, he has distinguished the different modes of life by the name of callings. Every man's mode of life, therefore, is a kind of station assigned him by the Lord, that he may not be always driven about at random. So necessary is this distinction, that all our actions are thereby estimated in his sight, and often in a very different way from that in which human reason or philosophy would estimate them . . . in everything the call of the Lord is the foundation

and beginning of right action. He who does not act with reference to it will never, in the discharge of duty, keep the right path. He will sometimes be able, perhaps, to give the semblance of something laudable, but whatever it may be in the sight of man, it will be rejected before the throne of God; and besides, there will be no harmony in the different parts of his life.

Hence, he only who directs his life to this end will have it properly framed; because, free from the impulse of rashness, he will not attempt more than his calling justifies, knowing that it is unlawful to overleap the prescribed bounds. He who is obscure will not decline to cultivate a private life, that he may not desert the post at which God has placed him. Again, in all our cares, toils, annoyances, and other burdens, it will be no small alleviation to know that all these are under the superintendence of God. The magistrate will more willingly perform his office, and the father of a family confine himself to his proper sphere. Every one in his particular mode of life will, without repining, suffer its inconveniences, cares, uneasiness, and anxiety, persuaded that God has laid on the burden. This, too, will afford admirable consolation, that in following your proper calling, no work will be so mean and sordid as not to have a splendor and value in the eye of God. —John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III. X. 6.

15. For Calvin, the active life is subordinated to the contemplative life, and knowledge was not to be gained as something in itself (this is “unprofitable”), but rather knowledge was for the sake of fruitfulness and how one lived one’s life.
16. Hence, work also has a religious dignity, no matter how mean or low it may appear! Hence, ML and JC on these matters:

The devil is 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 that 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 the service of God.

—John Calvin, Sermon on 1 Corinthians 10: 31-11: 1, quoted in *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*, by Ronald S. Wallace, p. 155.

What you do in your house is worth as much as if you did it up in heaven for our Lord God. For what we do in our calling here on earth in accordance with His word and command He counts as if it were done in Heaven for Him . . . .

Therefore we should accustom ourselves to think of our position and work as sacred and well-pleasing to God, not on account of the position and the work, but on account of the word and faith from which the obedience and the work flow. No Christian should despise his position and life if he is living in accordance with the word of God, but should say, "I believe in Jesus Christ, and do as the ten commandments teach, and pray that our dear Lord God may help me thus to do." That is a right and holy life, and cannot be made holier even if one fast himself to death [*ibid.*].

. . . 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 other housework. But because God's command is there, even such a small work must be praised as a service to God far surpassing the holiness and asceticism of all monks and nuns. For here there is no command of God. But there God's command is fulfilled, that one should honor father and mother and help in the care of the home [*ibid.*].  
—Martin Luther, *Works*, vol. 5, p. 102

17. In reformed thinking, human life, like life in the Church itself, is to be lived out in a society of mutual service and support where each member contributing according to specific talents and gifts to the common good, and each receiving according to his need.

### **The Calvinist Modification: The Call to Reform Fallen Structures**

18. Though ML lived in a time when the order of society was thought to be ordained by God, as time progressed and so did scientific, technological, and economic structures, it was recognized, largely by the Calvinists that culture was largely a human construction motivated and infused by sinful desires and activity, and thus largely in need of reform just as much as the personal life of Christians. Calvin's treatment of the issue of slavery as wholly against the order of nature (contra Aristotle) is a good example (though he did not outright call for its abolishment).
19. Furthermore, in the theology of calling, instead of focusing on stations in life in which one's gifts are to be exercised for God, rather the focus is on gifts and finding a suitable station in which to exercise them. Stations in life were no longer normative, and in fact could be ill-suited for service to God; some stations must be either altered or discarded totally. Not only must we serve God in our callings, but our callings or stations in life must be also be aligned with God's word.

### **Ecumenical Convergence: The Contemporary Catholic Position**

20. The contemporary RCC social teaching on work was originally in response to the profound issues raised by changing socio-economic conditions, and the philosophy of Karl Marx (*Rerum Novarum* of 1891, Pope Leo XIII). Also, a distinctive “reformed shift” in RCC theology of work is also noticeable, drawing on *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican II, 1965), and spelled out in *Laborum Excercens* (1981, Pope John Paul II). In these documents, seven basic areas of agreement between RCC and the Protestant Reformed view of work can be discerned.

- Both hold that work stands at the center of God’s intent for human life.
- Both hold that work is the means by which we express God’s image within us.
- Both hold that by means of our work we participate in God’s providence.
- Both set forth their theology of work in a comprehensive vision of the divine economy at work in human society (body image).
- Both hold that religious suffering ought not to be sought through the artificial means of the monastery, but is encountered in following Christ in the work of everyday life.
- Both hold that there is no conflict between expressing love for God and love for human beings.
- Both hold that not only the human heart but also the given order of human society is corrupted by the presence of sin and in need of radical reformation and transformation.

Conclusion:

Teach me, My God and King,  
In all things Thee to see;  
And what I do in anything,  
To do it as for Thee.

A man that looks on glass,  
On it may stay his eye;  
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,  
And then the heaven espy.

All may of Thee partake;  
Nothing can be so mean,  
Which with this tincture: For Thy sake,  
Will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause  
**Makes drudgery divine;**  
Who sweeps a room, as for Thy laws,  
Makes that and the action fine.

This is the famous stone  
That turneth all to gold:  
For that which god doth touch and own,  
Cannot for less be told.

--George Herbert.