This article, the second of a three-part series, focuses on insights from four historical periods regarding the understanding and application of Christian vocation. We look back on these centuries through the vocational questions that people were inspired to ask as they sought to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

The Early Church

William C. Placher, editor of *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*, has provided a helpful guide through Christian history and the changes in our understanding of vocation in his anthology of selected writings. Excerpts from theologians, church leaders, and other faithful disciples make the journey through time and thought come alive in a cohesive way. Following a prologue of several biblical texts on calling, the first historical time period explored is the Early Church, 100-500. During this time, Christians were an endangered minority. The decision to follow the call to be a follower of Jesus was to break from family, friends, and much of society. According to Placher, vocational questions for an individual before the fourth century might have included, *Should I be a Christian?* and *How public should I be about my Christian life?* (2005, p. 6).

Ignatius (35-107), bishop of Antioch in Syria expressed a powerful sense of call through his union with Christ in suffering and death. In his *Letter to the Romans*, he writes:

> Just pray that I may have strength of soul and body so that I may not only talk (about martyrdom), but really want it. It is not that I want merely to be called a Christian, but actually to be one...The greatness of Christianity lies in its being hated by the world, not in its being convincing to it....But if I suffer, I shall be emancipated by Jesus Christ; and united to him, I shall rise to freedom (Ignatius, trans.1970/Placher, 2005, p. 34).

The lives of other Christian converts, writers, and orators, from this era including Justin Martyr, Perpetua, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and St. Augustine were witnesses to the depth of faith and commitment in the midst of danger and extreme sacrifice. To answer the call, to follow the vocation of Christian, in these days was a matter of life and death and as Placher notes, *The very demandingness of Christianity constituted part of its appeal* (2005, p. 31).

Things began to change early in the 4th Century when Emperor Constantine was baptized and declared Christianity the official religion of the empire. It became safe to practice one’s faith in Christ and even provided a way to be successful in society. The vocational question changed to *What were Christians called to do when it seemed pretty easy just to be a Christian?* (Placher, 2005, p. 6). Thousands of adventurous, dedicated believers took to the deserts of the Western Roman Empire and North Africa to follow the call to discipleship and self-denial in extreme ways. *Vocation* carried a new meaning as men and women tried to *turn away from everything else in order to focus on God* (Placher, 2005, p. 31). Those who lived the ascetic life became the heroes of ordinary Christians and were considered the highest examples of Christian life and vocation.

The Middle Ages

For a thousand years during the Middle Ages (500-1500), predominantly in Europe where Christianity flourished, a majority of people professed to be Christian and grew up in the church. The question about calling in life became, *What kind of Christian should I be?* As the terms *vocation* and *religious* were now used specifically for those who responded to a call to serve the church in the priesthood or live in a monastic order,
the vocational question to be considered by a young man or woman was, *Should I stay a part of my family, marry, and have children, or should I choose the vocation of a religious?* (Placher, 2005, p. 7). The social and vocational order became those who pray and serve the Church (the priests, nuns, and monks), those who fight (the nobles), and those who work (the peasants). Entering a religious vocation had its advantages of education, safety, and reduced physical labor.

The monastic life drew inspiration from the desert movement of northern Africa. Benedict of Nursia (480-550) had lived as a hermit, but later founded several monasteries and wrote a rule to guide them that became the standard for life in all such settings of Western Europe. The rule was based on moderation and common sense and promoted the communal life, daily chores, prayer and liturgy as the way to fulfill one’s vocation (Placher, 2005, p. 108). By 1200, different kinds of orders appeared with slightly different purposes, theologies and lifestyles, but most called dedicated Christians into lives of personal poverty, service to others, charity, and prayer. As Placher summarizes, *They prayed and prepared themselves for death. Most modern folk are so eager to justify religious activities in terms of the social goods they serve that we are embarrassed to celebrate them as ends in themselves* (2005, p. 114).

Around 1500, European ideas about vocation began to change for complex secular and religious reasons. A increasingly diverse society offered more choices about the kind of work one might do and the New Devout among the Roman church were living a faithful, religious life while holding a secular job and getting married (Placher, 2005, p. 7). When considering what went wrong with the monastic life in the middle Ages, Darby Ray writes, *In monastic culture, the tendency was to view spiritual work as the proper human occupation and physical work as valuable mainly as a form of spiritual discipline* (2011, p. 70). Scholars and common workers began to think about work and faith differently.

**The Protestant Reformation**

In the midst of many objections to the Church of his day, Martin Luther protested against monastic vocations that were given a higher status than other occupations and that promoted the works of prayer and devotion as a means to righteousness and salvation. Believing that our good works and our daily work is to be done in service to our neighbor, Luther took the word *vocation* and applied it to all Christians in all their roles and places of responsibility (Kolden, p. 8).

Since the time of Luther, when people narrowly defined *vocation* as occupation, they failed to understand Luther’s broader perspective. Though it was not considered a Sacrament in Protestant theology, marriage and family relationships were viewed as a God-pleasing and neighbor-serving way of fulfilling one’s vocation or calling. Occupation is included in vocation, but it is not the only expression of it. People without occupation or marriage, such as children and elderly (retired) people, were still said to have vocation or calling because there were ways that they could serve God in their situations by serving their neighbors (Kolden, 2002).

Following the Reformation period, as other Protestant believers contributed to thought and practice, they began with Luther’s work and made adjustments for new views and circumstances. As Placher summarizes, *Henceforth, at least among Protestants, one could no longer limit the term “vocation” to some Christians. Every Christian had at least two vocations: the call to become part of the people of God (Luther called it “spiritual calling,” the Puritans later called it “general calling”) and the call to a particular line of work (For Luther, “external calling,” for the Puritans “particular calling”)* (2005, p. 206).

I find that John Calvin’s beliefs that *the particular work to which persons are called is determined not so much by our station in life as by our gifts* (Ray, 2001, p. 78), connecting work and vocation with identity and discipleship, to be a very wise Reformation period addition and still quite useful for our time and religious context. His understanding of vocation was gifts-focused and allowed for and encouraged social mobility. Following Calvin’s thought, Darby Ray suggests:
Instead of a static social universe imposed by God in which one’s calling or vocation is predetermined and fidelity to that singular calling or vocation is a civic and religious duty, Calvin gives us a world in need of transformation, a world in which each person must discern a calling that will contribute to social change and the world’s renewal. In this context, Christians should look to their God-given talents for vocational guidance, and they should choose work that both employs their gifts and moves society toward conformity with the word of God...Pursing our calling means living as we were created to live; it means doing what God intends us to do (2011, pp. 78-79).

Other Protestant successors opened up the possibility that even a faithful Christian might hear new callings or change the expression of their vocation during the course of life (Placher, 2005, p. 8). This is another helpful perspective that is surely a part of our experience today.

The Modern World

In the last two hundred years, paradigms and experiences of vocation have continued to change. The Social Gospel movement, inspired by the plight of workers during the Industrial Revolution in North America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, drew attention to the questions of Christian doctrine and practice in the midst of growing industrialization and capitalism. Darby Ray and Miroslav Volf point out that the movement took aim at the social challenges of the time, claiming that the gospel of Jesus is not just about spiritual things, but relevant to social realities, as well (Ray, 2011; Volf, 1991).

Two world wars, holocausts, and uprisings across the globe have affected people’s faith, their work, and their identities. Christian Socialism, Catholic social teachings, the Catholic Worker Movement, the work of Karl Marx, Liberation Theology and countless other contemporary theologians have struggled to connect faith, work, and calling in relevant and meaningful ways. Vocational questions in a post-Christian culture are both individual and social in scope: What does God want me to do with my life? and How can my life make a difference in the world? The work and lives of Soren Kierkegaard, Walter Rauschenbusch, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, and Karl Barth have all contributed to the wide array of answers and further challenges to those questions.

As our world is increasingly more secularized, being a faithful Christian in today’s world may not be so different from that of the first century. Christians often find themselves a minority in their neighborhoods and workplaces. The vocational questions of today are, What do I believe? Does my faith and my work connect in some way? and How do I pick up my cross to follow Jesus in my daily life? Placher suggests that in our present age, Simply living as Christians could be our calling, too (2005, p. 9).

In our next issue: a contemporary refocus from a doctrine of vocation to a theology of work.

References


