

# CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 110



**Callings**  
Work and vocation  
in the history  
of the church



**FROM PLAYBOY TO TEACHER TO MONK** Above: Thomas Merton's varied life helped him write for others about seeing God in dark places.

**JUST SITTING THERE TALKING** Below: Dorothy Day found herself led to a life serving the poor.



# Did you know?

FAMOUS CHRISTIANS TALKED ABOUT ISSUES THAT STILL CONFRONT US IN OUR VOCATIONS TODAY. HEAR THEM IN THEIR OWN WORDS.

## **DOES MY CHRISTIANITY CHANGE THE WAY I APPROACH MY WORK?**

[Augustine meditated on whether he should remain a teacher of rhetoric after his conversion.] And under your oversight I decided that my tongue would no longer serve the chattering industry... I did not want my mouth to be an arms merchant to the raging passions of boys who were not studying your law or your peace, but crazy lies and legal battles.

Fortunately only a few days were left before the grape-harvest holiday, and I decided to hold on for those few days, so that I could take formal leave. Since you had bought me back, I determined that I would never return to put myself up for sale again. (*Confessions*, Book IX, ch. 2)

## **CAN I BALANCE WORK AND PRAYER?**

The active life may be considered from two points of view. First, as regards the attention to and practice of external works... it is evident that the active life hinders the contemplative, insofar as it is impossible for one to be busy with external action, and at the same time give oneself to Divine contemplation. Secondly, active life may be considered as quieting and directing the internal passions of the soul; and from this point of view

the active life is a help to the contemplative, since the latter is hindered by the inordinateness of the internal passions....

Hence [Pope Gregory I] says.... "Those who wish to hold the fortress of contemplation must first of all train in the camp of action. Thus after careful study they will learn whether they no longer wrong their neighbor, whether they bear with equanimity the wrongs their neighbors do to them, whether their soul is neither overcome with joy in the presence of temporal goods, nor cast down with too great a sorrow when those goods are withdrawn." (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, question 182.a.2)

## **WHEN SHOULD I STOP TALKING AND START WORKING?**

All men naturally desire to know; but what avails knowledge without the fear of God? Surely, a humble laborer that serves God is better than a proud philosopher who neglecting himself labors to understand the course of the heavens? ...

O, if men bestowed as much labor in the rooting out of vices, and planting of virtues, as they do in moving of questions [arguing], neither would there so much hurt be done, nor so great scandal be given in the world,

ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO—MINIATURE, 15TH CENTURY, DE AGOSTINI PICTURE LIBRARY / G. DAGLI ORTI / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES  
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**NO MORE "CHATTERING"** Above: Becoming a Christian changed Augustine's career path.

nor so much looseness be practiced in Religious Houses [convents and monasteries]. Truly, at the day of judgment we shall not be examined on what we have read, but what we have done, not how well we have spoken, but how religiously we have lived. Tell me now, where are all those Doctors and Masters, with whom you were well acquainted, while they lived and flourished in learning? (Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, chapters 2, 3)

### CAN I PERSEVERE EVEN WHEN I DON'T SEE GOD?

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.

And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. (Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*)

### CAN I FOLLOW GOD'S WILL WITHOUT KNOWING HOW I GOT THERE?

We were just sitting there talking when lines of people began to form, saying, "We need bread." We could not say, "Go, be thou filled." If there were six small loaves

**IMITATE CHRIST** Below: Thomas à Kempis argued in *The Imitation of Christ* that faithful daily love and labor trump philosophy.



**WORK FIRST, THEN PRAY** Above: Thomas Aquinas thought that active life in the world prepared us to approach God in prayer and thought.

and a few fishes, we had to divide them. There was always bread.

We were just sitting there talking and people moved in on us. Let those who can take it, take it. Some moved out and that made room for more. And somehow the walls expanded.

We were just sitting there talking and someone said, "Let's all go live on a farm." It was as casual as all that, I often think. It just came about. It just happened. I found myself, a barren woman, the joyful mother of children. It is not always easy to be joyful, to keep in mind the duty of delight. (Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness*) ☩

*Dorothy Day quote courtesy of "The Final Word Is Love," The Catholic Worker, May 1980, <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/Reprint2.cfm?TextID=867>.*

# Editor's note

I GREW UP as the daughter and granddaughter of United Methodist pastors. In my house, we talked about calling a lot. Later, in college and graduate school, the language continued, but nearly always in the context of callings to the ordained ministry or at the very least to “full-time Christian service.”

Sometimes people struggle with that call: my own grandmother wrestled with whether marrying my grandfather would mean giving up on what she discerned, as an eager teenager, was a call to missionary service in a far-off country. She did marry him, and as pastor's and Christian academic's wife she labored long and fruitfully as a different kind of missionary much closer to home. But it did not look like the call she had been led to expect.

## IN OR OUT?

I also heard much language about “finding God's will for your life.” That will, it always seemed, was something quite precisely known by God, though only dimly discerned by humans, and it was something you could be “in” or “out” of, especially concerning the choice of a spouse and of a career. At the ripe old age of 29, spouseless, and on my third different career trajectory, I was fairly sure I was “out.” At the very least, it did not look like the call I had been led to expect.

I would have benefited immensely then from spending some time in the wise company of the Christians whose stories this issue tells. Our subject is the myriad ways that Christian “vocation” or “calling” has been understood throughout Christian history. The words are really the same—“vocation” has a Latin root; “calling” an Anglo-Saxon one—and both have been used from Bible times to our own to describe the summoning of Christians. But that summoning has raised many questions over the years.

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Can one have a vocation to “secular” work, or is the word limited to the ordained and the consecrated? How can you tell what God is calling you to do with your life, your job, and your relationships? Does calling mean abandoning those things or fulfilling them differently? Is “vocation” synonymous with “occupation”? What does calling look like in a largely Christian world? And what does it look like in a largely un-Christian world?

The questions have been many, and the answers have been varied. At times Christians have emphasized the call to religious work over the call to work in the world, and at times they have risen up against that assumption. At times they have claimed that there are some professions a Christian cannot hold and still be a Christian—and at times those professions have changed. At times they have understood their calling as building up the social order, and at times they have understood it as undermining the social order or tearing it down.

At their best, they have always remembered that the primary call on the life of all Christians is the call to follow Christ. At the somewhat riper age of 42, with a husband and two children—and a conviction that God can work through the life of a magazine and a magazine editor—that is a message I still need to hear.



Our brothers and sisters in this issue have much wisdom regarding following Christ even when it does not look like the call you have been led to expect. Read on, and let them tell you how. ☒

Jennifer Woodruff Tait  
Managing editor, *Christian History*

*Correction: On p. 16 of issue 109, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's death date was erroneously stated as 1943 instead of 1945. CH regrets the error.*

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**TILLING AND SPINNING** Adam and Eve work after the Fall.

# Gifts that differ; callings that unite

*An interview with Will Messenger*

*A VOICE FROM HEAVEN, a descending dove, an announcement from God: that picture of Jesus' baptism looms large in the mind of those who open the Bible looking for words about vocation. Or if not the dove, then Moses at the burning bush, shoeless before the voice of God. Calling: clear, unmistakable, dramatic. And probably to something very special. Was Moses called to herd sheep? Was Jesus called to make tables? Will Messenger, executive editor at the Theology of Work Project ([www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org)), talks to Christian History about what vocation looked like to Biblical writers.*

**CH:** *Why is the true story larger than the dove and the bush?*

**WM:** The stories the Bible tells can be interpreted to give us three overarching guidelines about calling. First, everyone is called to belong to Christ and to participate in his creative and redemptive work. Second, it is rare for God to call someone directly and unmistakably to particular work. Third, everyone is commanded to work to the degree they are able, but God does not usually pro-

vide a particular "job offer." In any case, God frequently calls people to a whole life, not just to a job.

**CH:** *How often does God call people directly and unmistakably to take up a particular task, job, profession, or type of work in the Bible?*

**WM:** That kind of calling is actually very rare in the Bible. In Biblical times and in fact throughout history, most people had the job of slave, farmer, or homemaker—still the case in much of the world even in the twenty-first century.

No more than a hundred or so people were called by God in the Bible in a direct, unmistakable way. God called Noah to build the ark. God called Moses and Aaron to their tasks (Ex. 3:4; 28:1). He called prophets like Samuel (1 Sam. 3:10), Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4–5), and Amos (Amos 7:15). He called Abram and Sarai and a few others to undertake journeys or to relocate. He placed people in political leadership, including Joseph, Gideon, Saul, David, and David's descendants. God chose Bezalel and Oholiab as chief craftsmen for the tabernacle (Ex. 31:1–6). Jesus called the apostles and other disciples (Mark

3:14–14), and the Holy Spirit called Barnabas and Saul to be missionaries (Acts 13:2). The word "call" is not always used, but the unmistakable direction of God for a particular person to do a particular job shines clearly.

**CH:** *So what does calling look like if it doesn't look like that?*

**WM:** In the Bible God guides and empowers people for all kinds of work. At the very beginning of the Bible, God chose to involve human beings in the work of creation, production, and sustenance. Work continues through to the very end of the Bible: there is work from the Garden of Eden to the new heaven and new earth (Gen. 1:27–28, Gen. 2:15, Rev. 21:24–26). For most of us, calling means going about our so-called ordinary work, guided by Scripture and prayer rather than by dramatic pronouncements or events in our lives.

**CH:** *Absent doves and burning bushes, how did people in the Bible determine God's calling?*

**SOMETIMES A CALL IS DRAMATIC . . .** *Right and below:* 6th-c. mosaics show Moses being called by God out of the burning bush and Jesus summoning Andrew and Peter away from their nets.

**WM:** One way was through seeing what needed to be done to make the world more like what God intends. In many cases this involved earning a living to support oneself and one's family (Prov. 13:22), or working to meet the needs of individuals beyond family (Prov. 14:21, Luke 3:10–11).

People were also called to serve the good of the larger society, as when Jeremiah told the exiles in Babylon to “build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce” (Jer. 29:5–7).

The Spirit also guided, and guides, people as they pay attention to their skills and gifts. Paul famously claimed that God gives people gifts for accomplishing the work he wants them to do, and he named some of the gifts and skills that God imparts: “prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness” (Rom. 12:6–8).

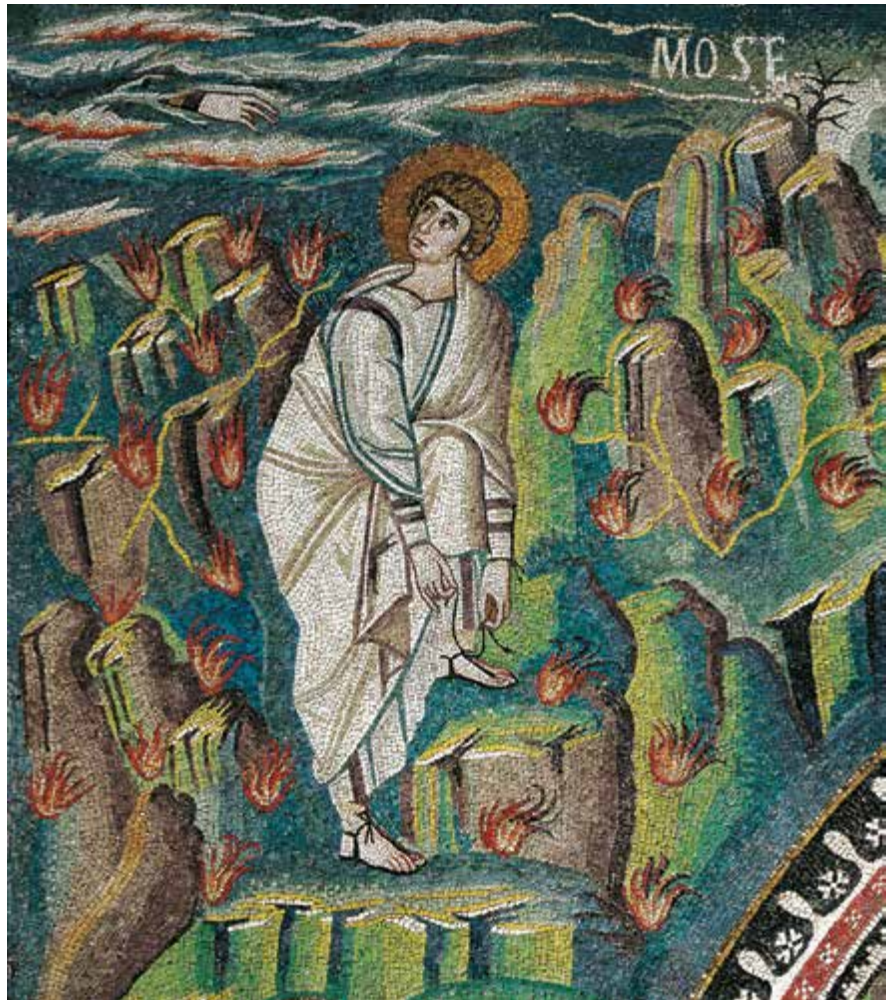
When Paul discusses the gifts of the Spirit, he is usually referring to their use in the church, but if all work done by Christians is done for the Lord (Col. 3:23), then the Spirit's gifts are also given for use in any workplace. We do need to be careful here. The present generation of Westerners is the most gift-analyzed in human history, yet this can lead to self-absorption, crowding out attention to the needs of the world. These passages say that God gives gifts for the common good; they say nothing about work being for our personal satisfaction.

Besides, in many cases, God gives gifts only after you take the job in which you will need them. Paying too much attention to the gifts you already have can keep you from receiving the gifts God wants to give you.

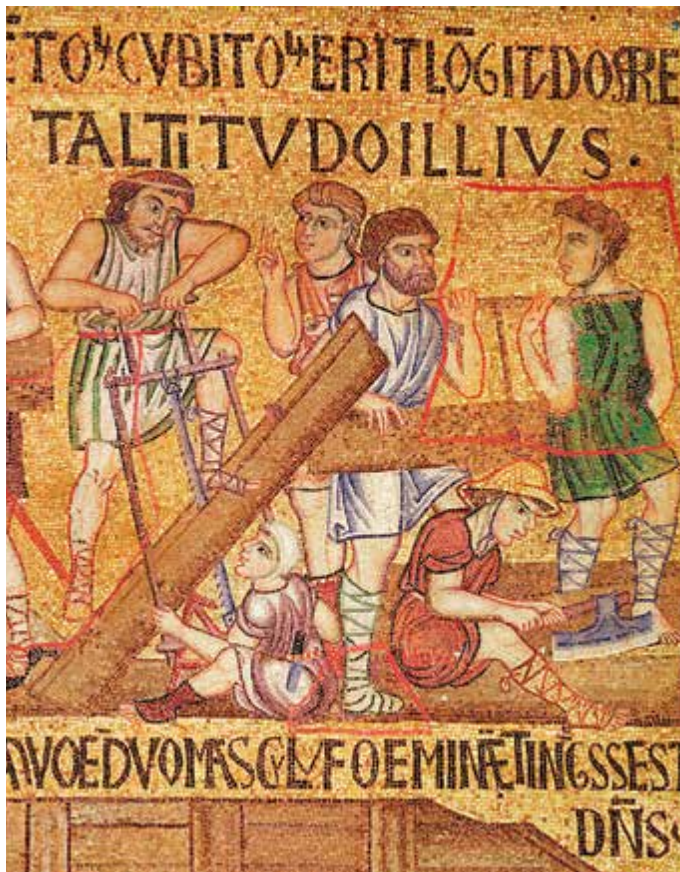
To return for a moment to the role of personal satisfaction in discovering our vocations: God clearly considers people's truest, deepest desires important in determining their calling (Ps. 37:4 and 145:19; Matt. 5:6). But human motivations often become confused by the brokenness and sinfulness of the world. What makes a



person happy—or seems to—might be far from meeting the needs of the world, or from using skills and gifts for the common good, or even from fulfilling true desires. Knowing what we truly desire requires spiritual maturity—not to mention the discernment of



Moses in the Burning Bush—mosaic, 6th c. / San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy / De Agostini Picture Library / A. Dagli Orti / Bridgeman Images  
St. Andrew and St. Peter Responding to the Call of Jesus—From the Main Nave (Mosaic), Byzantine School, (6th century) / Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy / Giraudon / Bridgeman Images



...AND SOMETIMES NOT *Left:* Construction laborers work on building Noah's Ark.

**JESUS' BAPTISM AND OURS** *Right:* Early Christians saw baptism as crucial to God's calling.

the Christian community, the body of Christ on earth (Rom. 12:5).

**CH:** *What about callings to church work?*

**WM:** Many Christians through the ages have had the impression that church workers—evangelists, missionaries, pastors, priests, and the like—have a higher calling than other workers. But in the Bible, God called individuals to both kinds of work.

In Exodus he called out Aaron and his descendants to serve as priests of the Israelites (Ex. 28:1). In the New Testament, he called certain fishermen, tax collectors, and the like to spend time traveling and ministering with him (Mark 1:16–17). After Jesus' death the early church began to call its leadership, for example setting apart Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:2, 5).

But the Bible also gives stories of calls to leadership in the world. For example, God commissioned Joshua to take up the leadership of the Israelites after Moses' death (Deut. 31:14). He also, through the prophet Samuel, anointed Israel's first kings—Saul and then David (1 Sam. 16:12–13).

**CH:** *Does the Bible forbid jobs? Does it forbid changing jobs?*

**WM:** The only jobs the Bible explicitly forbids are those incompatible with its values: for example, jobs requiring murder, adultery, stealing, false wit-

ness, greed (Ex. 20:13–17), usury (Lev. 25:26), damage to health (Matt. 10:8), or harm to the environment (Gen. 2:15).

One question people over the years have sought to answer through Scripture is: if God leads or guides people to their work, could it ever be legitimate to change jobs? Would that be rejecting God's guidance? Martin Luther famously argued against changing jobs, based largely on his understanding of the passage "Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called" (1 Cor. 7:20) (see "Liberating those who work," pp. 20–22).

Luther equated "condition" with "profession" and concluded that it was not legitimate for Christians to change professions. However, Luther's contemporary, John Calvin, did not accept this interpretation—and most modern scholars do not either. For one thing, it does not seem to take into sufficient account the very next verse, 1 Cor. 7:21: "Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever."

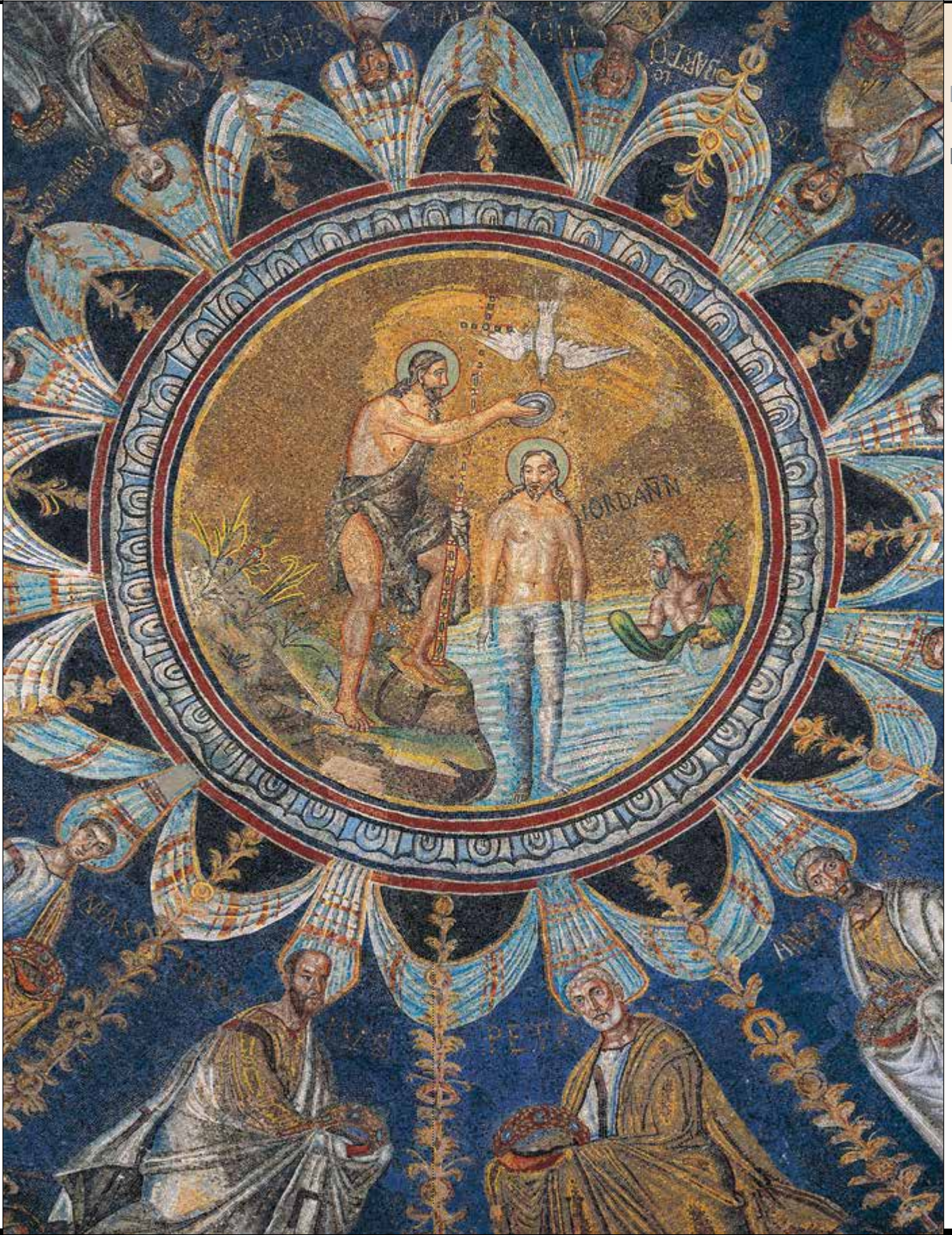
Because there is no hierarchy of professions, it is generally a mistake to think God wants people to find a higher calling if they become a Christian later in life—unless the Bible forbids their current job or the situation encourages un-Christian habits. But the Bible witnesses that the new Christian needs to work *differently* than before, paying attention now to Biblical commands, values, and virtues—as happened with Zacchaeus the tax collector (Luke 19:5–9).

The Bible says that *how* people work is at least as important to God as what job or profession they have. "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much," said Jesus (Luke 16:10). Over a lifetime people can serve Christ best by making the most of every job for his purposes, whether they feel called to every job or not.

In the end the Bible seems to clearly say that God calls and guides people to various kinds of ordinary work—in various kinds of ordinary ways. But the stories in the Bible also tell us that getting the right job does not bring salvation, nor even (necessarily) happiness.

Moreover, the truest aim of work for the Christian is to serve the common good. Over a lifetime, that comes from doing each day's work to the best of one's ability in Christ. At the end, the Bible makes clear, people will not be judged on getting the right job or fulfilling their potential. The calling to belong to Christ is God's only indispensable calling. ☩







# Called first to Christ

EARLY CHRISTIANS PREACHED THAT COMING TO CHRIST CHANGED EVERYTHING

*Beth Felker Jones*

**AROUND THE TURN OF THE FIFTH CENTURY,** Augustine wrote a compelling account of his life, the *Confessions*, which remains one of the most influential Christian books ever written. Beginning in infancy through the time of his appointment as bishop of Hippo, Augustine's narrative interpreted every aspect of his life as evidence of God's relentless pursuit of him.

Augustine prayed to a God who sought him even when he was most rebellious, and he realized that God's first calling to him was a call to be converted. He told his story as one in which his love of self was

overcome by God's love for him. "I was drawn to you by your beauty," Augustine prayed to God, "but swiftly dragged away from you by my own weight."

In the early church, the question of vocation was not—as it often is in the twenty-first century—about what sort of occupation a Christian should have. The church fathers didn't sit around agonizing over whether they should be plumbers or doctors or teachers or farmers. Their agony, instead, was about submission to Christ. No one doubted that the results of answering that call would be dramatic.

THE CONVERSION OF ST. AUGUSTINE—TEMPERA ON PANEL, ANGELICO, FRA (GUIDO DI PIETRO) (C.1387–1455) / MUSEE D'ART THOMAS HENRY, CHERBOURG, FRANCE / GIRAUDON / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES



**HEARING GOD'S VOICE** *Left:* Augustine's conversion changed his life.

**"CEASE OR BE REJECTED"** *Right:* Prostitutes could not be baptized without giving up their profession.

When Augustine gave himself to faith, he assumed that everything would have to change. Afraid of such dramatic change, Augustine reports that he hung back from the faith.

He knew what it would demand, recalling in prayer, "What I now longed for was not greater certainty about you, but a more steadfast abiding in you. In my daily life everything seemed to be teetering, and my heart needed to be cleansed of the old leaven. I was attracted to the Way, which is our Savior himself, but the narrowness of the path daunted me and I still could not walk in it."

### CHANGED BY GOD'S LOVE

Once he answered that primary call, Augustine saw God demanding other vocational decisions of him. He left behind his work as a teacher and rhetorician. He also rejected the marriage his mother had arranged for him. His calling to Christ took over every other aspect of his life—his work, his household, and his marital status. Once he surrendered to Christ, Augustine recounted being "irked" by the "secular business" that had been his career before his conversion. He linked this discontent with the fact that God had

changed his heart at the deepest level.

To God in his *Confessions* he wrote that he was "no longer . . . fired by ambition, and prepared on that account to endure such heavy servitude in the hope of reputation and wealth, as had formerly been the case. Those prospects held no charm for me now that I was in love with your tender kindness and the beauty of your house." Augustine did not demean all secular work, nor marriage, but he made the judgment that—in his own case—conversion meant leaving those things behind. Looking back, he saw his career as a way of having sold himself to the highest bidder and cited God's redemption of him as the reason that he need "no more to offer" himself "for sale." In keeping with his theology of grace, Augustine wanted his readers to know that he didn't manage this dramatic change by his own effort or strength of will. His new life was only possible because the Lord set him "free from a craving for sexual gratification which fettered



## An early church list of unacceptable jobs for Christians

They will inquire concerning the works and occupations of those are who are brought forward for instruction. If someone is a pimp who supports prostitutes, he shall cease or shall be rejected. If someone is a sculptor or a painter, let them be taught not to make idols. . . . If someone is an actor or does shows in the theater, either he shall cease or he shall be rejected. If someone teaches children [worldly knowledge] it is good that he cease. But if he has no [other] trade, let him be permitted.

A charioteer, likewise, or one who takes part in the games, or . . . goes to the games, he shall cease or he shall be rejected. . . . a gladiator, or one who teaches those among the gladiators how to fight, or a hunter who is in the wild beast shows in the arena, or a public official who is concerned with gladiator shows . . . a priest of idols, or an attendant of idols. . . . A military man in authority must not execute men. If he is ordered, he must not carry it out. Nor must he take military oath. . . . If someone is a military governor, or the ruler of a city who wears the purple, he shall cease or he shall be rejected. The catechumen or faithful who wants to become a soldier is to be rejected, for he has despised God.

The prostitute, the wanton man, the one who castrates himself, or one who does that which may not be mentioned, are to be rejected, for they are impure. . . . An enchanter, or astrologer, or diviner, or interpreter of dreams, or a charlatan, or one who makes amulets . . . they shall cease or they shall be rejected. If someone's concubine is a slave, as long as she has raised her children and has clung only to him, let her hear. Otherwise, she shall be rejected. The man who has a concubine must cease and take a wife according to the law. If he will not, he shall be rejected. (*The Apostolic Tradition*, third or fourth century; translation <http://www.bombaxo.com/hippolytus.html>).



## Perpetua's calling to Christ leads her to separate from her family

After a few days there prevailed a report that we should be heard. And then my father came to me from the city, worn out with anxiety. He came up to me, that he might cast me down, saying, "Have pity my daughter, on my gray hairs. Have pity on your father, if I am worthy to be called a father by you. If with these hands I have brought you up to this flower of your age, if I have preferred you to all your brothers, do not deliver me up to the scorn of men. Have regard to your brothers, have regard to your mother and your aunt, have regard to your son, who will not be able to live after you. Lay aside your courage, and do not bring us all to destruction; for none of us will speak in freedom if you should suffer anything."

These things said my father in his affection, kissing my hands and throwing himself at my feet; and with tears he called me not Daughter, but Lady. And I grieved over the gray hairs of my father, that he alone of all my family would not rejoice over my passion. And I comforted him, saying, "On that scaffold whatever God wills shall happen. For know that we are not placed in our own power, but in that of God." And he departed from me in sorrow.

*The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas, third century.*

**"NOT IN OUR OWN POWER"** *Left:* Perpetua chose her Christian vocation over all else.

**SOMEONE HAS TO STOMP THE GRAPES** *Right:* Everyday work in the 4th-c. century included bringing in the grape harvest.

me like a tight-drawn chain, and from my enslavement to worldly affairs."

### CALLED TO GIVE UP EVERYTHING

Augustine's story comes to us from the end of the early church period. While much in that story was peculiar to him, it also epitomized the early church in several important ways. Though Augustine was the bishop of an imperial church—a church with the blessing and sometimes, to its detriment, the power of the Roman Empire behind it—he stood in the legacy of a persecuted church, the church of the first three centuries, which thought about vocation from the standpoint of a persecuted minority.

Calling, in this context, was not just the special calling of some to serve in offices of the church. Calling belonged to all Christians. It was the call to faithfulness, to share the good news regardless of the cost, and to give up everything to follow Christ.

Tertullian (c. 160–225) in the late second century spoke from this tradition as he responded to critics' "outcry" that Christians were everywhere and that Christians included people from every walk of life—"both sexes, every age and condition, even high rank, are passing over to the profession of the Christian faith." The only place you wouldn't find Christians, according to Tertullian, was in the temples of the false gods.

Tertullian described a church united in worshiping the true God, but he also described that church as diverse, a diversity including Christians in a variety of occupations. And through those many occupations at all levels of society, Christians were infiltrating the world at large in a most alarming fashion, leading to ever more conversions. Consequently Christians were an ever-increasing threat to a state that would not tolerate their anti-idolatry stance.

If the early church knew what it meant to be "in" the world, it was also familiar with the tension involved in discerning what it meant to be in that world but not "of" it. In the third century, some Christians dealt with that tension by retreating from the city to the desert. Desert hermits—at a physical distance from the worldly pressures of the city—dedicated their lives to prayer and to the practice of asceticism, following physical disciplines such as fasting and solitude as a means of training the soul.

Monastic communities also grew up as places where Christians could dedicate their whole lives to



prayer. In the best of the Christian tradition, neither the desert nor the monastery was conceived as a rejection of the world—and more worldly occupations. Instead, Christians who saw their special vocation as prayer also saw those prayers as going up for the world.

Some expressed that prayerful vocation in powerful ways while staying “in” the world. Writing about his sister Macrina, Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330–395) provided a lovely reflection on Christian vocation as encompassing the most mundane aspects of life. He recounted his sister’s routine, including “when she rose from bed, or engaged in household duties or rested”—as a routine bathed in prayer. This vocation not only included the daily rhythms of life, but also had, in Gregory’s account, a strong impulse toward the radical equality of all people before God. Macrina and her mother chose to live “on a footing of equality with the staff of maids, so as to share with them the same food and the same kind of bed, and in all the necessities of life, without any regard to differences of rank.” Gregory also told of his sister’s “resolve” to “remain single.” Singleness, especially for some ancient Christian women, seems to

have provided an unusually fruitful avenue for dedicating life to God.

### COME FIRE, COME CROSS

Ignatius (c. 35–107), one of Christianity’s earliest authors, saw his calling as one to martyrdom. “It is not that I want merely to be called a Christian, but actually to be one,” he writes. And Ignatius was unflinching in his vision. He described the many things “seen or unseen” that he did not want to obstruct his vocation as a Christian. “Come fire,” he writes, “cross, battling with wild beasts, wrenching of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of my entire body, cruel tortures of the devil—only let me get to Jesus Christ.”

If to answer the call to conversion was to open oneself up to martyrdom in the arena, then it made sense that the early church saw conversion itself—and not so much questions about occupation—as the central category for vocation.

In linking vocation to marriage, singleness, and teaching about sexual ethics, the early church also recognized the stark contrasts between Christian teaching



**“CHRISTIANS ARE EVERYWHERE”** Christians were working in every corner of Roman society—from goatherds milking their charges (*above*) and iron workers crafting tools in their forges (*left*) to senators and wealthy matrons.

on sex and procreation (a key part of the Genesis mandate to be productive and have dominion in the world) and the teachings of the pagans. Christianity was born in a world in which, in the words of historian Kyle Harper, “the sex industry was integral to the moral economy.” In the ancient Greco-Roman world, there was no getting around the buying and selling of sex. Slavery flourished, and with slavery came sexual abuse of the enslaved. Divorce was everywhere as well, even though many rulers tried to suppress it; wealthy Romans (including the very emperors speaking against the practice) sought out new partners frequently for both political and personal reasons.

Early Christians saw sexual ethics as closely bound up with the calling to bear witness to Christ, standing in stark contrast to this sex industry. For the early church, sex and marriage had everything to do with vocation, and they wrestled with Paul’s advice in 1 Cor. 7.

When Paul counseled the unmarried to remain as they were, he specifically linked this to vocational considerations. Unlike the married with divided interests (7:34), single people were free to serve and please the Lord. Vocational considerations, as Paul addressed them here, were full of eschatological urgency. The end was near, and there was kingdom work to be done.

Christians from Augustine’s day to our own have looked back to those first three Christian centuries as a model for worship, prayer, theological reflection, and depth of community. As we wrestle with questions of vocation and kingdom work today, in the midst of the twenty-first century’s own idolatries, these Christians remind us that the question of calling is foremost one of responding to Christ and submitting to him. No one doubts that answering that call will be dramatic. **✠**

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# Reading scripture, washing feet

BENEDICT'S MONASTIC *RULE* ADDRESSES BOTH PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF THE MONASTIC CALLING

## CHAPTER 35: KITCHEN SERVERS OF THE WEEK

<sup>1</sup>The brothers should serve one another. Consequently, no one will be excused from kitchen service unless he is sick or engaged in some important business of the monastery, <sup>2</sup>for such service increases reward and fosters love. <sup>3</sup>Let those who are not strong have help so that they may serve without distress, <sup>4</sup>and let everyone receive help as the size of the community or local conditions warrant. <sup>5</sup>If the community is rather large, the cellarer should be excused from kitchen service, and, as we have said, those should also be excused who are engaged in important business. <sup>6</sup>Let all the rest serve one another in love.

<sup>7</sup>On Saturday the brother who is completing his work will do the washing. <sup>8</sup>He is to wash the towels which the brothers use to wipe their hands and feet. <sup>9</sup>Both the one who is ending his service and the one who is about to begin are to wash the feet of everyone. <sup>10</sup>The utensils required for the kitchen service are to be washed and returned intact to the cellarer, <sup>11</sup>who in turn issues them to the one beginning his week. In this way the cellarer will know what he hands out and what he receives back.

## CHAPTER 53: RECEPTION OF GUESTS

<sup>1</sup>All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Matt. 25:35). <sup>2</sup>Proper honor must be shown to all, especially to those who share our faith (Gal. 6:10) and to pilgrims. <sup>3</sup>Once a guest has been announced, the superior and the brothers are to meet him with all the courtesy of love.

<sup>4</sup>First of all, they are to pray together and thus be united in peace, <sup>5</sup>but prayer must always precede the kiss of peace because of the delusions of the devil. <sup>6</sup>All humility should be shown in addressing a guest on arrival or departure. <sup>7</sup>By a bow of the head or by a complete prostration of the body, Christ is to be adored because he is indeed welcomed in them.

<sup>8</sup>After the guests have been received, they should be invited to pray; then the superior or an appointed brother will sit with them. <sup>9</sup>The divine law is read to the guest for his instruction, and after that every kindness is shown to him. <sup>10</sup>The superior may break his fast for the sake of a guest, unless it is a day of special fast which cannot be broken. <sup>11</sup>The brothers,



**WASH THE TOWELS AND WELCOME THE GUESTS:** Benedict teaches from his *Rule*.

however, observe the usual fast. <sup>12</sup>The abbot shall pour water on the hands of the guests, <sup>13</sup>and the abbot with the entire community shall wash their feet. <sup>14</sup>After the washing they will recite this verse: God, we have received your mercy in the midst of your temple (Ps. 47[48]:10). <sup>15</sup>Great care and concern are to be shown in receiving poor people and pilgrims, because in them more particularly Christ is received; our very awe of the rich guarantees them special respect.

From *The Rule of Saint Benedict* (translated by the monks of The Monastery of Christ in the Desert, <http://christdesert.org>).



# Duty and delight

MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANS LIVED IN A TENSION BETWEEN ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION, BETWEEN THIS WORLD AND THE NEXT

*Edwin Woodruff Tait*

**ENGLISH WRITER** William Langland's thirteenth-century poem *Piers Plowman* took place in a dream. In that dream, in an episode called the "plowing of the half-acre," the people of an unnamed kingdom—disillusioned with their society—sought out a mysterious figure named "Piers the Plowman," who represented true Christianity and the possibility of redeemed humanity. They asked him to lead them in a pilgrimage to Truth.

But Piers responded that they needed to help him plow his half-acre of ground first. He organized them in a way that reflected the ideals of medieval society: everyone was to work on the plowing except for the knights, whose job it was to protect the rest.

To explain whether the journey commenced, we need first to step back a few centuries to the roots of that ideal medieval society. For medieval Christians, the word "vocation" referred first and foremost to

salvation. All Christians, by virtue of their baptism, had been "called out" from their sins and offered a share in God's eternal kingdom. They saw themselves as pilgrims on a journey—on which they feared Jesus' warning, "Many are called, but few are chosen." To be among the called was not necessarily to be one whom God had chosen to persevere on the difficult path from this world to the life to come.

## **ON MY JOURNEY HOME**

For medievals, on one hand, this world was created by God and showed forth his glory. On the other, it was fallen and sinful, a "vale of tears," a "Babylon" where believers were exiled, hoping to escape and return to their true home. This tension derived ultimately from the classical heritage Christians had inherited from Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle saw



**SERVANT AND LEADER** *Left:* Pope Gregory struggled between his monastic call and his exalted office.

**GET YOUR PASTRIES HERE** *Right:* Medieval laypeople practice jobs here ranging from scribe to cook to organ maker.

virtue as participation in the human community and care for the common good; his writings shaped an understanding of how human societies fostered virtue and happiness. On the other hand, Plato understood the human soul as a heavenly entity trapped in a physical body. Human desires (for food, sex, drink, and the like) distracted from the desire to return to God from whom all things had proceeded. *This* strand of classical thought stood behind medieval understanding of Jesus' harsh words about taking up the cross.

Medievals expressed this as a division between the "active" and "contemplative" Christian life, symbolized by Leah and Rachel in the Old Testament and Martha and Mary in the New. In both cases, though the more active "elder sister" was necessary, the "younger sister" was the more spiritually gifted and more central in salvation history.

Sixth-century bishop of Rome Gregory I exemplified this tension. A Roman aristocrat, Gregory, like many of his generation, renounced wealth and position to become a monk. But power pursued him into his new, unworldly life, where he was given increasingly important assignments and eventually elected pope. Throughout his career Gregory struggled with the conflict between his exalted office and his personal ascetic calling—a struggle that caused him to describe the pope's role in terms of Jesus' command to serve the least, as "servant of the servants of God."

Why did Gregory struggle so? Because medieval Christians believed the surest way of journeying to the heavenly homeland successfully was by belonging to a monastic community committed to poverty, chastity, and obedience, and by the observance of the "evangelical counsels," namely the teachings of Jesus in all their rigor. To be a monk or a nun was to hear the voice of Jesus saying, "Sell everything you have, leave your family, and come, follow me." This was a particularly intense version of the call addressed to all Christians in baptism. But as the Christian Roman Empire crumbled in Western



Europe and barbarian warlords set up new kingdoms in its shattered shell, monasticism seemed at times the only authentic way to live out one's baptismal calling.

## KINGS AND PRIESTS

For two groups of people to whom the welfare of Christian society was entrusted—kings and members of the clergy—vocation was more public than a monastery. Priests and bishops taught, administered the sacraments, and (less explicitly) carried on Rome's cultural legacy. Kings bore the name "the Lord's Anointed" like Old Testament monarchs or Christian Roman emperors. For both, providing for the welfare of the people stood in tension with individual salvation. At the very least, the stress of public affairs left little contemplative time. But being involved in the world had a deeper problem: there one was entangled in structures shaped by basic human desires for pleasure, for wealth, and for power over others.



**ON A JOURNEY TO HEAVEN?** Women weave (*left*) and a doctor operates on a patient (*below*).



The activities involved with these three desires were themselves innocent, necessary parts of created life in this world. But according to the Augustinian theology dominating medieval Christianity, all three were radically corrupted by sin; the desire fueling them would always tend to drag people away from God. To be holy “in the world” required one to eat only for sustenance, have sex only to have children, and engage in economic and political activity only for the common good. But human sinfulness made all of these things almost impossibly difficult in practice.

Clergy were to avoid sex in principle, although this was not compulsory for parish clergy until the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Monarchs and other well-born laypeople had no exemption; one of their principal duties was to produce heirs to carry on the family line. For some pious monarchs, such as Earl Magnus of Orkney (twelfth century), who spent his honeymoon in prayer and never went near his bride, this was a serious problem.

The burden of producing heirs weighed especially heavily on aristocratic women, for whom procreation was not just one of their worldly duties—it was by far their most important. Over and over again, pious queens and ladies sought to escape this duty, taking vows of celibacy instead of—or even *in*—marriage, or seeking to be released from the “marital debt” after producing the necessary heirs.

### **NO GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL**

Neither clergy nor laity could avoid economic activity either. Donations from laypeople made monasteries great landowners, and their cultural and educational activities gave them massive influence. Monasteries were central to the economic revival of the eleventh and twelfth centuries and, according to some scholars, instrumental in the early growth of capitalism. The Cistercian reform movement of the twelfth century, even while trying to avoid wealth and political entanglements, opened previously uninhabited areas to economic development. Yet these economic activities troubled many spiritually serious people—they seemed to contradict the very purpose of monasticism.

Leaders could not escape politics any more than economics. Bishops and abbots held key political offices and

## ENTANGLED IN THE WORLD? A choir of monks worships.

sometimes led armies. Church leaders were the best educated, and often most talented, members of the upper classes: noble families disposed of surplus male heirs in church positions and placed extra daughters in convents. Many convents (such as famous eleventh-century mystic and intellectual Hildegard of Bingen's establishment) allowed only upper-class members.

Monarchs found the tension between political power and salvation sharp indeed. The church praised effective monarchs such as Charlemagne and Alfred the Great and often treated them as saints after their deaths because of their roles in defending the faith. But for some pious rulers, the bloodshed and self-promotion required proved too troubling. Earl Magnus and Russian princes Boris and Gleb all let themselves be killed by unscrupulous relatives and rivals rather than assert their rights by force. These royal victims *too* were canonized as saints, their nonresistance seen as imitating Christ rather than failing to exercise effective rule.

By the High Middle Ages (eleventh–twelfth centuries), agricultural innovations had led to population growth, economic growth, and increased urbanization. Politics stabilized, and literature in Latin and vernacular languages flourished. The church experienced a wave of reforms leading to a sharper sense of its spiritual mission—and to the need for strict discipline so the clergy would carry out its task of preaching and sacramental ministry without fooling around with food, drink, and sex.

These reforms coincided with a growth in Christian commitment by ordinary laypeople. The “Peace of God” movement (aimed at ending violence in Europe) and the Crusades, while spurred on by clerical initiatives, were carried out by mass movements of laypeople of all social classes. Eventually some lay movements rejected the authority of church hierarchy altogether, claiming for laypeople the callings to preach and teach.

### SAINTS, PILGRIMS, AND HERMITS

Soon the growing cities of twelfth-century northern Italy gave rise to an almost entirely new phenomenon: saints who were not clergy, monarchs, nuns, or monks. Some were of humble origins, others were prosperous, and one was a knight. Some were merchants; others engaged in manual trades. One, Teobaldo of Alba,



began as a shoemaker and chose to become a porter as an act of asceticism—a less prestigious, more demanding position. Some spent lengthy periods of time as hermits—20 years in a forest, in the case of Gualfrado of Verona (d. 1127). All lived lives of ascetic self-denial; most did not marry.

Layman Raimondo Palmiero entered into an arranged marriage, but after four children suggested to his wife that they should abstain from sex. His wife said that since she wasn't a nun she saw no reason to act like one. They had one more child, but after her death he gave away his possessions and went on a pilgrimage.

These lay saints often used the proceeds of their labors to provide for the poor and to build conveniences for travelers and pilgrims. They sometimes involved themselves heavily in civic politics. In his later years, Palmiero tried to stem violence in his native city of Piacenza (for which he was imprisoned), criticized his local bishop for not doing more, and organized a procession of beggars who marched through the streets shouting, “Help me, help me, cruel harsh Christians, for I am dying of hunger while you live in abundance.”

In the thirteenth century the role played by lay saints was taken over in many ways by the “mendicant” (begging) monastic movements, particularly Franciscans. Francis of Assisi in fact resembled his twelfth-century urban Italian predecessors who had sought to live lives of self-denial and devotion to the poor.

The other mendicant order, the Dominicans, did not have as charismatic a founder or as popular a touch. But they were immensely effective preachers and, along with Franciscans, soon came to dominate university theological education. The greatest Dominican

theologian, Thomas Aquinas, used Aristotle to articulate Christian virtue as conducive to happiness in this world as well as in the world to come and Christian social ethics as a means of caring for the common good of earthly society.

For Aquinas contemplation of divine things flowed out in active ministry to the world (see “Did you know?,” inside front cover). While Aquinas himself belonged to a religious order, his writings mapped out ways lay Christians could live according to divine law in the world, seeking both earthly happiness and eternal salvation.

Franciscans and Dominicans also developed “third orders,” men and women who lived “in the world” while committed to a version of the monastic lifestyle. Other laity joined the Brethren of the Common Life (source of Thomas à Kempis’s devotional classic *The Imitation of Christ*). At the heart of the Brethren movement was a network of lay men and women committed to spiritual disciplines and to living in the world with hearts entirely fixed on God. Similar movements existed on the boundaries of, or outside, church approval: Beghards (for men), Beguines (for women), and Lollards, who appealed to lower-middle-class men and women and developed a flourishing network of lay preachers.

### WINE, WOMEN, AND SONG

All these movements dedicated themselves to evangelizing a surprisingly secular society. The sophisticated courtly culture of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries showed little interest in religion and sometimes even outright hostility. The hero of one medieval French

### BEARING GOOD FRUIT A worker prunes trees.



romance told an old hermit he had no desire to go to heaven because only priests and monks went there. Rather he wanted to go to hell with all the brave knights and beautiful ladies.

Latin poetry attributed to the anonymous “Archpoet” parodied the liturgy to proclaim the good of wine, women, and song: “To everyone nature has given a different gift. I myself have never been able to write while fasting.” Most people seem to have genuinely believed that church teachings were true and they should be reconciled with God before they died. But for most of their lives, they sought their vocations according to values different from those promoted by clergy or by earnest movements of lay piety.

Indeed late medieval literature often breathed exuberant joy as much as austere devotion: in the beauty of spring, in the delights of love, good food, and laughter at human folly. Medievalists knew both how to fast and to feast, how to rejoice and to mourn. Many Christian writers combined their piety with this-worldly zest and were concerned with following their baptismal call in social and economic matters. Famous Italian poet Dante Alighieri’s greatest work, *Divine Comedy*, dealt not only with the afterlife but with this life—imagining a human society lost in sin, journeying to the heavenly homeland, and redeemed and transformed by grace.

Dante’s paradise included men and women Dante had known or who were famous in public life. He

## Dante’s calling

In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself, in a dark wood, where the direct way was lost. It is a hard thing to speak of, how wild, harsh and impenetrable that wood was, so that thinking of it re-creates the fear. It is scarcely less bitter than death: but, in order to tell of the good that I found there, I must tell of the other things I saw there. . . . [After



the poet Virgil tells Dante that he is summoned to travel through hell, purgatory, and heaven, Dante protests his unworthiness for the calling, but ultimately decides to undertake it after seeing a vision of his beloved, Beatrice.] “Why should I go there? Who allows it? I am not Aeneas: I am not Paul. Neither I, nor others, think me worthy of it. So, if I resign myself to going, I fear that going there may prove foolish: you know, and understand, better than I can say.” . . . I rose from weakened courage: and so fine an ardour coursed through my heart, that I began to speak, like one who is freed: . . . “You have filled my heart with such desire, by what you have said, to go forward, that I have turned back to my first purpose.” . . . So I spoke to him, and he going on, I entered on the steep, tree-shadowed way. (Dante, *Divine Comedy: Inferno*, translated by A. S. Kline © 2000.)

even met people still concerned with the state of Florence and of Europe. Greed and corruption in civil politics, the French domination of the papacy, the ambiguities of romantic love which could both damn and redeem—all found a place in Dante’s masterpiece. For Dante, the baptismal vocation meant not escaping the world but transforming it.

And so we return to *Piers Plowman*. William Langland wrote his long dream allegory amid late fourteenth-century social instability. In the wake of the Black Death, traditional understandings of a harmonious society in which each person was born to a divinely appointed “station” were falling apart. Social mobility through accumulating wealth was more and more possible, but losers in the economic game were bitter and angry. Peasant leader John Ball marched on London under a slogan of social equality: “When Adam dug and Eve span [spun], who was then the gentleman?”

### “GIVE WHAT YOU OWE”

Langland’s poem largely blamed these social instabilities on the figure of “Lady Meed”: the vibrant early capitalism that made the later Middle Ages so culturally and socially dynamic. In the poem Lady Meed seduced most of the powerful people in the kingdom in spite of being accused of serious crimes. But not everyone agreed that she was evil. The word “meed” could also simply imply the legitimate reward a person was owed. Was Meed evil, or corrupted through those lusting after her? Could society ever be constructed without regard to the desire for reward and material gain?

When the people sought out *Piers Plowman*, it was through disillusionment with Lady Meed. But her influence proved inescapable. When *Piers* organized the company to plow, many people didn’t want to work. *Piers*, in desperation, sent for Hunger to force them. This broke the bonds that held society together, and no more was heard of a pilgrimage to Truth.

Like other reform-minded authors, Langland warned that pilgrimages and indulgences could not replace genuine conversion and a life based on love of neighbor. The quest for individual salvation was futile without attention to proper ordering of society with regard for the common good and the business of ordinary work. The pilgrimage that pleased God was the pilgrimage



**SEEKING TRUTH, SOWING SEED** Farmers plow and sow in a 14th-c. *Book of Hours*.

to Truth, which was impossible until the half-acre was plowed. But the half-acre never did get plowed.

That frustration characterized many devout people at the close of the Middle Ages. The promise of a truly Christian society, in which people lived out their baptismal vocation in the station to which God had called them, seemed elusive. The tension between the ascetic demands of mainstream medieval piety and the joys and demands of life in this world seemed irreconcilable.

Ironically this resulted from medieval Christianity’s success as well as its failure. Over time a critical mass of lay Christians had come to take the summons to live out their baptismal calling in the world with deadly seriousness. That was why Martin Luther’s radical solutions soon gained so much traction—solutions that created tensions and paradoxes of their own. ☒

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# Liberating those who work

MARTIN LUTHER CHALLENGED CENTURIES OF VOCATIONAL REFLECTION

*David C. Fink*

**THE NOTION OF CALLING** has always been at the very heart of Christian identity. For Jesus' earliest followers, entering into Christian community meant sharing in a calling that stood in strong tension with other identities (see "Called first to Christ," pp. 8–12). As Christianity spread throughout the Mediterranean world and became the faith of the empire, however, that tension began to ease.

When Christianity transformed from an underground, persecuted sect into the Roman Empire's established religion, monasticism soon emerged as a high-tension alternative to the increasing laxity and worldliness of mainstream churches. Monasteries issued a clarion call to drop everything for Jesus. As Basil the Great (329–379) explained in rules for his monastic community, "A beginning is made by detaching oneself from all external goods: property, self-importance, social class and useless desire,

following the holy example of the Lord's disciples. James and John left their father Zebedee and the very boat upon which their whole livelihood depended."

This might seem like a recipe for disaster—after all, if all Christians are "called" to abandon their nets to follow Christ, who will catch the fish? Milk the cows? Tend the crops? Build the roads? Change the diapers? Maintain justice?

And yet, in the millennium that followed, monasticism proved to be one of Christendom's most compelling and enduring institutions. It allowed Christianity, as philosopher Charles Taylor put it, to operate "at several speeds." By restricting the term "vocation" to the monastic life, the church maintained an ideal of spiritual perfection, while acknowledging that not everyone—in fact, only a very few—is called to this sort of arduous asceticism. The ministry of those "in the world" could be pitched at a lower speed to

THE VINEYARD OF THE LORD—1589 (OIL ON PANEL) (DETAIL OF 330498). CRAMACH, LUCAS THE YOUNGER (1515–86) / STADT-KIRCHE, WITTENBERG, GERMANY / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES



**“THE VINEYARD OF THE LORD”** *Left:* Luther’s friend Lucas Cranach painted him and other reformers “tending the vineyard.”

**CAN MONEY BE HOLY?** *Right:* This 15th-c. painting shows how some viewed moneylenders.

accommodate the needs of the less committed, while the monasteries offered a fast lane for religious “virtuosos.”

Medieval writers typically divided Christian society into three parts: the church, the political order, and the economy. Eleventh-century bishop Adalbero of Laon put it, “God’s house, which we think of as one, is thus divided into three: some pray, others fight, yet others work. . . . The services rendered by one are a precondition for the labors of the other two, and each in his turn takes it upon himself to relieve the whole.” But by the later Middle Ages, this arrangement was starting to show signs of strain (see “Duty and delight,” pp. 14–19). Enter Martin Luther.

### A NEW LANE ALTOGETHER

Luther (1483–1546) had tried life in the spiritual fast lane, and it had done him no good. “Though I lived as a monk without reproach,” he recalled, “I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience.” As he lectured on the Bible in his post as theology professor at the university in Wittenberg, Luther gradually came to develop a radically different understanding of Christian salvation. It did away entirely with “fast lanes” and “slow lanes,” as well as with the idea that vocation necessarily implies a call to abandon one’s nets and leave the world for the cloister.

Luther’s revolutionary new theology of justification by faith alone was based on the insight that human life is lived out at the intersection between two basic relationships: a vertical relationship “before God” and a horizontal relationship “before humanity.” Before God, humans stand in a purely passive, helpless relationship. Luther argued that we, as finite beings, are utterly incapable of meriting our own salvation, or any good thing, for that matter. What makes the gospel “good news,” in Luther’s view, is that it reveals to us the righteousness God grants to sinners as a pure gift.

“What do we do to obtain this gift?” Luther asked. “Nothing at all. For this righteousness means to do nothing, to hear nothing, and to know nothing about the law or about works and to believe only this: that Christ . . . sits in heaven at the right hand of the Father,



not as a Judge but as one who has been made for us [i.e. on our behalf] wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption from God.”

This righteousness, Luther argued, is given to us freely through the Word of God. In contrast to human words, which merely name things—for example, when Adam gave names to the animals in the Garden of Eden—God’s Word is powerful. It called the universe into being from nothing, and it was the same creative Word calling faith into being when Christ spoke to his disciples from the seashore, or to his church through Scripture, sermon, or sacrament.

This meant for Luther that vocation defined Christian identity. And “vocation” was not a special invitation to join God’s “fast lane” as a priest or a monk, but the transformative power of God’s Word uniting people to Christ in faith.

That may seem like a rather abstract point, but it had radical implications in the sixteenth century. In his *Address to the German Nobility* in 1520, Luther spelled these implications out with startling clarity: the distinction between religious and secular, between sacred and profane, is nothing more than a “specious device invented by time-servers,” for “our baptism consecrates us all without exception, and makes us all priests.”

For Luther this did not mean, however, that all Christians are called to perform the same duties or

THE MONEYLENDERS—QUINTEN MASSYS (FOLLOWER OF) NETHERLANDISH (1466–1530) OIL ON PANEL 44 1/2 X 31 IN. THE GROHMANN MUSEUM COLLECTION AT MILWAUKEE SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING



**A WELL-ROUNDED REFORMER** Later artists liked to imagine the story of Luther playing the lute as a young student in the home of his landlady.

or occupy the same stations. Since human beings are incapable of rendering anything to God in return for his grace, Luther argued that God does not need our good works. But our neighbors do. Therefore God so ordered things that each is assigned his or her proper task to help the body of Christ function. The vocation that unites people to Christ in faith always comes first. But “when I have this righteousness within me,” Luther explained:

I descend from heaven like the rain that makes the earth fertile. That is, I come forth into another kingdom, and I perform good works whenever the opportunity arises. If I am a minister of the Word, I preach, I comfort the saddened, I administer the sacraments. If I am a father, I rule my household and family, I train my children in piety and honesty. If I am a magistrate, I perform the office which I have received by divine command. If I am a servant, I faithfully tend to my master’s affairs.

In short, whoever knows for sure that Christ is his righteousness not only cheerfully and gladly works in his calling but also submits himself for the sake of love to magistrates, also to their wicked laws, and to everything else in this present life—even, if need be, to burden and danger. For he knows that God wants this and that this obedience pleases him.

### THE GATE TO PARADISE?

Luther experienced these “discoveries” as “the very gate to paradise,” and he was confident that his gospel would liberate “those who work” and “those who fight” to rediscover the joy of their salvation. But Luther’s critics, then and now, pointed out that this understanding

of vocation seemed to underwrite a deeply conservative view of the social order. And much confirmed this. Luther made clear that justification by faith alone dissolves the distinction between the “spiritual” and the “secular,” but he left wholly untouched any secular distinctions.

Rulers are called to rule and servants to serve: “If you are called in slavery, then remain in the slavery in which you were called,” he said, and elsewhere, “We know that everybody . . . must be able to tell himself: ‘This is my office; this is my vocation.’ Such a person is pleasing to God. It is God’s will that I be a father or mother, a husband or wife.” And yet Luther always insisted—sometimes in the face of his own experience—that truly understanding vocation in Christ would transform how people treat others. Commenting on 1 Cor. 7:20, Luther responded to the question, “What if the Gospel calls me in a state of sin, should I remain in that?” by saying:

How can you sin if you have faith and love? Since God is satisfied with your faith and your neighbor with your love, it is impossible that you should be called and still remain in a state of sin. . . . This call brings you from the state of sin to a state of virtue, making you unable to sin as long as you are in that state. All things are free to you with God through faith; but with men you are the servant of everyman through love.

Luther was unwilling to use the gospel as a blueprint for reconstructing the social order. But he also insisted that a master who exercises his office sinfully, with no recognition that the gospel makes him “the servant of everyman,” fails to understand the gospel.

Luther’s ambiguous legacy on these points echoed through the centuries, as Christians wrestled with the question of when their vocation as Christians calls them to support the social order and when it calls them to change it. But through those centuries, his message of God’s universal calling also comforted many in knowing they were doing the work of God’s kingdom as they caught the fish, milked the cows, tended the crops, built the roads, changed the diapers, and maintained justice. ☒

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# “God rejoices in his works”

MARTIN LUTHER WRITES ABOUT WHAT MAKES AN HONORABLE VOCATION

Not only has God appointed such great wealth for schools and scholars, but it is honorable and divine wealth, earned in a divine and honorable estate by many glorious, good, and useful works which please God and are a service to him.

The avaricious [greedy] man, on the contrary, earns his wealth with spite (even though his works are not godless and sinful) and with hateful works, about which he cannot have a glad conscience or say that they are a service of God. For my part, I would rather earn ten gulden [gold pennies] by a work that is a service of God, than a thousand gulden by a work that is not a service of God but serves only self and Mammon...

Chancellors, city clerks, jurists [judges], and the people who hold such offices also sit in high places and help to counsel and rule, as has been said. They are in actual fact lords upon earth, even though they are not that by virtue of their own person, birth, or estate. For Daniel says that he had to do the king's work [Dan. 8:27].

And that is true: a chancellor must go about the work or business of the emperor, king, or prince; a city clerk must do the work of the council or the town.

And they do this with God and with honor, to which God adds blessing, good fortune, and success...

## MANY SERVANTS, ONE LORD

By this I do not mean to say that we should despise, reject, or do away with soldiers, fighting men, and those whose business is war. They too, when they are obedient, help with their fist to maintain peace and protect things. Every occupation has its own honor before God, as well as its own requirements and duties...

All the estates and works of God are to be praised as highly as they can be, and none despised in favor of another. For it is written...“What God does is fine and beautiful”; and again in Psalm 104[31], “God rejoices in his works.” These ideas ought to be impressed particularly by the preachers on the



“IF I AM A MINISTER OF THE WORD...” Luther preaches to the faithful, as shown on a 16th-c. altarpiece.

people from their youth up, by schoolmasters on their boys, and by parents on their children, so that they may learn well what estates and offices are God's, ordained by God, so that once they know this they will not despise or ridicule or speak evil of any one of them but hold them all in high regard and honor. That will both please God and serve the cause of peace and unity, for God is a great lord and has many kinds of servants.

“A Sermon on Keeping Children in School” (1530). From Luther's Works, vol. 46 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967.)

# Hearing God call in the midst of the world

100

250

500

750

## Vocations in the early church (100–500): Callings to a Christian life

**E**arly Christianity appealed to people of varying occupations and social status. While many early Christians were poor, even slaves, others were not; Christianity had a particular appeal to wealthy women, in whose homes churches sometimes met. In between persecutions some Christians even served in governmental positions. The early church worried about some occupations, however; those in immoral trades (like prostitution) or connected with pagan religious practices had to give up their jobs before baptism.



**What might you have been doing?** *Slave, shopkeeper, senator, aristocratic matron, bishop*

**What might you have worried about?** *How to submit your life totally to Christ and whether you would be called upon to die for him*

Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35–107) tells how Christ called him to suffering and death.

**64–late 200s: Persecution of early Christians occurs under various emperors.**

Tertullian (c. 160–225) explains the ways in which following Christ is difficult.

*Martyrdom of Perpetua* (third century) describes Perpetua parting from her family for the sake of her faith.

*Apostolic Tradition* (third or fourth century) specifies occupations Christians need to give up.

**300s: Christianity becomes the Roman Empire's official religion; monasticism begins.**

Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330–395) writes about his sister Macrina's humble life.

Augustine (354–430) rejects his former occupation and relationships after his conversion.

**400–500s: Roman Empire crumbles; monasticism grows.**

Benedict (c. 480–550) outlines both spiritual and practical aspects of living in community.

## Vocations in the Middle Ages (500–1500): Called to a religious life

**A**fter the Roman Empire fell apart, the leadership of the church continued to be largely drawn from the Roman aristocracy, even as military power became concentrated in the hands of Germanic rulers. Monasticism, originally a reaction against Christianity's increasing respectability, grew and blossomed—and became respectable itself—all over Europe. "Vocation" largely meant a calling to become a priest or a "religious" (monk or nun), and there was great concern about how Christian rulers should conduct themselves. In the age of "Christendom," believers were found in all places and social classes. Starting around 1300 Europe began to transition to a more city-based economy with a rise in trade, culture, and what would eventually be called the "middle class." At the same time, numbers of laypeople began to take their calling to serve God in their professions with a new seriousness.



**What might you have been doing?** *Nobleman or noblewoman, priest, monk or nun, farmer, skilled craftsman, beggar*

**What might you have worried about?** *Whether God was calling you to "religious life"; whether the pursuit of money and property was compatible with your faith*

Gregory I (540–604, pope 590–604) describes how pastors ought to exercise their vocation.

**By the 1100s: Monasticism dominates Western Europe. 1200s–1300s: European society becomes more urban; mendicant (begging) monastic orders begin; lay piety revived.**

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) relates the active and contemplative aspects of Christian calling.

Dante Alighieri (1235–1361) describes a journey through the afterlife that is also much concerned with this life.

William Langland (c. 1332–1386) describes a world excited and disturbed by economic growth.

Thomas à Kempis (c. 1380–1471) stresses hope and trust in God.

Through the ages Christians have produced a vast number of reflections on how God calls, whom he calls, and when and where he calls. But those writings didn't happen in a vacuum. What was the church doing? What did the economic and political worlds look like? What did people do for a living? (*Adapted by Jennifer Woodruff Tait from Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Writing on Vocation by William Placher, and other sources*)

1500

1650

1800

2014

## Vocations after the Reformation (1500–1800): *Every work a calling*

**M**artin Luther famously pronounced all honorable work a calling from God and began a tradition of Protestants reflecting on how to serve God in nonchurch employment and how best to choose an occupation. Christians continued to labor in occupations at all levels of society, with varying levels of agreement on how much social mobility is possible between those levels—and whether success in “worldly” occupations represents spiritual success as well.



**What might you have been doing?** *Ruler or government official, farmer, merchant, sailor, craftsman, coal miner, soldier, priest, pastor*

**What might you have worried about?** *How to use your calling for the common good*

### 1500s: Reformation and Counter-Reformation transform the religious landscape.

Martin Luther (1483–1516) argues that “calling” applies to all people, not just religious professionals.

Martin Bucer (1491–1551) encourages people to enter professions that will profit their neighbors.

John Calvin (1509–1564) emphasizes the role of believers as stewards of God’s goodness.

George Herbert (1593–1633) writes on how to labor faithfully, even through discouragement.

Brother Lawrence (c. 1611–1691) finds God’s love in everyday tasks.

Richard Baxter (1615–1691) urges Christians to gain worldly wisdom but use it for eternal purposes.

John Flavel (c. 1630–1691) notes the spiritual significance of earthly labors.

### Late 1600s–1700s: The Enlightenment leads people to question the influence of Christianity.

### 1700s–early 1800s: Industrial Revolution transforms the vocational landscape.

John Wesley (1703–1791) encourages his followers to live disciplined spiritual and social lives.

## Vocations from 1800 to the present: *Callings in a technological world*

**T**he Industrial Revolution moved the site of many people’s labor from country to city and from home to factory. Christians wrestled with how to deal with the poverty, crime, and unrest that often resulted—in the face of a social order that frequently seemed hostile to Christianity. They also wondered whether meaningful work was still possible in an increasingly mechanized and computerized society. A “faith at work” movement emerged in which both clergy and laity struggled with how to equip church members to find meaning in their work.



**What might you have been doing?** *Factory or service worker, writer, executive, clergyman, office worker*

**What might you have worried about?** *How to choose the right job, how to be faithful to Christ in the workplace*

### 1800s: Modern “Catholic social teaching” and the Protestant “Social Gospel” emerge.

Pope Leo XIII (pope 1878–1903) calls for employers to respect laborers and laborers to respect themselves.

### c. 1900: First wave of the “faith at work” movement begins.

Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918) urges churches not to monopolize the “best and the brightest” as clergy.

Charles Sheldon (1857–1946) asks, “What would Jesus do?”

Bruce Barton (1886–1967) describes Jesus as “the world’s greatest business executive.”

Dorothy L. Sayers (1893–1957) urges excellence in everyday work.

### 1940–60s: Second wave of the “faith at work” movement begins.

Elton Trueblood (1900–1994) seeks “whole-life Christians.”

Sam Shoemaker (1893–1963) takes the church to the world.

Dorothy Day (1897–1980) calls for lives of radical hospitality.

Thomas Merton (1915–1968) writes about seeking God in darkness and doubt.

*Gaudium et spes* (1965) and other Vatican II documents discuss the dignity of all people’s callings.

### 1980s–present: Third wave of the “faith at work” movement takes hold; secular career counseling flourishes; “global world” is interconnected technologically and economically.



# Doing much good in the world

THE REFORMED TRADITION EMPHASIZED LABORING IN ONE'S CALLING FOR GOD AND FOR NEIGHBOR

*Jordan J. Ballor*

**WE'VE ALL DONE IT:** we meet someone new, and we immediately ask, "What do you do?" In return we expect a job title—teacher, accountant, salesperson. In today's social shorthand, job = vocation = identity. But on the eve of the Reformation, the idea of vocation had a far different significance.

At the time that the young Martin Luther entered the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt in Germany in 1505, the idea of a specific calling or vocation was largely restricted to religious and churchly endeavors: monks, nuns, priests, bishops. Other jobs were just that—jobs.

Luther questioned a system that seemingly segregated those seeking to live holy and chaste lives into small enclaves, separate from the larger world (see "Liberating those who work," pp. 20–22). He argued that all Christians are called to follow God; there are not two distinct classes of callings, one for the more spiritually focused and the other for profane, worldly pursuits. Instead Christians live and work in family, church, and government: "The first government is that of the house, out of which come people. The second is the ruling of the city, that is, lands, people, princes, and lords, which we call worldly government. There everything



**FISHING FOR SOULS** *Left:* This painting uses an image of everyday work for a spiritual purpose.

**TRUST GOD, READ MUCH** *Right:* Calvin ponders a book in his study.

is given—children, property, money, beasts, etc. The house must build this; the city must guard, protect, and defend it. Then comes the third thing, God’s own house and city, that is, the Church which must have people from the house and protection and defense from the city.” The Christian calling encompasses these three institutions, which are united in “the common order of Christian love.”

### KINGS AND PLUMBERS

Later Protestant reformers (in the Reformation’s “magisterial” or “main-line” strain found in the Lutheran and Reformed traditions) took this basic perspective—vocation is relevant to all Christians—and made it the foundation of a whole new “take” on doing one’s job.

But magisterial Reformers made it clear that even though all jobs are important, a hierarchy of callings according to worldly standards still remains: different orderings of authority and responsibilities through-

out the different parts of society. Kings are not peasants, and magistrates are not plumbers.

In this they differed from more “radical” reformers (Anabaptists and their kin) who usually rejected worldly notions of hierarchy or rank, drawing a sharp line between the church and the world and emphasizing unity, charity, and equality among God’s people.

Genevan reformer John Calvin (1509–1564) emphasized the universality of Christ’s lordship and the corresponding mandate for all believers to act as responsible stewards in God’s world. While today we connect Calvin’s belief in Christ’s lordship with his teaching that God sovereignly predestined our salvation, his arguments also had implications for the job market.

The transplanted Frenchman and lawyer-turned-pastor agreed with Luther: God calls all believers, regardless of whether they are clergy or laypeople, to follow him in their vocations. But as he tried to reform Geneva, Calvin strongly resisted more “radical” efforts that might subvert social order and peace. And he quite comfortably distinguished between different offices and responsibilities *within* the church: minister, elder, deacon, and doctor (or “teacher”).



## John Calvin reminds readers to keep their eyes fixed on God’s guidance

**I**t is enough if we know that the Lord’s calling is in everything the beginning and foundation of well-doing. And if there is anyone who will not direct himself to it, he will never hold to the straight path in his duties. Perhaps, sometimes, he could contrive something laudable in appearance; but whatever it may be in the eyes of men, it will be rejected before God’s throne. Besides, there will be no harmony among the several parts of his life.

Accordingly, your life will then be best ordered when it is directed to this goal. For no one, impelled by his own rashness, will attempt more than his calling will permit, because he will know that it is not lawful to exceed its bounds. A man of obscure station will lead a private life ungrudgingly so as not to leave the rank in which he has been placed by God.

Again, it will be no slight relief from cares, labors, troubles, and other burdens for a man to know that God is his guide in all these things. The magistrate will discharge his functions more willingly; the head of the household will confine himself to his duty; each man will bear and swallow the discomforts, vexations, weariness, and anxieties in his way of life, when he has been persuaded that the burden was laid upon him by God.

From this will arise also a singular consolation: that no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God’s sight. (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 3, ch. 10.6)

POURTRAIT OF JOHN CALVIN—(1509–64), FRENCH THEOLOGIAN AND REFORMER (OIL ON CANVAS), FRENCH SCHOOL, (16TH CENTURY) / SOCIÉTÉ DE L’HISTOIRE DU PROTESTANTISME FRANÇAIS, PARIS / GIRAUDON / BRIDGEMAN IMAGES



**“ENTER THE BEST PROFESSION”** Martin Bucer urged his readers to consider their neighbors’ good.

## Richard Baxter encourages believers to help as many people as they can through their work

**O** Christians! Go on in doing good to all men with cheerfulness, for it all tendeth to make up the body of Christ, and to prepare for that glorious state and day; every soul you convert, every brick that you lay in the building, tendeth to make up the house and city of God.

But as all motion and action is first upon the nearest object, so must ours; and doing good must be in order: first we must begin at home and with our own souls and lives; and then to our nearest relations, and friends, and acquaintance, and neighbours; and then to our societies, church, and kingdom, and all the world. But mark that the order of execution, and the order of estimate and intention, differ. Though God set up lights so small as will serve but for one room, and though we must begin at home, we must far more esteem and desire the good of multitudes, of city, and church, and commonwealth; and must set no bounds to our endeavours, but what God and disability set.

(Richard Baxter, *How to Do Good to Many*, 1682)

Calvin thus wrote in his *Institutes*, “Each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wander about throughout life.” Distinctions between callings have to do with considerations of worldly authority and responsibility, but are not an indication of more or less worth in God’s sight.

For Calvin, as for Luther, the justification of all believers by grace through faith undercut any basis for arrogance. Whether given little authority or much, everyone is accountable to God, and greater authority results in greater accountability (Luke 12:48).

Calvin’s friend and contemporary Martin Bucer (1491–1551) articulated, defended, and promoted this perspective on vocation. Bucer, a Dominican monk turned Protestant pastor, spent most of his life in Strausbourg until conflict drove him into England in exile in 1549. There he constantly complained about the food and the endless cold—at one point asking his wife to send him a stove. While he was trying to warm up, he served as Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge.

For Bucer the Christian’s calling meant a responsibility under God, directed toward promoting the good of others. Christians must figure out for themselves how to best express Christ’s love for their neighbors amid a variety of competing responsibilities, differing depending on social station.

Christian ministers need to proclaim the gospel and administer the sacraments—but farmers also have to tend to their crops, parents to raise and nurture their children, and civil authorities to promote justice and punish evildoers. As Bucer put it, “Children should be encouraged to enter the best profession, and the best profession is the one which brings most profit to neighbors.”

By those standards he judged that “the spiritual ministry and the secular authority” [i.e. government] are the most important, followed by “agriculture, cattle-raising, and the necessary occupations” involved in these pursuits. So: be a pastor or government official if you could—but if not, you might want to try farming.

In this way the doctrine of vocation increasingly demands sustained attention to how society is set up and the different jobs people do. Judgments must be made about how each calling contributes to the common good and whether there are better ways of serving and of bringing the “most profit” to others. This led Bucer to formulate a basic rule: “The more a profession is useful to

**SERVING GOD AT HOME. . . .** *Right:* Baxter addressed Puritan families like this one with his writings.

**. . . AND AT WORK** *Below:* Everyday work in the 17th c. and the 18th c. might include church bell-hanging.

the needs of the general neighborhood and furthering the profit of the whole community, the more that profession is honorable and Christian and should be cheerfully entered or accepted by each."

### SAILING AND FARMING

Thinking about vocation this way did more than make Christians think about the duties appropriate to callings ranging from preaching to teaching to herding cows. It also impressed all of life and society with divine significance. No work, even sweeping floors, is too menial to be of service to others and therefore to be of service to God (see "Making drudgery divine?," p. 31).

Since all types of work have value, then all people are also of value to God and ultimately to society. Puritan John Flavel (c. 1630–1691), for example, endeavored to find the spiritual significance of labors ranging from seafaring to farming. Seafaring particularly occupied his mind as he ministered at Dartmouth, a bustling seaport. He had occasion to reflect on the truth of his workplace observations when he took a voyage by sea to London that narrowly avoided shipwreck. (The storm was said to have ended when Flavel offered fervent prayers.)

In his work *Navigation Spiritualized* (1664), Flavel noted that sailors were historically subject to apostasy and bad morals. Yet even those sailors are within the realm of Christ's lordship and calling. "O what a marvelous work of God is here!" exclaimed Flavel, "that men should be kept in a poor, weak vessel, upon the wild, and stormy ocean, where the wind hath its full stroke upon them, and they are driven before it, as a wreck upon the seas; yet, I say, that God should preserve you there, is a work of infinite goodness and power."

Likewise in his *Husbandry Spiritualized* (1669), Flavel sought "the heavenly use of earthly things" so much that he was impelled "to beg that God, who instructeth the husbandman [farmer] in his civil calling, to teach him wisdom spiritually to improve it."

The things of this world have a significance and validity because of their status as aspects of God's good creation. The Christian is called to live in the midst of the world and not to flee from it. And yet Calvin, Bucer, and Flavel all realized that spiritual realities must take priority. Material blessings should be used for eternal good.



But that does not mean there is no reason for material blessings—as many learned from the writings of Puritan pastor, preacher, prolific author, and occasional prisoner of the English crown, Richard Baxter (1615–1691). In over 160 books, he touched on all aspects of pastoral care, moral theology, and practical Christian living. Baxter argued that the Christian realizes his or her calling in the world through four main structures: personal ethics, household management (the older meaning of the word *economics*), ecclesiastical ministry, and civil government.

Baxter was largely self-taught and extremely well read. His long ministry at Kidderminster provided



him ample opportunity to instruct his flock in true doctrine and advise them in Christian living. Much of his guidance involved questions of how to serve God best amid the vagaries of life—in one’s job and outside of it. Baxter’s advice was rigorous and thorough.

In his *A Christian Directory*, a four-volume collection of moral instruction, Baxter discussed 27 directions for “faithfully serving Christ, and doing good.” He instructed Christians to “study to do good, and make it the trade or business of your lives”—including in trade or business.

Reflecting on Galatians 6:10 (“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people”), Baxter emphasized the responsibility to care for physical needs in service of spiritual realities. In this way Christians would gain practical insight into how the world works. “He that will do much good in the world, must be furnished with considerable abilities, especially prudence and skill in knowing when, and to whom, and how to do it... Without this, he will do more harm than good.” Thus Christians must seek to become knowledgeable in human arts and sciences.


But worldly wisdom does not stop there; it is to be used to make an eternal impact. “Do as much good as you are able to men’s bodies, in order to [i.e. for] the greater good of souls,” urged Baxter. “God hath so

**TWO KINDS OF WORK?** Peasant farmers often came into conflict with mercenary soldiers who wanted their crops and animals in the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648).

placed the soul in the body, that good or evil shall make its entrance by the bodily sense to the soul.”

### A REMEDY FOR RESTLESSNESS?

All these writers, as they reflected on Christian calling, sought to properly balance the things of heaven and earth. They accepted all morally permissible forms of work and service as valid, even as they recognized the complexities of an increasingly diverse social order.

Calvin noted that God assigns duties to different callings as a remedy for “the boiling restlessness of the human mind, the fickleness with which it is borne here and there, its eagerness to hold opposites at one time in its grasp, its ambition.” As doctrinal confessions shifted, wars tore apart the European continent, and a new “middle class” of artisans and merchants arose, these ideas of vocation provided a sense of assurance during much uncertainty. They proved to be dynamic and adaptable in succeeding centuries as well. 

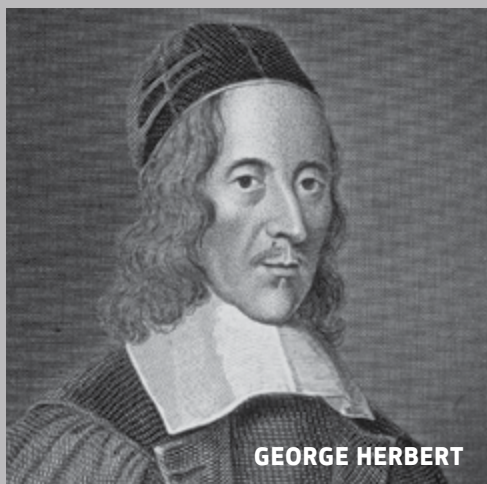
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WERNER SCHUCH GERMAN (1843–1918) TWO RIDERS OF THE THIRTY YEARS WAR AND FARMERS, 1881 OIL ON CANVAS 21 X 27 3/4 IN. THE GROHMANN MUSEUM COLLECTION AT MILWAUKEE SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING



# Making drudgery divine?

GEORGE HERBERT WRITES OF DOING ALL THINGS FOR CHRIST—AND THE DISCOURAGEMENT WHEN DOING ALL THINGS SEEMS TO NOT BE ENOUGH



## THE ELIXIR

Teach me, my God and King,  
In all things thee to see,  
And what I do in any thing,  
To do it as for thee:

Not rudely, as a beast,  
To run into an action;  
But still to make thee prepossessed [put first],  
And give it his perfection.

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

All may of thee partake:  
Nothing can be so mean,  
Which with this tincture<sup>1</sup> (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.

## THE COLLAR

I struck the board [table], and cried, "No more.

I will abroad.

What? shall I ever sigh and pine?

My lines and life are free; free as the road,

Loose as the wind, as large as store.

Shall I be still in suit?

Have I no harvest but a thorn

To let me blood, and not restore

What I have lost with cordial fruit?

Sure there was wine

Before my sighs did dry it: there was corn

Before my tears did drown it.

Is the year only lost to me?

Have I no bays [gatherings of flowers] to crown it?

No flowers, no garlands gay? all blasted?

All wasted?

Not so, my heart: but there is fruit,

And thou hast hands.

Recover all thy sigh-blown age

On double pleasures: leave thy cold dispute

Of what is fit, and not. Forsake thy cage,

Thy rope of sands,

Which petty thoughts have made, and made to thee

Good cable [rope], to enforce and draw,

And be thy law,

While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.

Away; take heed:

I will abroad.

Call in thy death's head there: tie up thy fears.

He that forbears

To suit and serve his need,

Deserves his load."

But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild

At every word,

Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Child:*

And I replied, *My Lord.*

From *The Temple* (1633). Spelling and punctuation modernized.

<sup>1</sup> A "tincture" is a small amount that is added to affect the whole.



# About God's business

JOHN WESLEY ENCOURAGED METHODISTS TO SEEK HOLINESS OF HEART AND LIFE IN WAYS THAT ALSO TRANSFORMED THEIR SECULAR VOCATIONS

*Chris Armstrong*

IN 2012 during the live opening ceremony of the London Olympics, before millions of worldwide viewers England's pastoral island paradise emerged to the wafting strains of British composer Edward Elgar. But suddenly the paradise was shattered.

A group of belching smokestacks arose accompanied by violent drumming and harsh music. The Industrial Revolution had arrived. Legions of lock-step laborers under the command of black-coated factory owners overran the green land. TV commentators gleefully quoted poet William Blake, describing how the Industrial Revolution's "Satanic mills" had brutalized the landscape and crushed workers. The ceremony's creator, they told viewers, had titled this section "Pandemonium," after the capital city of hell in Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

This picture has many roots in English history, from Blake himself to J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, where all the villains are industrialists with minds "of metal and wheels." One of those roots is a book from

**FROM FARMS TO FACTORIES** Early 20th-c. workers drag a red-hot iron block across a factory floor, in a kind of work unimaginable 150 years before.

1949. With the warlike fruit of the military-industrial complex still a stench in the world's nostrils, French philosopher and historian Elie Halévy wrote a history of England telling how John Wesley and the Methodists emerged in the very cradle of the Industrial Revolution and changed the English landscape forever—on the side, Halévy believed, of the industrialists.

## PIE IN THE SKY BY AND BY?

Methodism was born in the late 1730s in the middle of political and economic crisis, working-class strikes, and riots. In the midst of these crises, Halévy argued, middle-class Methodist leaders led their working-class devotees to seek spiritual, rather than temporal, solutions to the difficulties they faced—turning the minds of the new converts away from the oppressive conditions in which they worked and toward their eternal destinies.

JOSEF JÜNGER (AFTER KAMPF), GERMAN (c. 1880–c. 1949) WORKERS DRAGGING A RED-HOT IRON PIECE, c. 1920 OIL ON CANVAS 31 3/4 X 23 3/4 IN. THE GROHMANN MUSEUM COLLECTION AT MILWAUKEE SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING

**LISTEN UP, FOLKS** John Wesley's advice to his followers had implications for their souls and their bodies.

At the same time, Halévy made no bones about it: Methodism changed everything about English society. The movement's bedrock morality and voluntary obedience to a freely constituted religious organization seeped into all the institutions and ideas of England—her science, art, literature, education, and political debates—and contributed to an unprecedented social stability that kept England from the kind of bloody revolution that France experienced. The movement's influence even successfully jumped fences into the Presbyterians and Baptists and the venerable, wealthy, established state Church of England.

But as it did so, Halévy's tale went, Methodism lost something. As it grew in influence, Methodism moved increasingly into the center of successful society, where its adherents found no contradiction between moral growth and commercial gain. In achieving commercial gain, Methodism lost its working-class soul and the desire to protest against black-coated factory owners.

Or did it? That influential portrait of the movement was flawed in several important ways that go to the heart of the Methodist theology of vocation.

First of all, Methodism was not a movement from the top down (with the possible exception of John Wesley himself, a man of strong personality and even stronger desire for order). It was a movement from the bottom up.

Many early Methodist leaders came from the working classes. Rank-and-file Methodists had a strong sense of ownership of the movement's institutions, including class and band meetings and Sunday schools, in which working folk were active participants and leaders. They enjoyed a kind of spiritual—and for a while gender—egalitarianism that spurred them to lead a wide array of efforts in religious and social reform, including Sabbath observance, Bible distribution, and, perhaps most crucially, the abolition of the British slave trade.

On any given Sunday, the great majority of Methodist pulpits were occupied by local preachers “on the plan”—that is, preaching every few weeks, but still laboring in their secular vocations as well. In this the movement's leadership reflected its membership, nearly 60 percent of whom were skilled craftspeople—workers who enjoyed relative independence and sought decency and self-respect in their work and social lives.

The rules of the land allowed “nonconforming” churches to operate in the very shadow of the established Church of England. Methodism thrived there as a voluntary association freely supported by its members, who resembled sturdy, self-reliant English workers more than the cowed factory slaves some twentieth-century labor historians took them to be.



Even famous Methodist sermons preaching responsibility and lecturing against drunkenness—sermons attacked by later historians as simply creating docile, sober, industrious factory men—were usually not imposed from above. Most arose from below as Methodists, finding that responsibility had transformed their own lives, preached it to others.

### **EARN, SAVE, AND GIVE**

Second, working-class Methodists very quickly started to move up the economic ladder themselves. Even in Wesley's own lifetime were signs that the values of his movement were assisting members temporarily as well as spiritually—so much so that Wesley had to remind them on occasion that his famous advice to “earn all you can” and “save all you can” had a third component, “give all you can.”

Wesley himself lived his entire life on the same salary he had received as a fellow of Lincoln College, £28 a year, and devoted the profits from his books over and above that to advancing the Methodist movement and assisting its members. In his eighties he preached a sermon in which he observed with great regret that Methodists had almost universally failed to “give all you can.” He claimed his fears had come to pass: the love of money had reared up and stolen away much of the energy and focus of many Methodists.



## TURNING CONFUSION TO ORDER

Left: A Victorian farmer and his family attend Sunday worship.

improvidence to foresight, and sloth to industry.”

All this protection of both order and freedom within society would support “that great end, the Christianizing of the world.”

That this freedom and ambition of the Methodists took social and economic forms should not surprise us. Famously many of the miners of Cornwall—even mine bosses—were Methodist lay preachers, whose communal cohesion and Christian virtues changed the way they did business with other workers and with management.

In fact, Methodist societies attracted many of their worshippers precisely through their offer of a more purposeful, disciplined way of life. Workers responded partly because they found the industriousness and financial prudence preached by the movement to be a solid means for self-improvement and material success.

The liberty, fellowship, discipline, and emphasis on personal moral responsibility of the large and growing Methodist movement transformed the economic sphere and ensured individual Methodists a central and successful place in the new industrial economy. At some times, when faced with injustice, Methodists did resist the new industrial order. But at many other times, they embraced it—for *Methodist reasons*.

## GIN, TAXES, AND LUXURY

These reasons stemmed, of course, from John Wesley’s teachings. In many respects John Wesley had the sensibility of a businessman. The world-engaging Anglicanism of his father, the hard-working, strictly disciplined Puritanism of his mother, and his Oxford education all joined together to mold a leader of intense piety, fevered activism, and organizational genius.

Wesley did not often explicitly turn his enterprising genius from the task of shaping the church to that of shaping the economic and political life of the nation. But the influence of his ideas extended into the political realm, pressuring politicians to address the conditions that were creating economic distress in

person in his or her own salvation. We hear economic as well as political results of this theology in early nineteenth-century Methodist theologian Richard Watson, who argued: “A religious man must not become a factious man and must avoid all association with low and violent men, the rabble of a State and their designing leaders.” Instead, “true Christianity, when applied by a faithful Christian labourer,” was to turn darkness “into light, confusion to order, shamelessness to character, squalidness to decency, prodigality to frugality,

## John Wesley argues that Methodists should be engaged in “honest industry”

**I**t is the bounden duty of all who are engaged in worldly business to observe that first and great rule of Christian wisdom with respect to money, “Gain all you can.” Gain all you can by honest industry. Use all possible diligence in your calling. Lose no time. If you understand yourself and your relation to God and man... [i]f you understand your particular calling as you ought, you will have no time that hangs upon your hands... Never leave anything till tomorrow, which you can do to-day. And do it as well as possible. Do not sleep or yawn over it: Put your whole strength to the work. Spare no pains...

But let not any man imagine that he has done anything, barely by going thus far, by “gaining and saving all he can,” if he were to stop here... As you yourself are not your own, but his, such is, likewise, all that you enjoy. Such is your soul and your body, not your own, but God’s... If you desire to be a faithful and a wise steward... first, provide things needful for yourself; food to eat, raiment to put on, whatever nature moderately requires... Secondly, provide these for your wife, your children, your servants, or any others who pertain to your household. If when this is done there be an overplus left, then “do good to them that are of the household of faith.” If there be an overplus still, “as you have opportunity, do good unto all men.”... [A]ll that is laid out in this manner is really given to God... Waste nothing, living or dying, on sin or folly, whether for yourself or your children;—and then, give all you can, or, in other words, give all you have to God.



VICTORIAN SUNDAY MORNING—ANN ROMAN PICTURE LIBRARY, LONDON. GREAT BRITAIN/PIPART RESOURCE, IVY J.C. WOMEN EMBROIDERING, 1904 OIL ON CANVAS 35 3/4 X 49 1/4 IN. THE GROHMANN MUSEUM COLLECTION AT MILWAUKEE SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING



CORNELIUS VREEDENBURGH, DUTCH (1880–1946) A REED CUTTER. OIL ON CANVAS ON BOARD 20 X 30 IN. THE GROHMANN MUSEUM COLLECTION AT MILWAUKEE SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING

England, such as enclosure of farmlands and wasteful diversion of resources into luxuries. In his “Thoughts on the Present Scarcity of Provisions,” for instance, he claimed that the poor were hungry because of the influence of “[gin] distilling, taxes, and luxury.”

Although he was deeply concerned about the love of money becoming an idol, damaging people’s relationships with God and others, Wesley was not averse to promoting economic work in the secular world as a means to promote human thriving. He taught his people that when well handled by Christians, money could become food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, clothing for the naked, rest for the traveler, support for the widow and the orphan, defense for the oppressed, health for the sick, even life for the dying.

True, Wesley’s impulse to help believers thrive economically and create better social structures was secondary to his impulse to see individual hearts transformed. But he famously did not believe that any such thing as a “solitary Christianity” could exist.

Wesley addressed communal, organizational forms from the beginning of his ministry, creating structures that disciplined people and created community. Those structures—from “societies,” which encompassed all Methodists in a given area, down to “bands,” which met as small groups focused on in-depth spiritual growth—gave people accountability and help as they journeyed toward wholeness.

Methodist structures taught people not only the chief doctrines of the Christian faith, but also how to live well in all the dimensions of their lives. They provided secure communities in a world in which industrialism and urbanization were tearing apart old social structures. They taught a new ethic of love and social responsibility.

**WORK AT HOME AND IN THE FIELD** Before the Industrial Revolution, work often looked more like the jobs done in this embroidery workshop (*above left*) and by this reed cutter (*above right*) than like the pictures on pp. 32 and 36. Methodist structures helped many people navigate the transition.

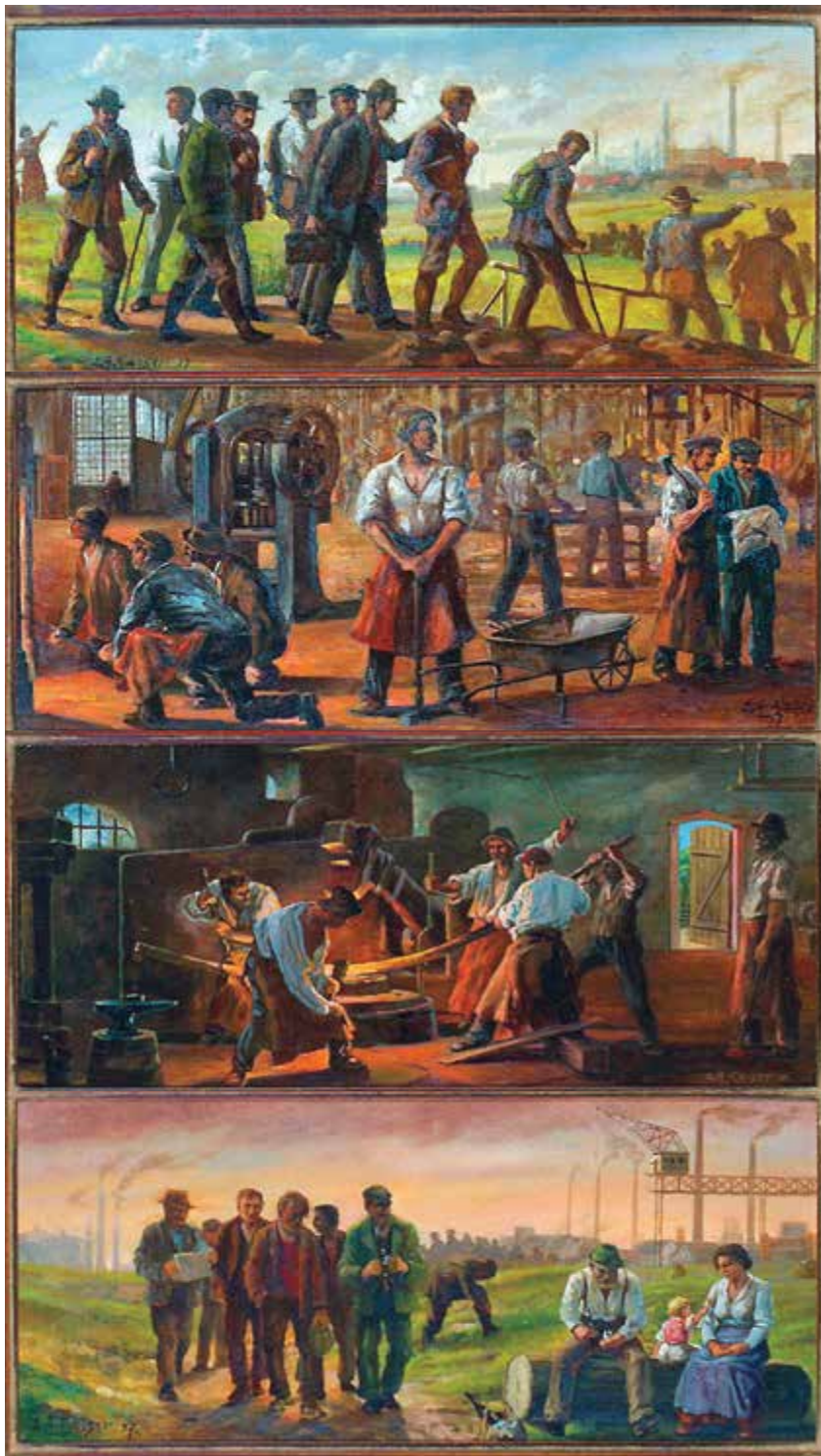
And they taught that true holiness was not a matter simply of what goes on inside the heart—it must be externalized in service to others through works of mercy and even honest business practices: refusing to lend money at unreasonable rates or to borrow when the ability to pay back is uncertain. In fact, the origin of the Methodist small groups known as “class meetings” was financial, not theological—they met as a way of easily collecting from each member their weekly contribution for the relief of the poor.

The heart and soul of Wesley’s vocational teaching was his refusal to abstract spiritual lives from material lives. So he provided a pattern of “this-worldly asceticism” not just applicable to prayer closets or churches. He taught that holiness healed and redirected disordered “tempers,” and he encouraged his people to live in ways marked by integrity and authenticity. As their hearts were transformed, their work soon followed.

### AN ETHIC OF LOVE TRANSFORMED

Wesley’s ministry-long conviction was that sanctification—holiness of heart and life, having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked—was the epitome of Christianity, the “house” into which the porch of repentance and the door of justification by faith led. Holiness was a love for God first and foremost and an active love for others pouring out from that.

Wesley understood that how people work is a significant part of how they love others. So, following a Lord who healed bodies as well as souls, he gave medical



**LINE UP HERE** This 20th-c. series of paintings shows workers heading for their daily factory labor, working at machines, and heading home.

square. Wesley emphasized that there are many “means of grace,” many spiritual disciplines to practice to become better people.

His most common list of those means of grace included “works of piety”: prayer, searching the Scriptures, fasting, the Eucharist, and “Christian conferencing” (meeting together as believers). But he also included “works of mercy” on the list. Feeding the hungry and clothing the naked were spiritual disciplines for Wesley, not only social acts.

### ON EARTH AS IN HEAVEN

To writers such as Halévy, and perhaps to the planners of the London Olympics’ opening ceremony, any Christian movement worth its salt should have risen with a robust socialist response to the forces of industrial capitalism. Believers should have stood against the injustices of new economic developments, rather than participating willingly in those developments and establishing virtues related to productive work.

But that is not what happened with the early Methodists. While they addressed the social fallout of the new industrial realities, they also disciplined people in ways that did not begin and end in heaven, but on earth. From the beginning Wesley believed that evangelism must be accompanied by hard work, education, thrift, and grassroots leadership if converts were to be prepared for both spiritual and social-economic fruitfulness.

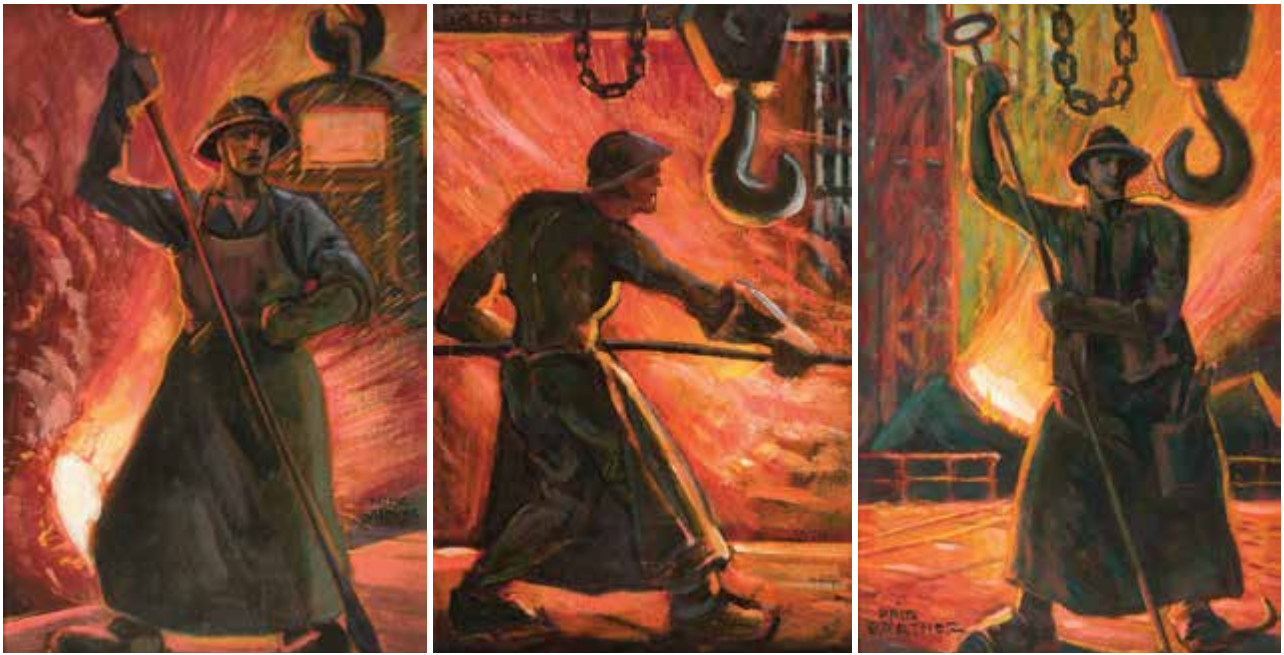
Holiness became a way to go deeper in the world, not to stand against and apart from it. This did not satisfy Methodism’s critics. But it did prepare

legions of Christians for this-worldly vocations, even while also preparing them for heaven. ☐

*Chris Armstrong is senior editor of Christian History and director of the Wheaton Institute for Faith and Vocation. For more on this topic, see “Eating bread with widows and orphans” in Christian History issue 104.*

advice, published folk and herbal remedies for the use of his people, and started dispensaries to distribute medicines.

He taught a salvation that was not just a “way to heaven” but also a “way on earth”: get the heart in order, and good, ethical actions will follow—in the marketplace as well as the church, home, and public



# What would Jesus do?

SNAPSHOTS FROM THE BOOK *GOD AT WORK: THE HISTORY AND PROMISE OF THE FAITH AT WORK MOVEMENT*

David W. Miller

*IN 1995 DAVID W. MILLER SHOCKED his friends in the corporate world when he left a successful career in international finance to study theology. He eventually became an expert on how Christians have tried to relate their Sunday faith to their Monday workplace over the past 150 years. Here are excerpts from Miller's book and a glimpse into his story. (Our editor's linking text is in italics.)*

About a hundred years ago, a businessman and a pastor each blew the clarion call for integrating Sunday and Monday. The businessman was interested in what lessons he could find in his faith to help his work. The pastor was interested in what lessons he could find in his faith to help society.

Bruce Barton, a successful New York advertising executive and later a U.S. congressman, read the Bible for the first time and discovered that Jesus was not a mild, meek, domesticated God whose relevance is relegated to quiet once-a-week visits. Rather, Jesus was a strong, vibrant being who lived in the rough and tumble of daily life, who assembled a management team made of both winners and losers, and who built an organization from scratch that has outlasted most other known businesses, governments, and societies.

**IN THE FIERY FURNACE** Many 20th-c. writers wondered what Jesus had to say to people like these steelworkers.

Walter Rauschenbusch, a pastor in New York's "Hell's Kitchen" [at the time a particularly dangerous slum] for years and later a theologian, also looked at Jesus differently than did many of his day. He, too, saw Jesus as a vibrant figure, someone who made some rather specific demands of his followers in the here and now.

## HOW DO WE HELP THE POOR?

*Rauschenbusch (1861–1918) and Barton (1886–1967) both operated against a background of great social and economic change, where factories and their mass-production assembly lines became the center of employment for many. Rauschenbusch's efforts came first: he helped spark the Protestant "Social Gospel" movement, which tried to figure out Christian approaches to social concerns like poverty and drunkenness.*

Assembly lines created a voracious appetite for low-cost labor, often drawing women and children into dangerous, monotonous jobs with long hours. . . . This demand for labor in the cities where the factories were situated caused huge social unrest both in these cities

and in the rural towns the workers left behind. The cities did not have the infrastructure or social services to absorb the influx of workers, and the family unit was often torn apart as the historic models of family farms and small family businesses were forever changed. City pastors were overwhelmed with new levels of affluence in their congregations, as well as with increasing levels of poverty, crime, alcoholism, hunger, and spiritual thirst.

*Rauschenbusch wanted the church to address these issues in part by developing Christian workers, rather than grabbing the "best and the brightest" for pastoral careers.*

He rejected the typical concept of a good layman who attends church, tithes, and is a member of church committees doing good works. Instead, he argued, "What we want is young men who will carry the determination to live consecrated lives into the workshop and office and clear a track for their determination by revolutionizing the conduct of business in which they are engaged."

### GIDEON BIBLES AND BESTSELLERS

*Rauschenbusch was far from the only person thinking about these issues. At the same time, a large number of lay-led special-purpose groups sprang up to help people evangelize and live Christian lives in their workplaces. One is still instantly familiar to anyone who has ever looked in their hotel-room nightstand and found a Bible: the Gideons. In addition, writers turned their attention to what Jesus might*



*do if faced with the workplace crises of the late 1800s. One was pastor Charles Sheldon, who wrote the runaway best-seller *In His Steps* in 1896.*

What began as a simple sermon series in Topeka, Kansas, asking what would happen if people really modeled their lives on Jesus turned into a mass-marketed book phenomenon paralleling the popularity of today's *Purpose-Driven Life*...

The basic thesis of the book [was] for people to ask, "What would Jesus do?" in response to any and all modern issues that Christians might encounter. Indeed, *In His Steps* is the literary forerunner of the modern popularity of WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) bracelets and t-shirts. Sheldon's book was a clarion call to Christian social action to transform one's community, with particular emphasis on the workplace.

*Advertising executive Barton's book, *The Man Nobody Knows* (1925), also became a "runaway bestseller." Barton, a pastor's kid from Tennessee, grew up to become—among other things—the creator of the advertising character Betty Crocker and a prolific author.*

Barton bemoaned that the church had distorted the image of Jesus, portraying him as sissified, sorrowful, meek, and lowly, whereas his reading of the Gospels revealed a vibrant, strong, life-enjoying, and popular leader. He noted that Jesus "picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world."

Barton wrote *The Man Nobody Knows* to "tell the story of the founder

## Dorothy L. Sayers argues for excellence in daily work

In nothing has the Church so lost Her hold on reality as in Her failure to understand and respect the secular vocation. She has allowed work and religion to become separate departments, and is astonished to find that, as a result, the secular work of the world is turned to purely selfish and destructive ends, and that the greater part of the world's intelligent workers have become irreligious, or at least, uninterested in religion.

But is it astonishing? How can any one remain interested in a religion which seems to have no concern with nine-tenths of his life? The Church's approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him not to be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours, and to come to church on Sundays. What the Church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables.

Church by all means, and decent forms of amusement, certainly—but what use is all that if in the very center of his life and occupation he is insulting God with bad carpentry? No crooked table legs or ill-fitting drawers ever, I dare swear, came out of the carpenter's shop at Nazareth. Nor, if they did, could anyone believe that they were made by the same hand that made Heaven and earth. No piety in the worker will compensate for work that is not true to itself; for any work that is untrue to its own technique is a living lie. ("Why Work?," essay, 1942)



**A WELL-MADE INSTRUMENT** *Left: A carpenter works in a piano factory.*

**LINES AND LINES OF MACHINES** *Right: Garment-making in the early 1900s was done in factories, not the in-home workshops of a century before.*

**HARD AT WORK** *Below right: Bruce Barton wanted Americans to think of Jesus as an organizational genius.*

of the modern business," in hopes that "every business man will read it and send it to his partners and salesmen" as a means to spread Christian culture throughout the world. . . . [It struck] a chord with those whose church experience echoed Barton's and with those who had never considered Jesus as having any relevance to the business world.

*Baptist preacher, frequent traveling lecturer, and former lawyer Russell Conwell (1843–1925) also spread a popular message about Christians, vocation, and money.*

His signature speech, "Acres of Diamonds," was given more than 6,000 times and reached tens of thousands of listeners. Its central theme was that wealth could be found where we are planted and not in far-away exotic places. Moreover, he stressed that people should become wealthy: "I say you ought to be rich; you have no right to be poor." Conwell argued that people ought to be rich because money has power—power to pay scholarships for poor people, to build hospitals and schools, and to take care of one's family. Faithful to his teachings, Conwell died with little money to his name, having used his fame and money to fund worthy causes; his particular interest in education for the poor led to his vision of what later became Temple University.

## PRAYER, NOT COCKTAILS

*In the twentieth century, authors like Quaker Elton Trueblood (1900–1994), "a noted philosopher, theologian, writer, and speaker," inaugurated a second "wave" of the faith at work movement. Trueblood urged people to be "full-life Christians."*

. . . [He noted] that commercial travelers had formed the Gideon Society, that many cities had associations of Christian businessmen, that even a society of Christian professors had been formed, and that in Washington, D.C., a small group of legislators met regularly to pray. What all of these groups had in common, he concluded, was that they came to look upon their work as a holy calling. . . . [H]e wrote, "This movement is small, and seems to have little chance in a city where the normal basis of a meeting is not prayer but a cocktail party, yet it is a step in the right direction in which we must turn if our common life is to escape ultimate decay."



*Trueblood was not alone. In 1954 the Second World Council of Churches Assembly endorsed the expression of faith in the workplace.*

"[T]he real battles of the faith today are being fought in factories, shops, offices and farms, in political parties and government agencies, in countless homes, in the press, radio and television, in the relationship of nations. Very often it is said that the Church should go into these spheres; but the fact is, that the Church is already in these spheres in the persons of the laity. . . . It is the laity who draw together work and worship."

*Episcopal clergyman Sam Shoemaker (1893–1963) pastored churches in New York City and Pittsburgh, and as a "master of start-ups" influenced Alcoholics Anonymous. He founded the magazine Faith at Work in 1956, which "contained engaging stories of how businesspeople in all walks of life relied on their faith for inspiration and motivation." In 1955 Shoemaker launched the "Pittsburgh*



**LOOK WHAT WE'VE GOT** A 1950s family greets a new machine for their shop.

*Experiment” to bring the church into the workplace in a tangible way.*

Instead of basing the Pittsburgh Experiment staff and events in the church building, Shoemaker chose space in a financial office building in the heart of the business district. From there, he hosted, coordinated, and initiated a steady flow of lunches, discussion groups, and workshops. Each of these adhered to a basic guiding principle: “apply your Christianity to your job.”

Shoemaker was convinced that God enters the business world in two ways: through converted men and women whose hearts God has changed and who carry God’s spirit with them wherever they go and through human relations that are different because God has become a third party to them. So effective was the Pittsburgh Experiment that it was featured in a 1953 article in *Fortune* magazine under the title “Business Men on Their Knees.”

*But despite the best efforts of many, the movement suffered from several handicaps: its clergy-dominated nature, church structures inhibiting lay ministry, the tendency of church professionals to equate ministry with serving on church committees, and, especially from the 1960s on, theological perspectives that named business as inherently wicked.*

People in the workplace, particularly in for-profit businesses, were led to conclude that participation in the marketplace was displeasing to God, making money was evil, and life in the economic sphere was

somehow intrinsically tainted. . . . Congregations [often] were given a false choice between personal salvation and piety or organizational transformation and social justice in the economic sphere, as if God were interested in just one and not the other.

### **GOING INTO BUSINESS WITH GOD**

*But in the last few decades of the twentieth century, these questions exploded with new urgency—including in Miller’s own life.*

Lay ministry is arguably a classic interpretation of Christian discipleship, a tradition faithful to the New Testament teachings and the first 300 years of the life of the church. . . . [From the mid-1980s on], work-related questions about meaning, purpose, ethics, and how to express one’s faith at work [began] to drive the movement. And there appears to be an irrepressible urge in laity to live an integrated life . . . a deep desire to connect faith and work, while hoping for both personal and societal transformation. . . .

In the summer of 1995, I sent out a letter to some 400 executive contacts and business acquaintances around the world to advise them that I was leaving my [business] partnership [in London] to return to the United States to study theology . . . and see what it had to do with the business world and the people in the workplace.

Expecting mostly snickering and derisive responses, I was stunned to receive back more than 150 faxes, letters, and phone calls. What surprised me even more was that my letter seemed to strike a deep chord with the recipients. Despite external measurements of career and financial success many of these executives were feeling a deep emptiness and a disconnect from the beliefs, people, and things they valued most in life.

I still remember one phone call vividly. . . . “I have worked hard to reach the pinnacle of my profession. I have more money than God, yet I am unfulfilled. My marriage is a shambles, I hardly know my kids, and when I look in the mirror, I wonder where the man went who so idealistically graduated from college 30 years ago and was ready to make his mark on the world. I’d like to talk to my pastor, but he has no clue about my world and the pressures I face. Let me know what you find at seminary. I’d like to talk with you.” ☐

*David W. Miller is the founding director of the Princeton University Faith & Work Initiative where he conducts research, teaches, and hosts programs on the intersection of faith and work. This article is excerpted from his book God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement.*

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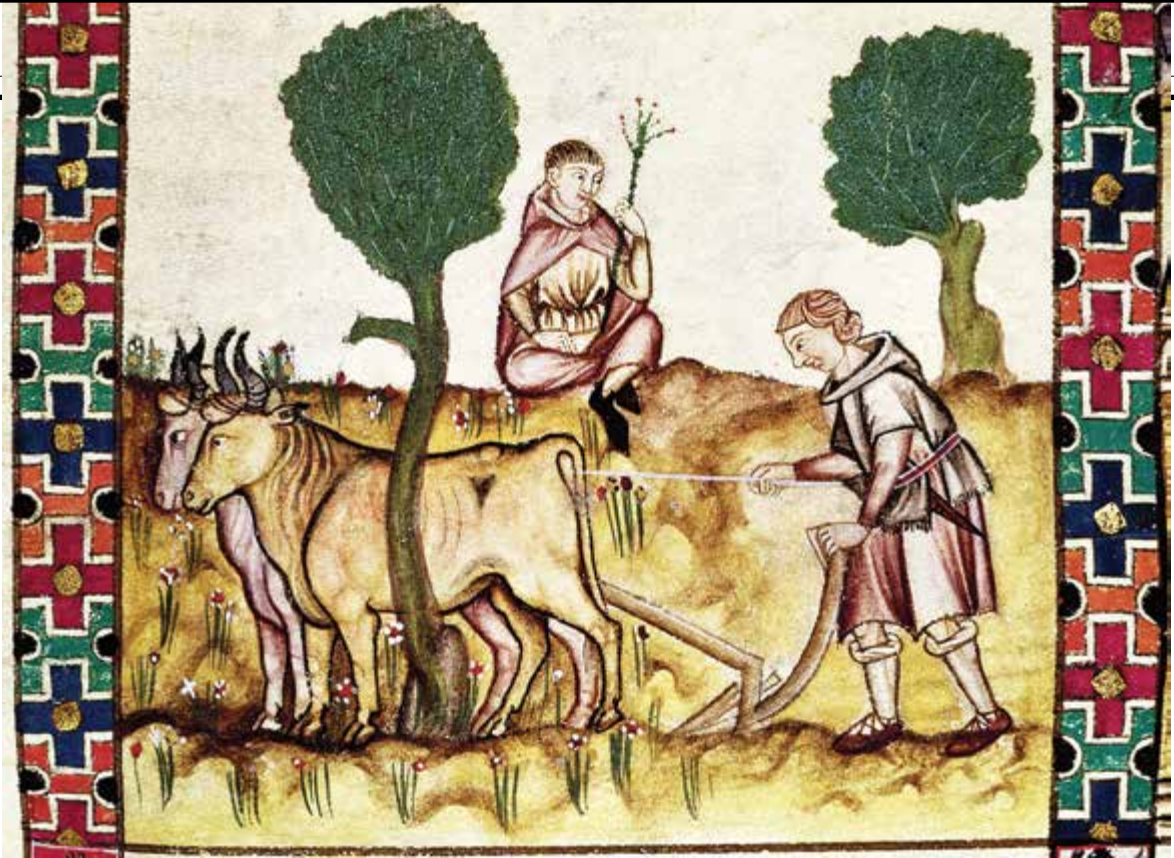
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# “Vocation is in the here and now”

FOUR CHRISTIAN THINKERS REFLECT ON HOW GOD CALLED THEM AND CALLS US

*GREG FORSTER IS A program director for the Kern Family Foundation; Gene Edward Veith is provost and professor of literature at Patrick Henry College; P. J. Hill is a cattle rancher and professor emeritus of economics at Wheaton College; Charlie Self is professor of church history at Assemblies of God Theological Seminary and has served as a local church pastor.*

**CH:** How would you define vocation?

**GREG FORSTER:** I think of vocation as the imperative God places on us, and nurtures within us, to live all of life in ways that glorify him. We find this imperative operating in the deepest recesses of our own nature; in the world around us, in the structures of human civilization that we participate in every day; and in Scripture and in the life of Christian discipleship.

**GENE EDWARD VEITH:** When the Bible talks about God “calling” someone—to faith, to a particular task, to a way of life—it is teaching the doctrine of vocation. The defining Biblical passage on vocation is I Cor. 7:17: “Let each of you lead the life that

the Lord has assigned, to which God called you.” God “assigns” to each of us “a life,” and then he “calls” us to that life. “Vocation” refers not just to the work we do to make our livings—that’s a secular appropriation of the theological term. Our vocations are multiple, found in the family, the society, the church, and the economic order.

**CHARLIE SELF:** Vocation is the broad sense of our purpose for being on earth, broader than simply the job that we do. It includes loving God with all our hearts and fulfilling his Great Commission, and it includes the specific way we do that with the gifts and resources and opportunities that we’ve been given.

**CH:** How did you know God was calling you to your vocation? Did the Christian community help you discern that?

**GREG:** I got the opportunity to do something that would have a big positive impact on a lot of people and that very few people are equipped to do. There wasn’t a lot of difficulty discerning that God would want me to

## SERVING GOD THROUGH FARMING ...

Left: A farmer teaches his son to plow.

... AND ART Right: Lucas Cranach, Reformation artist, influenced Luther ... and Gene Veith.

take that job, so there wasn't much for the Christian community to do in my case.

**GENE:** I seem to have wandered into my various vocations with very little sense of choosing a particular path. Looking back, though, I see connections and design. Many Christians assume that God has one purpose for them and that they then need to find it on their own. I don't think God works that way. We cannot evade or thwart God's will.

We find our vocations in ordinary ways—making a friend we end up marrying, getting turned down for jobs we want but settling for one that opens up at the last minute, growing up in a particular community, getting active in a particular church. My Christian community helped me understand my most important vocation, that I have been “called” by the Gospel. But we are also called to live out our faith in so-called secular arenas, and God is active there as well. It was in those realms that I found my vocations as an academic, a writer, a husband, a father, an American, and the like.

**CHARLIE:** Four things helped me understand my sense of vocation. First of all, my own times of prayer and an inner sense of wanting to serve and be a light to the nations as I read the Scriptures. Second, the wonderful mentors God surrounded me with in my local church affirmed that I had gifts that could be put to use for the kingdom. Third, I was given an opportunity to serve on mission trips and in small groups, even as a teenager, and saw where my skills were best used. And finally, my vocation has been clarified through interaction with believers from around the world. God has given me a peaceful and powerful sense of mission, and I thank the Lord and the body of Christ, both locally and globally, for helping me fulfill my calling.

**CH:** *How has your calling changed over the years?*

**GREG:** God closed a lot of professional doors for me early in my career, and that was very painful. But the jobs and activities I undertook as a result equipped me with a very distinctive collection of skills and experiences. And then I got offered a job where I get to do



amazing work which requires almost exactly that distinctive collection of skills and experiences. Sometimes God's providence is mysterious, but not in my case.

**GENE:** I pursued my love of literature by going to graduate school, never thinking of practical considerations. But then I was offered teaching jobs where I began to reflect and write about Christianity and culture. I left teaching to work as the cultural editor for *World Magazine*, but came to realize that my full vocation was in the academic world. At the moment, I am mainly an administrator. I value being able to help make our college the kind of institution I think it should be. And yet I would like to get back in the classroom more. In my family, my callings have changed: being a young husband, becoming a father, raising children, sending them off on their own, and now—one of the most fun vocations—being a grandfather. Vocation is in the here and now. At every stage, whatever our own preferences, we need to understand that this is where God has placed us and where he wants us to serve.



**P. J. HILL:** When I was finishing my PhD at the University of Chicago, Prof. Greg Lewis called me in and told me he had interviews set up for me. I said, "Professor Lewis, I'm not entering the job market." And he said, "What? We put all this fellowship money into you." I said, "Well, there was always a place on the application for 'professional plans,' and I always wrote down 'cattle rancher.'" And he said, "Well, a lot of people come into graduate school with foolish ideas, and they change them over time."

In some sense he was correct; it just took me 40 years. I began as a full-time cattle rancher and gradually moved into teaching full time and still ranching. God has shown me that my life is to be out of doors, working with cattle, fixing the fence, rounding up, working with horses, but that I also have a place in the classroom. I've had a delightful life doing both of those.

**CH:** *What is one thing you have learned from the Christian tradition about vocation?*

**GREG:** Vocation is indispensable to combating sin and becoming people who combine grace and humility with a profound sense of responsibility and stewardship. The doctrine that all of life responds to a calling from God sets people free from paternalism and injustice, giving us dignity and meaning as human beings made in God's image and made for a vocation. But at the same time, vocation is very strict with us about how we use our freedom, because the only freedom worth having is freedom for righteous living.

**CAN WE FIND GOD HERE ...?** Miners labor in Cornwall in the 1890s.

**GENE:** From Luther, the great theologian of vocation, I learned that God himself providentially cares for his world by means of ordinary people doing ordinary things. He gives us daily bread by means of farmers, millers, bakers, and cooks. He creates new human beings by means of mothers and fathers. He protects us through public officials. He teaches his Word and gives spiritual care by means of pastors. He creates beauty by means of artists. He makes our lives easier by means of engineers and technology workers. And on and on.

**P. J.:** The fundamental idea of the dignity of work is a very important aspect of our Christian faith. We may think of monks as just living in solitude and contemplating. Actually, monasteries were one place where work was dignified, and anybody could join as long as they met certain religious conditions. That changed the world because for a long time before, elites had regarded work as something beneath them.

**CHARLIE:** That all of life is worship. Paul says to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1-2), and all through church history, whether it's the great work of Hildegard of Bingen, or Wycliffe's Lollard preachers, or Pietists, or Methodists, whatever tradition, we understand that every single arena of service can bring glory to God.

...AND HERE? Traders make deals in the Fannie Mae Market Room.

**CH:** *Is there any Christian from the past whose life has been a particular model or inspiration to you?*

**GREG:** I feel a deep affinity with John Calvin. He repeatedly sacrificed his life plans when he saw that God was giving him greater opportunities to serve in other ways. He deeply desired a private life of scholarship, but he never got it. He stayed in Geneva when he wanted to leave, and then he left when he wanted to stay, and then he went back when he wanted to stay away—all because he felt responsible to serve God and not himself.

**GENE:** As I've studied the Reformation, I thought that a fitting "patron saint" of vocation—if the Reformation had patron saints—would be Lucas Cranach, a close personal friend of Luther's. Cranach, a major artist, popularized Reformation teachings by means of art. He set up a printing business that published Luther's translation of the Bible. He mass-produced his woodcuts so that even peasants for the first time in their lives could own a Bible and put a work of art on their walls. As the mayor of Wittenberg, he lent important political help to Luther. He also essentially arranged Luther's marriage.

**CHARLIE:** Jonathan Edwards brought passion and intellect together. One of my great desires is to be a thoughtful, passionate Christian and I see in Edwards an example of that. Another would be the Wesleys, especially John. He combined practical realities of living the Christian life in community with an ecumenical spirit, embracing sisters and brothers from a variety of traditions.

**CH:** *What is the vocation of all Christians?*

**GENE:** The purpose of every vocation, said Luther, is to love and serve our neighbors. In the economic orders, these are customers and clients, colleagues and bosses. In the family, spouses love and serve each other; parents their children and children their parents. In our civic vocations, we love and serve our fellow citizens and pursue the common good. In the church we love and serve our fellow Christians.

**CHARLIE:** We're all called to live out the Great Commission, shaped by the Great Commandment of Jesus



to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. We're all called in general to worship and to witness. We're all called specifically to live out a particular calling in the context of our culture.

**CH:** *How does vocation apply to non-Christians?*

**GENE:** Was the farmer who grew the grain for my daily bread a Christian? I hope so. But in another sense, it doesn't really matter; God used that farmer's work to feed both the just and the unjust. But Christians can glimpse God's presence in their ordinary lives, giving their work, family, and citizenship a transcendent dimension and meaning that nonbelievers miss.

**CHARLIE:** My friend Scotty is a mechanic. He has six mechanics that work for him and feeds 40 people through his business. Hundreds of people come with their cars. He helps thousands of hours of productive work take place and puts millions of dollars into the economy every month just by being an excellent mechanic and business owner. And so he's blessing Christians and non-Christians—and helping the poor very quietly behind the scenes. He's sharing the good news when he gets to talk to people in crisis. He came to me and said, "Hey, Pastor Charlie, I'm as much a preacher as you are and as much a minister as you are." And I said, "Absolutely, Scotty."

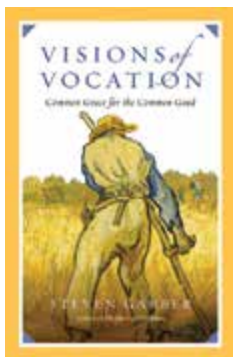
We can unite with people of good will and build flourishing communities, and that unity creates an opportunity for them to come all the way in and be full followers of Jesus Christ. ☐

# Recommended resources

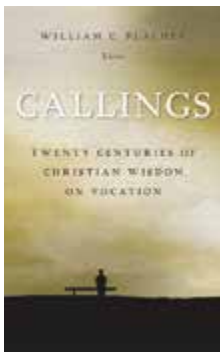
LEARN MORE ABOUT THE STORIES FEATURED IN THIS ISSUE, AND PUT GOD'S CALLING TO CHRISTIANS THROUGHOUT HISTORY IN CONTEXT, WITH RESOURCES RECOMMENDED BY CH EDITORIAL STAFF AND THIS ISSUE'S CONTRIBUTORS

## BOOKS

• The landscape of books devoted to the vocation of Christians through the ages is vast. The modern era has in fact seen an explosion of books devoted to discerning calling and living out faith in the workplace, including Mark Albion's *Making a Life, Making a Living*, Gene Edward Veith's *God at Work*, Parker Palmer's *Let Your Life Speak*, Os Guinness's *The Call*, Dean Brackley's *Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, John Paul II's *The Meaning of Vocation*, Gilbert Meilander's *Freedom of a Christian*, Timothy Keller and Katherine Leary Alsdorf's *Every Good Endeavor*, Steve Garber's *Visions of Vocation*, and Amy Sherman's *Kingdom Calling*.



Even more can be found via *The Marketplace Annotated Bibliography: A Christian Guide to Books on Work, Business and Vocation* by Pete Hammond, R. Paul Stevens, and Todd Svanoë.



• Going back into history to see how Christian brothers and sisters in the past understood their vocations, the best place to start is William Placher's anthology *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*. In addition to providing testimonies from Christians as diverse as Ignatius of Antioch and Dorothy Day, the book also sets each excerpt in context and gives overall introductions on how vocation was viewed in different eras of

church history. Both *Callings* and a follow-up volume focusing on literature and philosophy, *Leading Lives that Matter* (edited by Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass), have online study guides available ([www.ptev.org/news.aspx?iid=56](http://www.ptev.org/news.aspx?iid=56) and [www.ptev.org/news.aspx?iid=60](http://www.ptev.org/news.aspx?iid=60)).



• Robert Ellsberg's *The Saints' Guide to Happiness*, *All Saints*, and *Blessed among All Women* offer capsule biographies with a vocational slant of spiritual leaders of various faiths, where "well-known saints, apostles, and martyrs take their places beside lesser-known figures (the woman

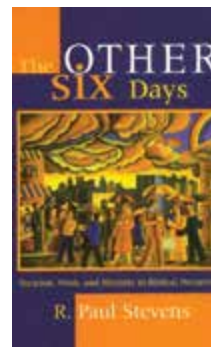
with a flow of blood who touched Jesus' hem), theologians and philosophers (Martin Buber, Simone Weil, Kierkegaard), artists (Van Gogh, Mozart, J. S. Bach), literary figures (Dante, Tolstoy), social reformers (Gandhi, Schweitzer), and numerous others who do not fit into neat categories."

A somewhat more traditional collection of spiritual biographies can be found in the *They Knew Their God* series by E. F. and Lillian Harvey—though many of the callings here are to "church work," others display a variety of vocations.

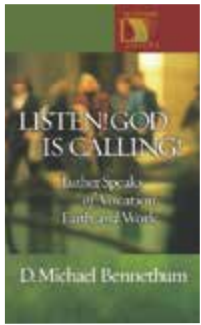
• It can be worthwhile to simply read good biographies of Christians of the past with an eye to how they lived out their vocations. But some books do deal with vocation in specific eras of the church or in the lives of specific Christians. A thorough list of these can be found in the bibliographies maintained by Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (at [www.ptev.org/indexer.aspx?sect=resources&tid=-10&iid=3](http://www.ptev.org/indexer.aspx?sect=resources&tid=-10&iid=3)).



• Examples include R. Paul Stevens's *The Other Six Days* and *Work Matters*, on vocation in the Bible; Lawrence Cunningham's *Francis of Assisi*; James Martin's *Becoming Who You Are: Insights on the True Self from Thomas Merton and Other Saints*; primary-source reflections on vocation such as George Herbert's *The Country Parson* and Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*; the historical analysis of André







Vauchez's *The Laity in the Middle Ages*; Gustaf Wingren's *Luther on Vocation*; D. Michael Bennethum's *Listen! God Is Calling! Luther Speaks of Vocation, Faith, and Work*; and Paul Marshall's *A Kind of Life Imposed on Man: Vocation and Social Order from Tyndale to Locke*.

• Famous modern reflections from several popes on issues of work and economics—in ways that guide vocational discernment—include the encyclical *Rerum novarum* and the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*. David Miller's *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement* traces the history of various largely



lay-led “faith and work” groups, existing and even thriving still today, who consider ways to integrate the claims of their faith with the demands of their work. And although it is a book about work rather than a book about faith, you might also enjoy Studs Terkel's *Working*, a classic reflection in which, as its subtitle says, “people talk about what they do all day and how they feel about

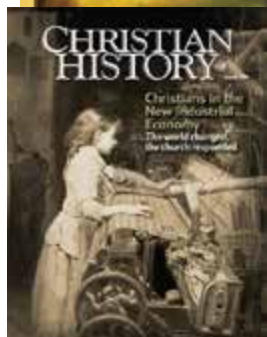
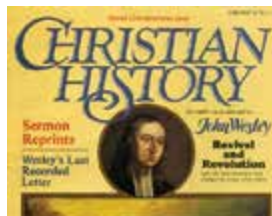
what they do”—with profound implications for how the church might respond.

### CHRISTIAN HISTORY ISSUES

• Read back issues at the CH website ([www.christianhistorymagazine.org/magazines](http://www.christianhistorymagazine.org/magazines)) or purchase print copies of available issues at [www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/storefront](http://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/storefront). Past issues that touch on

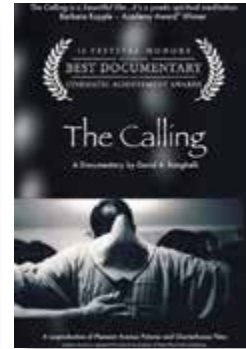
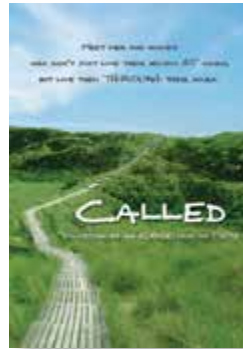
the topic of vocation include

- 2, 69: *The Wesleys*
- 12: *John Calvin*
- 14, 19: *Money in Christian History*
- 24: *Bernard of Clairvaux*
- 34, 39: *Martin Luther*
- 49: *Everyday Faith in the Middle Ages*
- 89: *Richard Baxter and the English Puritans*
- 93: *Benedict and Western Monasticism*
- 94: *Building the City of God in a Crumbling World*
- 104: *Christians in the New Industrial Economy*



### VIDEOS FROM VISION VIDEO

• In addition to offering many biographies—such as those of David Livingstone, David Brainerd, John Wesley, St. Patrick, and Gladys Aylward—Vision Video currently distributes *Called: Vocation as an Expression of Faith* and *The Calling*, and will be releasing as companion videos to this issue of *Christian History* the two-part series *Going on Vocation: Exploring Work as It Was Meant to Be*.



### WEBSITES

• Reflections on work and vocation in the Bible can be found at the Theology of Work Project, [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org), organized both topically (search particularly “vocation,” “calling,” and “meaning and value of work”) and by biblical book.

In addition to maintaining the bibliographies and study guides mentioned above, Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation ([www.ptev.org/default.aspx](http://www.ptev.org/default.aspx)) has many other resources for exploring vocation—throughout church history or in your own life—including everything from movie reviews to streaming DVDs to course syllabi. Some interesting articles on vocation throughout church history and in the modern world are at [www.christianitytoday.org/mediaroom/news/2013/leadership-journal-re-examines-christian-vocation.html](http://www.christianitytoday.org/mediaroom/news/2013/leadership-journal-re-examines-christian-vocation.html) (some are subscriber-only access, but not all).



• Some other sites with practical everyday reflections on vocation include Practicing Our Faith (for adults, [www.practicingourfaith.org](http://www.practicingourfaith.org)) and Way to Live (for teens, [www.waytolive.org](http://www.waytolive.org)), the Washington Institute for Faith, Vocation, and Culture ([www.washingtoninst.org](http://www.washingtoninst.org)), The High Calling ([www.thehighcalling.org](http://www.thehighcalling.org)), and Patheos Faith and Work Channel ([www.patheos.com/Faith-and-Work](http://www.patheos.com/Faith-and-Work)).

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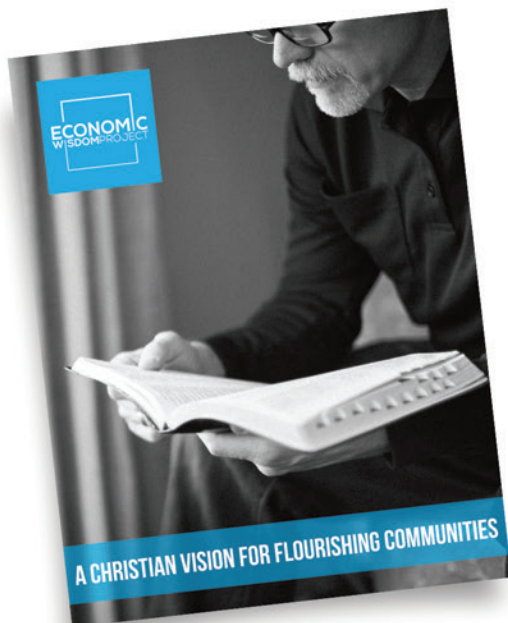


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