

# Thinking about vocation

### A background paper by Trevor Cooling

The central idea in the *Transforming Lives* Toolkit is vocation. It is not a word that is widely used today, and is often misunderstood when it is. Surveys amongst Christian teachers reveal a suspicion of the term; they see it as reflecting an amateurish approach where poor pay is justified on the grounds that one is 'working for God'. In recent conversations I have been told more than once that younger teachers simply don't use the term. This is a great loss, not least because it perpetuates the idea that there is a sacred/secular divide in life which keeps the life of faith firmly in the box of our private world. Commitment to God can become a leisure time activity that doesn't impinge on the public world of work.

The brief exploration of vocation in this paper offers an overview of the understanding of vocation that underpins the activities and resources provided in this Toolkit.

## Vocation – a misunderstood concept

In this section we will review some of the influential misunderstandings of the concept of vocation which have contributed to its demise.

### 1. To have a vocation is to be called to full-time Christian work

This is true; but it's a half-truth. It has its origins in a medieval view of work that attributed high status to the monastic life and was dismissive of the value of ordinary labour. Although very few Christians today would openly espouse this idea, it is still very influential in the Christian subconscious (although the aspiration may have shifted from monk to worship leader). Alison Brown's account of her church's response to her becoming a teacher is but one illustration of this influence. ([www.transforminglives.org.uk/people.php?58](http://www.transforminglives.org.uk/people.php?58)). In this Toolkit it is assumed that every Christian is called to a vocation, whatever their job.

### 2. A vocation is for life

Yes and no. Many commentators now make a distinction between the primary vocation of all Christians and the secondary callings through which we each express this. Our primary calling is to our relationship with God and to fulfilling the responsibility that derives from that relationship to be his co-workers in the world. Our secondary callings are the different ways in life that we find to do that and include our family life and the various jobs that we do through our life. The significant point is that, as we move from job to job, our primary vocation to serve God through using our passion, talents, gifts and personality remains lifelong. To be a faithful Christian is to be on the journey through life that results from seeking to fulfil one's vocation.

What is not true, however, is that, for example, if we become a school teacher and then move to another job, we have denied our vocation to teach. A vocation for life is not the same as a job for life. What is true is that our vocation is reflected in the way we are made and can be discovered through a growing understanding of the sort of



person God has created us. So although I may not actually be a teacher in a classroom for all my life, the vocation to teach will always be there and should ideally be expressed through whatever secondary calling I happen to be fulfilling. For example, someone might cease classroom teaching and become an author or an inspector or a full-time parent; all of these jobs utilise teaching expertise. See [www.transforminglives.org.uk/after.php](http://www.transforminglives.org.uk/after.php) for further information.

### **3. Having a vocation means accepting our lot and serving God in whatever situation we find ourselves**

This misunderstanding derives from Luther's view that each person is born into a station in life and it is there that God calls him or her to serve. The truth embedded in Luther's teaching is that we are called not to enjoyment in life but to service. The negative consequence of this teaching is, however, the notion that we should not seek another secondary calling if we are deeply unfulfilled in our work. If we regard it to be our Christian responsibility to maximise the use of our spiritual gifts in the service of God and others, then it is our duty to seek out alternative opportunities if we find ourselves under-utilised in our current station in life. We do, of course, have to be aware of the distinction between being unhappy and being unfulfilled. The former may indicate a need to examine our attitudes to our work and reflect too great a focus on our own enjoyment. The latter means that we are not using the gifts that God has given us.

### **4. A vocation is pre-ordained by God and comes as a call from God**

Absolutely; as long as we don't make the mistake of thinking that God will lay on us a vocation that is contrary to our nature. Our vocation and the gifts that we have as a created being of God are inextricably linked. We discover our vocation by discovering the person that God has made us. That means working hard at discovering and developing our gifts through prayer, through study, through listening to others and, above all, through the exercise of honest discernment. We should never underestimate our ability to dupe ourselves in listening to our selfish inclinations more carefully than we listen to God. We should not seek to bypass the hard work of honest engagement in this journey of discovery by looking for some supernatural revelation that appears to make it unnecessary.

## Vocation, transformation and work

Work is not the only context in which Christians exercise their vocation, but it is an incredibly important one. We work to provide a living for ourselves and our families and to support the ministry of the Church; no-one denies the importance of this financial dimension. But to see work as *just* for that is to adopt an inadequate theology of work. What follows is an alternative vision of working life.

### **1. Vocation and transformation**

For many Christians their workplace offers an opportunity for evangelism, for showing the love of God to others and for exemplifying Christian values in the way they behave. Amongst teachers this is often expressed through leading voluntary Christian groups, through taking assemblies and through aiming for high standards of pastoral care with pupils. All very important.



The limitations of this approach are, however, just that – it is a limited approach. If we are called to be co-workers with God in the transformation of the world, if we are to be part of the development of the kingdom of God, if we are to have an eternal impact on the world around us, then our attitude to work has to be more than placid compliance with the status quo. Rather our vision should be for an incarnational ministry, with the workplace as a key interface where Christians participate in the divine activity of transforming the world. That is what it means to have a vocation.

## 2. Work and vocation

An influential view is that some types of work are vocations whereas others are not. Classically the caring professions, such as teaching, social work and the health services, are honoured as such whereas business, for example, is not so considered. Professions like law have an ambiguous status. The reward of working in a vocation is perceived to be the meaning it gives to life. The rewards of other work are often perceived as almost exclusively financial.

This approach is not helpful. For one thing it frees the investment banker (et al.) from facing up to their responsibility to pursue their primary Christian calling. Too many Christians accept the ideas and practices of the workplace as givens on the mistaken assumption that business, management, law etc., are neutral enterprises - “that’s what you have to do in management”. This attitude perpetuates the sacred/secular divide. It also influences those in the so-called vocations who feel that being professional requires that you leave your faith at home. For example, church school governors often remark to me that it is very hard to find teachers who have any idea as to how to bring their Christian faith to bear on their professional work. They simply don’t see the relevance of their faith to the workplace.

## 3. Vocation and transformation

In this short paper I am proposing that a key feature of having a vocation is the vision for transformation. It is the desire to use one’s God-given gifts as a co-worker with God in the world. It is about making a difference to the way things are done. For many Christians the challenge is to know what this actually means in the day to day practice of their work. We have provided ideas on the *Transforming Lives* website ([www.transforminglives.org.uk/vocation.php](http://www.transforminglives.org.uk/vocation.php)). Sadly surveys amongst teachers suggest that few find their church helps them much with this. And yet education is a fairly high profile profession in Christian circles. Probably the position is even worse with other careers.

## 4. Loving identification and counter-cultural challenge in the workplace

This call for Christian transformation in the workplace is sometimes interpreted as aggressive assertion by Christians; an attempt to dominate. But this is not what is meant by incarnational ministry as epitomised in the life of Jesus. This can be described as the vision for the transforming professional and is a mode of Christian living characterised by two attributes.

Firstly it is characterised by loving identification. By this is meant that Christians enter fully into the goals and aspirations of their chosen career. If we cannot do that, serious questions should be asked about our involvement anyway. Science teachers are not just in school to point children towards Christ; they are there



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because they are passionate about the importance of a science education. Christians should be fully immersed in the culture of their profession. There should be joy to be found in the day by day tasks that characterise that work. They work for the flourishing of all their pupils as human beings, not simply to convert them.

Secondly it is characterised by the willingness to be counter-cultural, to challenge the norms that need challenging, to offer a better way that is both professionally compelling and more deeply Christian. Very few people want to be seen as a 'Bible basher', one of the awkward 'God-squad'. That is not what is being asked. Rather we are talking about an approach to work which, for example, doesn't simply say 'that's business' as individuals are abused, but offers another way that is preferable. There will, however, be times when such challenges become costly and we must be prepared for this.

In this Toolkit, Daniel is offered as a biblical model of a transforming professional. To seek to live like this is very demanding. The complexities of modern work mean that Christians may find themselves making decisions where it feels there are no right answers available. This is what happens when we seek to be God's co-workers in an imperfect world. It is part and parcel of the experience of being 'in the world but not of the world' and has characterised cutting edge mission since the time of the first disciples. It is for such a calling that the Church has the privilege of preparing its members.



## Concluding remark

The *transforming professional* is the key concept in this Toolkit on the vocation of teaching. The emphasis is on Christians shouldering their responsibility to discern the skills that God has given them and then to use them in the workplace as a co-worker with God in the ministry of transforming human experience. In our individualistic world, young and not so young are often left to discover their vocation on their own. This should not be. The community of God's people need to be supporting each other in the life journey of vocation. It is, indeed, a privilege to support others on this journey of self-discovery in the cause of Christian ministry. This Toolkit is offered as a resource to the leaders whose responsibility this is.

For further ideas for reading on vocation refer to the library on the *Transforming Lives* website ([www.transforminglives.org.uk/library.php?cat=1](http://www.transforminglives.org.uk/library.php?cat=1)).

