

REFLECTIONS ON FAITH AND WORK

Our Work and Our Calling

When we were children, how many times did interested (or nosy!) relatives or acquaintances ask us: "What are you going to be when you grow up?" The same question pursued us through junior high school and high school; in college, the question persisted, except then we were asking ourselves: "What should I do with my life? What kind of job do I want?" In mid-life, the question is still there, but with another wrinkle: "Is it time for a job change? Am I going to do this work for the rest of my life?" And then, much to our surprise, we turn fifty and the very question we started with comes around again: "What am I going to do when I grow up?"

Much of our lives revolves around this question of our work and career. As Christians, we believe that God cares about us and has given us certain abilities and talents. We also believe that the Bible can give us guidance. What is often difficult to understand, though, is whether or not God calls us to specific careers. Sometimes we struggle with this question because our understanding of "calling" is confused.

Our General Calling as Christians

The vast majority of Biblical references to "calling" or "the call of God" are directly related to salvation and to holy living. The Bible states that we are "called out of darkness into His light" (I Peter 2:9), "called to repentance" (Acts 2:38-39), "called into fellowship with Jesus Christ" (I Corinthians 1:9), and "called into His Kingdom" (I Thessalonians 2:12) This general calling is given to all Christians and, in this sense, every Christian receives God's call to salvation and the call to live as saints (I Corinthians 1:2).

The Biblical emphasis on the call to salvation is an important reminder that God's will for our lives focuses much more on the people we are, rather than on how we earn a living. We need to remind ourselves of this regularly, because our culture continually points in the direction of relating our worth to our work, our identity to our careers, our significance to our position.

Calling and Careers

Do you feel "called" to your work? For many of us, this terminology about "calling" is reserved for pastors and missionaries. Often we hear the words "full-time Christian service" in reference to students "called" to seminary or Bible school; this terminology, however, is profoundly unbiblical. Scripture clearly teaches that every Christian is called to serve Christ all the time regardless of what career path he or she chooses.

Though scarce, there are some Biblical passages which describe God's specific calling of certain individuals to positions as priests, kings, and prophets. In the New Testament, it is clear that Jesus chose the disciples, and Paul does speak about being "called" to be an apostle (Romans I:1). However, we must not conclude from this that their work was somehow a "higher calling" than the work of others. In addition to the general "call" which all followers of Jesus Christ receive, the apostles and others also received a specific "call." So do we.

◆ **Avoiding the Pitfalls**

We get in trouble when we make this "calling" too mysterious. It is very rare in Biblical history that God dramatically intervenes in the life of someone and instructs specifically what to do, where to work, or where to go. It happened, but only a few times. In most cases, the specific "call" each of us receives is not given in a burst of lightning or through a "Damascus road experience."

God is a God of order, and a God who cares deeply about each of us. God also desires that we serve Him, and work is one of the ways in which that can happen. All of us who love God and are desirous of living lives in accordance with His plan can joyfully refer to our work as a "calling." In fact, the word vocation is taken from the Latin word *vocatio* which means "calling."

Rather than waiting for divine guidance, which allows us to be passive until "God shows us His perfect plan for our lives" -- which we sure don't want to miss -- we should instead be evaluating ourselves by both subjective and objective criteria. Subjectively, we need to ask ourselves:

- Do I feel called to a particular kind of work?
- Do I have a desire, a passion, for this type of career?
- Is this job the one I believe God wants me to take?

These can be tough questions and, often, we have to wrestle with contradictory thoughts waging war in our minds. But there are also objective criteria to help us, questions such as:

- Do I have abilities and gifts in this area?
- Am I appropriately qualified to do this work?

- Do the people who know me best support this vocational direction in my life?

In addition, there are excellent tests available to help us ascertain our strengths and weaknesses and to determine which types of jobs we are best equipped to handle. God does "call" us to specific careers, but usually not in a loud voice. God uses our background, our abilities, our experiences, and our passion to help us find meaningful work; we must be willing to follow His leading through a reasonable self-assessment and the counsel of others who know us.

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