

10 Assumptions about Vocation to Critique

1. ***It's about a job or role.*** Vocation is less to do with a specific job or institutional role e.g. I am called to be a nurse or an accountant. It is more about a way of being who you are that is worked out in all the varied and different roles you perform in life eg. What kind of nurse, or what kind of accountant are you?
2. ***There is one thing I am meant to do.*** There may well be a life's work that you are called to do but that may take many twists and turns along the journey. It is more likely that your vocation will be a series of endings and new beginnings only being revealed in stages.
3. ***It's all about my strengths.*** My vocation is about my gifts - something that makes me happy and fulfilled. It may be that God turns something that you are not very good, or a disability, into a strength.
4. ***My vocation is an individual thing.*** Our vocations often involve others and may be connected to someone else. We are a body - the body of Christ – our vocation is part of being a member of a body
5. ***I can work this out for myself.*** In a Christian context we need others to help us to discern what God might be calling us to and testing out our calling. We can learn a great deal from listening to each others stories.
6. ***Vocation comes solely from within.*** Vocation has to be part of dialogue between our inward journey to find ourselves and our outward journey to engage with life. Both parts are equally important
7. ***God works out my vocation and I have no part in it.*** Vocations have to be worked out, and we have to be fully involved in that process. There is not a ready-made slot for us to slip into we have to work it out for ourselves.
8. ***Vocation has to be something that is essentially sacrificial.*** Vocation is sometimes viewed as a sacrificial sense of duty where it is more worthy to do something that your struggle with or don't enjoy. Vocations do present us with real challenges, but also lead us into a fuller life
9. ***Vocation is about a 'ministry' role in the institutional church.*** Vocation for most of us is about what it means to share in Christ's mission in the context of everyday life as the church dispersed in the world and work
10. ***Secular work doesn't count.*** The truth is that many people put heart and soul into their daily work, and often feel more connected to God through this work.



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So how did we develop such a ‘warped’ view of calling and vocation?

“Despite the best attempts of both Jesus and the Apostle Paul, it took only a century or so before the Christian church became heavily influenced by the dualism surrounding Greco-Roman culture. (Dualism is a concept that we have two separate natures; in this case, the physical and the spiritual.) As a result, certain ways of living came to be viewed as more “spiritual and holy”.

Soon, only religious priests, monks and nuns were considered to have a “religious” vocation. They were called to the “contemplative” life of prayer – set apart from the active life of ordinary, everyday work.

Even Augustine, who praised the work of farmers, merchants and trades-people, distinguished between the “active life” and the “contemplative life”. At times it might be necessary to follow the active life but, according to Augustine, one should choose the other wherever possible.

This type of thinking encouraged both monasticism and professional church leadership. People were supposed to be “called” to these more “spiritual” roles. In other words “calling” or vocation, became exclusively defined by the roles of the clergy and religious orders.

It wasn’t until the Reformation that Martin Luther began to effectively challenge this dualism. He promoted the idea that all Christians are called (not just monks and clergy) and that daily work is part of our calling. Monasticism, Luther said, was not a unique class or special order.

The work of monks and nuns was no higher in God’s eyes than the normal work, performed in sincere faith, of a farmer or housewife.

John Calvin further developed this idea of daily work as Christian calling. However, it wasn’t long before particular jobs (like farming and law) became specially identified as Christian vocations. Soon, the concept that our calling is primarily about belonging to Jesus began to drift into the background.

Consequently, while “calling” was once too narrowly defined, it now became so closely identified with particular occupations that the words “vocation”, “calling” and “profession” simply became synonyms for “job”. Then followed the idea of “career” which resulted in a person’s identity and status being defined by his or her paid job, without any reference to God at all.

At the same time, in spite of Martin Luther’s efforts, the church has never really freed itself from the clergy/laity distinction. The two tiered value system of the medieval church has largely remained in place. In church circles, a “real” calling is still thought to be one which involves a person in pastoral leadership or cross cultural mission work. And because of our emphasis on being called to “do”, invariably a calling is seen as something that takes us out of our current situation (geographical or task) as God “leads” us into a new one.”

From ‘Where’s God on Monday?’ by Alistair MacKenzie

(NavPress 2003)