
Initiatives *in* Religion

A Newsletter of Lilly Endowment Inc.



Winter 2003, Volume 10, Number 1

Vocation

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In 1999, Lilly Endowment launched the first round of its grants initiative on "The Theological Exploration of Vocation." By late 2002, at the end of three rounds of funding, 88 church-related colleges and universities all across the country had received grants to enable them to mount programs focused on this theme.

These programs have three purposes: (1) to enable as many students as possible to think through the vocational choices they are facing in the light of their faith and of the wisdom on these matters available in the great religious traditions, (2) to identify those who have gifts for pastoral ministry and support them in exploring this as a possibility for their own life's work, and (3) to enhance the capacity of the school's faculty and staff to teach and mentor students effectively in this arena and to develop new intellectual and educational resources to serve that purpose. Partly as a result of the energetic and creative work of many students, faculty, and administrative leaders on these campuses, "vocation" has quickly become a very significant topic in the larger world of higher education today (see p. 5).

In the spring of 2002, Wabash College invited me to preach in its Baccalaureate Service. Eager to speak to a group of undergraduates about a theme that has been occupying a good deal of my attention for several years, I offered up a sermon entitled "Vocational Training." What follows are excerpts from that oration, somewhat modified, which I hope will be of interest to any readers of this newsletter who are wrestling with the meaning of "vocation" or who are striving to attain some vocational clarity in their own lives.

What does "vocation" mean?

Vocatio is the Latin root, and it means neither job nor career nor occupation. It means "voice" or "a voice calling." Religiously speaking it means "a calling from God." Now I admit this "calling from God" stuff can get mighty confusing — indeed, sometimes, downright

misleading. For one thing, a religious understanding of vocation often gets too closely tied to the act of taking up a religious profession — of becoming a priest, a minister, a rabbi, or a pastoral leader in some faith community. I am all in favor of people doing that, of course. Part of my job is to encourage gifted people to consider the ministry. And from my own experience, and from deep friendships with many persons in ministry, I can attest that it can be a profoundly rewarding way to spend one's life. That said, however, I believe something is wrong with this too-narrow usage of the word "vocation." Why is it that we all know of people who hear God calling them to be a minister, but of almost nobody who hears God calling them to some other equally significant way to spend their lives?

And then there is another problem. What does it really mean for any of us to hear God calling? Gary Badcock, a theologian who grew up in a devoutly religious home, writes that, as a child, he was taught that "God has a plan for each life, a plan that a given individual might miss if he or she is not attentive to God's call and obedient to his voice. As a youth," he said, "I felt as if I were waiting for a bus, or a 'street-car named vocation'; if I became bored and decided to wander away from the street, it would pass me by" (p. 141). He was scared to death that he would somehow miss God's call. It took him a long time to develop a more profound and helpful understanding.

What the Bible has to say

When religious things start to get confusing, I often find it helpful as a Christian to take a fresh look at what the Bible has to say. In the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, we find accounts of how the people of Israel spent four decades wandering the wilderness after escaping generations of slavery in Egypt. Near the end of their journey to a promised new homeland — one still tragically in dispute — their leader had them stop for a while before proceeding across the Jordan River. Just before the moment when everything would become different, but no one knew just how, Moses called for a covenant renewal ceremony. On that occasion, he made a very important speech, at the climax of which he spoke these words: "I set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your

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descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob" (Deut. 30:19-20).

"Choose life," said Moses to the Israelites. "Choose life!" That is "the calling from God." That is the meaning and content of vocation.

But that was then. This is now. How do we choose life? We live in a world saturated with choice. Look at the varieties of electronic gadgets we are all supposed to buy, the surfeit of TV channels to choose from. We are bombarded from every direction by merchants and advertisers devoted to making sure we are fully aware of our latest opportunity to select some new product — and by implication perhaps, a new image, a new life-style, even a new self! In our society, such choices are presented to us so insistently and so alluringly that we are tempted to become preoccupied by them. Despite ourselves, we begin to take them seriously. We almost start to think that the very quality of our lives depends on these sorts of choices.

The choices that matter

In our hearts we know, of course, that our lives do not depend on these choices. Our life-style might — but not our lives! So, part of what it means in our time to choose life is to avoid getting all caught up in these kinds of choices. Choosing life means focusing our attention and energy on choices that really do matter. And what kinds of choices are those? Moses knew. He said, "If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, then you shall live."

The commandments Moses had in mind were quite specific. They are the commandments that say do not murder, or steal, or commit adultery; don't speak falsely about your roommate or your neighbor, or want so badly what your best friend or some hot-shot competitor has got that you get all bent out of shape in the process. There is the commandment to honor your parents, and the one that tells you to keep the Sabbath — to rest and to worship. These commandments are pointers to the big things, the things that matter, the really serious things about which we have to make choices. Choices about how we use our time. Choices about money, about how much "stuff" is finally enough. Choices about sex and about commitment. Choices about the world we live in and how we are to make it better. Choices about ultimate allegiances — about which God or gods we will worship, give our hearts and souls to, orient our lives by.

In a wonderful book entitled *The Shape of Living*, Cambridge University theologian David

Ford makes plain that our choices and our desires are deeply connected. The inner turbulence of our desires often reflects the cacophony of options before us. So, says Ford, "the dynamics of desire are often treacherous. We can be attracted on to ground that, as soon as we commit our weight to it, proves to be a bog we cannot get ourselves out of. Yet if we do not risk following our desires, we risk not really living. [Not only bad things, but also all] the best things in life are ... objects of desire: love, joy, justice, health, truth, goodness, beauty. To satisfy our desire for them, even in part, makes life and the dangers of desiring worthwhile" (p. 52).

The paradox of our desires

How, then, do we calm the turbulence and avoid the bog? Faced with far too many conflicting desires, some good and some not-so-good, we sometimes try very hard to limit them, to keep them under control, to make sure they never get out of balance. But while safer than utter chaos, mere static "balance" is deadening. It is not good enough. We yearn for something more. This is the paradox: our desires may get us in trouble, but they also give us life.

Fortunately, says Ford, there is another kind of balance, "a balancing that is dynamic and always on the point of overbalancing as it moves. It is like a bicycle being ridden, or an airplane in flight: If they stop, they crash. It is a picture of desires that are being shaped by one overwhelming desire. Such a great desire is the movement that integrates and balances all the others. We never feel in control of it. It constantly overwhelms us with demands and new possibilities. But take it away and we crash, our life seems dead — or we become victims of some lesser compulsion that fills the vacuum" (p. 54).

In Luke's Gospel, a recent graduate of the first century equivalent of Harvard Law School walks up to Jesus and asks him the biggest question there is: "Rabbi — Teacher — Professor — What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Note what he is asking here. He is asking the same question the Israelites had asked of Moses — and that we ourselves are all asking in one way or another. How in the world we choose life — real life, deep life, abundant life, life so well lived that in the end the only way we can understand it is to recognize it as a gift from God. And how does Jesus answer the young lawyer? He sends him back to his law school days, saying, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" The young man knows the answer immediately: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all

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your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." He is quoting the *shema*, the ancient Hebrew summary of the Law found in the book of Deuteronomy and inscribed still today on the hearts of every devout Jew and Christian. Love God; love your neighbor: these two, inextricably tied to one another, compose "the one overwhelming desire," "the movement" that in the deepest heart of things "integrates and balances all the others." It is the great desire which, Ford tells us, "constantly overwhelms us with demands and new possibilities." Take it away and your life will seem dead.

The way to life is the way of love. Whether we are parents, teachers, artists, shopkeepers, manual laborers, lawyers, scientists, public servants or pastors of congregations, what matters is that we choose life — love God, love your neighbor. To feel in one's heart, one's soul, one's strength, one's mind, the deep beckoning of the way of love — that is what it means to have a vocation. ■

Gary D. Badcock, *The Way of Life: A Theology of Christian Vocation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

David F. Ford, *The Shape of Living: Spiritual Direction for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

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Transitions

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tions in the first three years after seminary. The pastors are selected because they have significant youth ministry responsibility in their calls. Dobbs-Allsop explains that this population would correspond with the "residents" in the congregation-based programs funded in the Transition-Into-Ministry initiative. Their activities include gatherings at youth ministry conferences, a series of weekend conferences among themselves, plus participation in an on-line discussion board that includes the input of guest consultants. She explains that when the young pastors come together, they find "a safe space to debrief their experiences, to maybe step back and see things from a clearer perspective. Also, there is a built-in group of colleagues who are FOR each other, and 'get' each other's lives."

Asking the important questions

When Dobbs-Allsop speaks of the young pastors' preparedness for ministry, she relates that many of these young graduates are ill equipped to make a good decisions about a first call. "Folks don't know the important questions to ask, how to discern whether collegial relationships with other staff would be possible, how to burrow beneath the verbiage of a job description to see what's really there. This is something that seminaries should be attending to."

Heather Lampert of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in LaCrosse, Wisconsin and a 2001 graduate of Luther Seminary in St. Paul is one of the Bridges pastors. She speaks of the Bridges experience as offering support, permission, and friendship. She elaborates: "I have been supported by Leslie, by other program leaders, and by others in the program. I have also been encouraged to offer my support in return. By 'permission' I mean discussions within Bridges have given me and others permission to wonder — to wonder what it would look like if ALL pastors were healthy (in lots of different ways). There's permission to wonder what OUR ministry looks like, not what our senior pastors think our ministry should look like! And, lastly, in all of these conversations deep and lasting friendships have formed because of commonalities."

Whether they are based in a congregation or in a denominational judicatory or seminary, the young seminary graduates are learning about pastoring as they develop their own leadership skills and habits of mind and spirit for a lifetime. And their pastors and mentors are learning as well. The Endowment hopes this program will contribute significantly to our understandings of what constitutes effective congregational leadership and how best to