

# “Some Kind of Life to Which We Are Called of God:” The Puritan Doctrine of Vocation

LELAND RYKEN

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**Leland Ryken** is the Emeritus Professor of English at Wheaton College, where he taught English for fifty years. He earned his PhD from the University of Oregon. Dr. Ryken has published over fifty books, including one on the Puritans and two on work and leisure in Christian perspective.

The occasion for this essay and its companions is the five-hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther’s act of nailing a piece of paper to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg. The contemporary context within which we consider our topic of vocation is the explosion of interest among Christians on the topics of work and vocation. No one could have predicted twenty years ago that this would become the next growth industry among evangelicals. The question I will consider is whether a historical inquiry into the Reformation era has anything to add to the conversation beyond what is already on the table. We will see that it does.

My discussion in this essay will be guided by two overriding questions: 1) How did the Puritans reform thinking about vocation in their own day? 2) How can the Puritans reform thinking about vocation in our day? As I pursue these two questions, I will consider four subordinate questions, to be posed individually as my essay unfolds.

My first question is this: if the Continental Reformers and Puritans reformed attitudes toward vocation in their own day, exactly what attitudes existed that required reformation? In 1958 a German scholar named Karl

Holl published a copiously researched article entitled “The History of the Word Vocation,” and because it contains such a wealth of references to primary sources, I am going to base the following sketch largely on this article.<sup>1</sup> According to Holl, the medieval Catholic institution of monasticism wrote the pre-Reformation chapter in the history of the concept of vocation. It is true that there was something even older than monasticism that bears on the subject, namely, NT references to *call* and *calling*, based on the Greek word *klesis*. With the exception of three verses in 1 Corinthians 7 (vv. 17, 20, and 24), all of these references are a call to conversion and discipleship. The NT applies this call to everyone universally and to believers supremely.

But the matter does not rest there because, as Holl demonstrates, medieval monasticism broke with NT Christianity, retaining the terminology of calling but changing its meaning and application. Medieval monasticism did not embrace the ideal of the priesthood of all believers. The idea of a high calling worthy of the title *vocation* became limited to priests. They were the only ones who had a genuine calling. This was reinforced by the way in which the liturgy for ordination of monks accentuated the terminology of calling. The idea of vocation thus became linked to a specific profession, so that, in the words of Holl, “only the monk has a *klesis*” (131). Furthermore, according to Holl, “there is no passage in the writings of the early Fathers where *vocation* means anything like occupation” in the world (136).

Holl and others ascribe a modification of this mainstream view to a late medieval movement that they call “German mysticism.” This modification consisted of “the elevation of the religious evaluation of secular work” (143), but “this meant in no way the overthrow of the social teaching established by late scholasticism” (145). Active life was accorded a status of being legitimate in God’s eyes, but it was not equal to the contemplative life of the monk and manual labor within a monastery.

This mindset goes by the more common vocabulary of sacred vs. secular. In this framework, truly spiritual people are monks, nuns, and clerics. Ordinary people belong spiritually to a lower class. This attitude can be traced back all the way back to the Jewish Talmud, where one of the prayers states,

I thank thee, O Lord, that thou hast given me my lot with those who sit in the house of learning, and not with those who sit at the street-corners; for I am early to work and they are early to work; I am early to work on the words of

the Torah, and they are early to work on things of no moment. I weary myself, and they weary themselves; I weary myself and profit thereby, and they weary themselves to no profit. I run, and they run; I run towards the life of the age to come, and they run towards the pit of destruction.<sup>2</sup>

The same division of life into the categories of sacred and secular, clerical and ordinary, became a leading feature of medieval Roman Catholicism, as expressed in the following passage from Eusebius, penned in the fourth century:

Two ways of life were given by the law of Christ to his church. The one is above nature, and beyond common human living ... Wholly and permanently separate from the common customary life of mankind, it devotes itself to the service of God alone ... Such then is the perfect form of the Christian life. And the other, more humble, more human, permits men to ... have minds for farming, for trade, and the other more secular interests as well as for religion. ... And a kind of secondary grade of piety is attributed to them.<sup>3</sup>

What was the entrenched view of vocation that the Reformation reformed? That only monks had a vocation fully worthy of that title.

My second question is, How did the early Continental Reformers provide a foundation on which the English and American Puritans could build their edifice? I will take a wide-angle view and ascribe a single main idea to Luther and Calvin respectively. Luther's supreme achievement in regard to the doctrine of vocation was to obliterate the division between sacred and secular spheres. To return to Karl Holl's essay on the history of the word *vocation*, near the end of the article Holl writes, “The history of the word [*vocation*] thus shows a complete reversal of its meaning. At first it meant, the monk alone has a calling (*Beruf*); Luther says just the reverse, it is exactly monasticism which has no calling” (153). Luther's primary breakthrough was to eliminate the chasm between what had been regarded as sacred and secular. I will divide this into two complementary halves. The first is Luther's demolishing of the premise that ordinary people and tasks are inferior to the monastic or clerical life. Once this leveling was in place, Luther proceeded to elevate the common life to the status of a vocation. We can think in terms of a lowering and a raising—a lowering of the clerical calling from its alleged

superiority, and a raising of the common life from its alleged inferiority.

First, then, Luther's great denial. "It is pure invention," wrote Luther, "that pope, bishop, priests, and monks are called the spiritual estate while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the temporal estate. This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy [and] no one should be intimidated by it."<sup>4</sup> Again, "There is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate, and are truly priests, bishops, and popes."<sup>5</sup> Luther was scornful of how people stand in awe of priests when they put on a spectacle in a church or cathedral, burning incense and ringing bells, standing in a surplice embroidered with gold, while a poor girl taking care of a little child "is considered nothing."<sup>6</sup>

Even more recurrent in Luther's works is his elevation of the common life. "It looks like a small thing," writes Luther, "when a maid cooks and cleans and does other housework. But because God's command is there, even such a small work must be praised as a service of God far surpassing the holiness and asceticism of all monks and nuns."<sup>7</sup> Again, household work "has no appearance of sanctity; and yet these very works in connection with the household are more desirable than all the works of all the monks and nuns ... Seemingly secular works are a worship of God and an obedience well pleasing to God."<sup>8</sup> Then there is Luther's famous statement about the maidservant: "If you ask an insignificant maidservant why she scours a dish or milks the cow, she can say: I know that the thing I do pleases God, for I have God's word and commandment ... God does not look at the insignificance of the acts but at the heart that serves Him in such little things."<sup>9</sup> According to Luther, if we viewed work correctly, "the entire world would be full of service to God, not only churches but also the home, the kitchen, the cellar, the workshop, and the field of the townsfolk and farmers."<sup>10</sup>

This does not by any means exhaust all that Luther said about vocation, but I believe that his major contribution was to remove the cleavage between so-called sacred and secular callings, and to elevate the daily routine of life to a status of true dignity. Monumental and world-changing as Luther's contribution was, scholars regularly make statements to the effect that Calvin took the concept of vocation a step beyond what Luther proposed.

One way to express the difference is as follows: "To serve God *within* one's calling is not the same as to serve God *by* one's calling, and this last

step Luther was too much of a traditionalist to take ... Calvin took this step. The obligation to glorify God in one's daily toil passed from service *in vocatione* to *per vocationem*.<sup>11</sup> The passages that I quoted earlier from Luther all claim that our actions in the world bear God's approval, but in Calvin we find a stronger emphasis that God is the one who calls people to their tasks, thereby making the discharge of our callings more directly a service to God.

Calvin writes that “[God] has assigned distinct duties to each in the different modes of life.”<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere he claims that a person's calling “is connected with God, who actually calls us.”<sup>13</sup> This opens the door to viewing our tasks and actions as themselves a service and worship. “No sacrifice is more pleasing to God,” writes Calvin, “than when every man applies himself diligently to his own calling.”<sup>14</sup> Performing the work of our callings is itself a sacrifice to God. In Calvin's view, the very skill that people possess to perform their callings comes from the Holy Spirit, so that exercising a calling is itself a work of the Spirit. Calvin writes at length on this in his commentary on Exodus 31:2, which narrates God's calling of Bezalel to perform the artistic work on the tabernacle. At one point he writes, “No one excels even in the most despised and humble handicraft, except in so far as God's Spirit works in him ... Nor is this only the case with respect to the spiritual gifts which follow regeneration, but in all the branches of knowledge which come into use in common life ... We should honor God as the Author of so many good things, since He sanctifies them for our use.”<sup>15</sup> As a total package, the statements I have quoted from Calvin tend in the direction of claiming that not only the person who discharges a calling but the very actions that people perform are a service to God and a means of glorifying him.

To sum up, Luther and Calvin laid a foundation that the Puritans fully embraced and on which they set about to build an edifice. Luther declared the daily sphere sacred, and Calvin asserted that people can serve God by means of their earthly activities.

My third and major question is, What did the Puritans teach about Christian vocation? The Puritans were great systematizers, and this genius did not fail them when they turned to the subject of vocation. We need to piece together Luther's and Calvin's views on vocation from hither and yon in their writings, whereas the Puritans wrote whole treatises and books on the subject.

The greatest Puritan contribution to our understanding of vocation was to divide God's calling of people into the two categories of a general calling

and a particular calling. The general call comes in the same form to every person and consists of the call to conversion and sanctification. In his work entitled *A Treatise of the Vocations or Callings of Men*, William Perkins defined the general calling this way: “The general calling is the calling of Christianity, which is common to all that live in the Church of God ... The general calling is that whereby a man is called out of the world to be a child of God, a member of Christ, and heir to the kingdom of heaven. This calling belongs to every one within the compass of the Church.”<sup>16</sup> Richard Steele’s definition of the general calling is similar: “Our general or spiritual calling ... is whereby a person is called of God to believe and obey the Gospel ... It is termed our general calling ... because this is common to all Christians, requires of all the same duties, ... and obliges all to the same conditions.”<sup>17</sup>

The particular callings of people are the external roles and tasks that make up their daily lives. This particular calling most immediately encompasses one’s primary occupation, but as we will see, it cannot be limited to it. The Puritans seem to assume that we know what a particular calling is and spend little time in defining it. Richard Steele wrote that “a particular or temporal calling is a settled employment in some special business of God’s appointment.”<sup>18</sup> John Preston similarly equates the phrases “our particular calling” and “our ordinary business.”<sup>19</sup>

Before I leave the Puritan concept of general and particular callings, I want to note the important further point that the Puritans emphatically declared that the general calling to conversion and life in Christ was more important than our callings in the marketplace of life. John Downname wrote that “the duties of our particular callings must give place to the general calling of Christianity ... No calling must call us from God, or withdraw us from this blessed fellowship.”<sup>20</sup> George Swinnock said similarly that “the general [calling] must reign in the city, in thy heart, thy particular calling only in the suburbs of thy hands.”<sup>21</sup> And William Perkins called the general vocation “the most excellent calling in the world,” adding that “the particular calling of any man is inferior to the general calling of Christian ...; because we are bound unto God in the first place.”<sup>22</sup>

This, then, is the first contribution of the Puritans: they divided the subject of vocation into two categories and asserted the primacy of the spiritual. I want secondly to define more precisely how the Reformers and Puritans defined the particular callings of life.

There is no doubt that usually their discussions of particular callings have a person's main occupation or job in view, but sometimes they enlarge the scope in a very helpful way by claiming that all of the tasks and roles into which God leads us have the status of a calling. Gustaf Wingren, in his book *The Christian's Calling: Luther on Vocation*, writes as follows: “The life of the home, the relation between parents and children, is vocation, even as is life in the field of labor, the relation between employer and employee ... From this it is clear that every Christian occupies a multitude of offices at the same time, not just one: the same man is, for instance, father of his children, husband of his wife, master of his servants, and office-holder in the town hall ... All these are vocations.”<sup>23</sup>

Calvin shared Luther's view in this matter, claiming that God “has assigned distinct duties to each in the different modes of life. And ... he has distinguished the different modes of life by the name of callings.”<sup>24</sup> In this same passage Calvin asserts that the blessing that comes from fulfilling our callings is “harmony in the different parts of [one's] life,” implying a broader context than only one's job.<sup>25</sup>

The English Puritans likewise spoke of vocation in a way that implies that we have a plurality of vocations commensurate with the entire scope of life. Perkins, for example, described vocation as “a certain kind of life, ordained and imposed on man by God, for the common good.”<sup>26</sup> “A certain kind of life:” that embraces life off the job as well as life on the job, as all of life becomes a vocation. Elsewhere Perkins defines vocation as “the order and manner of living in this world,” a formula that embraces all of life.<sup>27</sup> And in yet another passage, Perkins speaks of “the calling of a ... father, of a child, of a servant, of a subject, or any other calling that is common to all.”<sup>28</sup> Richard Steele similarly said that “a calling is some kind of life to which we are called of God.”<sup>29</sup>

Other Puritan comments tend in the same direction. Richard Bernard puts marriage into the category of a “calling,” as he does also Ruth's faithfulness to Naomi in accompanying her to Bethlehem.<sup>30</sup> Richard Sibbes speaks the familiar vocabulary of Puritan discussions of calling when he writes that “the whole life of a Christian ... is a service of God ... Our whole life, not only in the church, but in our particular places, may be a service of God.”<sup>31</sup> Thomas Gataker, in a book on marriage, places the duties of spouses to each other into the category of special or particular calling.<sup>32</sup> Perkins similarly writes

that “a master of a family is to lead his life in the government of his family, and that is his calling.”<sup>33</sup>

I do not wish to create a misconception: usually when the Puritans speak of vocation or calling, they have a person’s chief occupation in view. The next most numerous category of references is to work generically, but I would observe that work is a broader category than occupation. Often as I read the Puritan discussions of work as a calling, I picture the tasks that I perform off the job. They, too, are callings.

A third cornerstone of Puritan teaching on vocation is that God is the one who calls people in the ways I have delineated. “The author of every calling,” wrote Perkins, “is God himself . . . And for this cause, the order and manner of living in this world is called a *vocation*, because every man is to live as he is called of God.”<sup>34</sup> Richard Steele was of the same opinion when he wrote that “the author of a particular calling . . . is God . . . Hence certainly these employments are named *Callings*, because every man must be called of God unto them: he directs men to them, he inclines them, he enables them for them.”<sup>35</sup> John Downname wrote that “the Lord himself is the Author of our callings.”<sup>36</sup>

Several implications can be extracted from the belief that God is the one who calls people to their vocations, the most important of which is that if God is the who calls us, as we respond to that call we become stewards who serve God. Fulfilling a calling is a response of obedience to God. God, moreover, is one to whom we are accountable. Work or service is not just a task that is completed; it is part of a believer’s relationship to God. John Cotton wrote, “A man therefore that serves Christ in serving of men . . . doth his work sincerely as in God’s presence, and as one that hath an heavenly business in hand, and therefore comfortably as knowing God approves of his way and work.”<sup>37</sup> Cotton Mather enjoined his readers, “Let every Christian walk with God when he works at his calling, act in his occupation with an eye to God, act as under the eye of God.”<sup>38</sup> “Whatsoever our callings be,” claimed John Dod, “we serve the Lord Jesus in them, and shall be sure of full reward from him.”<sup>39</sup> William Perkins asserted that in our callings we “serve God in serving of men,” and in that terminology we can see that the Puritans followed Calvin in claiming that Christians can view their endeavors not only as an arena within which they serve God but through which they serve him.<sup>40</sup> In summary, the Puritans held that God is the one who calls



people personally to the specifics of their life, so that their fulfillment of a calling is a form of stewardship in which they obey God and live out their relationship with him.

A further important question is, What are the goals and purpose of our callings? The Puritans claimed three goals, arranged into a hierarchy of value: in our callings, we meet the physical needs of our lives, we serve the public good, and we glorify God. The key concept is service. If a calling does not provide service to people, it is not warrantable, which was an omnipresent Puritan touchstone by which they measured whether a given calling was legitimate.

The goals propounded by the Puritans followed a formula, as the following quotations show. Richard Steele wrote, "The ends you should aim at in every particular calling are ... these three. First, and chiefly, the glory of God ... A second thing ye should aim at is the common good. And then, thirdly, you may ... aim at your own good ... Direct all to a right end, the honor of God, the public good as well as your private commodity, and then every step and stroke in your trade is sanctified."<sup>41</sup> "The main end of our lives," wrote Perkins, "is to serve God in the serving of men in the works of our callings ... Some man will say perchance: what, must we not labor in our callings to maintain our families? I answer: this must be done: but this is not the scope and end of our lives. The main end of our lives is to do service to God in serving of man."<sup>42</sup> John Preston was of the opinion that "our aim must be God's glory and the public good."<sup>43</sup> The following statement by John Downname is an admirable summary of Puritan goals for a vocation: "And here first is required, that our calling be lawful, and agreeable to God's will and word; that is, such an one as our labors in it may tend to God's glory, the good of the church and commonwealth, and the furthering not only of our temporal but also our spiritual good, and the eternal salvation of our souls."<sup>44</sup>

It goes almost without saying that the Puritans followed the Continental Reformers in rejecting the traditional cleavage between sacred and secular spheres. There are five results of this rejection when applied to vocation, and I will take these up in the following sequence: the Puritans (1) placed all vocations on a level playing field, (2) asserted the worthiness of vocations that the human race tends to despise, (3) affirmed the sanctity of the common, (4) enjoined people to be content in socially humble callings or when faced with distasteful tasks in the routines of life, and (5) opened the

door to integrating the life of faith with life in the world.

First, the Puritans followed Luther in claiming that no calling or task is less important than any other one. William Tyndale said that if we look externally “there is difference betwixt washing of dishes and preaching of the word of God, but as touching to please God, none at all.”<sup>45</sup> William Perkins was of the same opinion: “The action of a shepherd in keeping sheep . . . is as good a work before God as is the action of a judge in giving sentence, or a magistrate in ruling, or a minister in preaching.”<sup>46</sup> There was a strong “leveling” and democratic tendency at work in Puritanism, and we can see it in the elimination of the distinction between sacred and secular spheres and placing them on the same playing field.

Secondly, if clerical and prestigious occupations are not automatically elevated as superior, then all vocations are viewed as important and worthy in God’s eyes, even ones that the human race tends to despise. In fact, the Puritans spent much more of their time in elevating what in the parlance of the time went by the names of “low” and “mean” than in praising vocations that are externally impressive. As part of this enterprise, they regularly invoked the example of Jesus in his calling as a carpenter. The martyr Hugh Latimer wrote, “This is a wonderful thing, that the Savior of the world, and the King above all kings, was not ashamed to labor; yea, and to use so simple an occupation. Here he did sanctify all manner of occupations.”<sup>47</sup> Another Puritan source claimed that “the great and reverend God despiseth no honest trade . . . be it never so mean [lowly], but crowneth it with his blessing.”<sup>48</sup>

Thirdly, the cluster of interrelated viewpoints that I am tracing led to one of the Puritans’ most attractive features—their sanctification of the common life. William Perkins declared that people can serve God “in any kind of calling, though it be but to sweep the house or keep sheep.”<sup>49</sup> Nathaniel Mather said that “exercising grace will . . . spiritualize every action,” so that even such simple acts as “a man’s loving his wife or child” become “gracious acts . . . of great account in the eyes of God.”<sup>50</sup> John Cotton, in his treatise *Christian Calling*, claimed that “faith is ready to embrace any homely service his calling leads him to.”<sup>51</sup> How can this be? Richard Baxter provides the answer: “God looketh not . . . principally at the external part of the work, but much more to the heart of him that doth it.”<sup>52</sup>

Fourth, and related to the theme of redeeming the routines, is the omnipresent Puritan theme that if Christians live by faith they can be content

in a calling that is in itself unfulfilling or distasteful. John Cotton wrote, “Faith having put us into a calling, if it require some homely employment, it encourageth us to it. [A Christian] considers, ‘It is my calling.’”<sup>53</sup> Jeremiah Burroughs wrote in his classic treatise *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, “Your calling is low and mean, yet do not be discontented with that, for you have a principle within you ... of grace, which raises your lowest actions to be higher in God’s esteem than all the brave, glorious actions that are done in the world ... Yes, and the truth is, it is more obedient to submit to God in a low calling than to submit to him in a higher calling.”<sup>54</sup> Baxter similarly theorized that “if you cheerfully serve God in the meanest [i.e., most despised] work, it is the more acceptable to [God], by how much the more subjections and submission there is in your obedience.”<sup>55</sup>

Of course the most famous statement along these lines is Luther’s comment about washing a baby’s diaper as part of one’s domestic calling. His point of departure is to paint a picture of how distasteful a father might find it to care for an infant apart from a principle of Christian faith within him. Then Luther writes, “What then does Christian faith say to this? It opens its eyes, looks upon all these insignificant, distasteful, and despised duties in the Spirit, and is aware that they are all adorned with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels. It says, ... “How gladly will I do so, though the duties should be even more insignificant and despised.” Then Luther applies the same principle to a mother: “A wife too should regard her duties in the same light, as she suckles the child, rocks and bathes it, and cares for it in other ways; and as she busies herself with other duties and renders help and obedience to her husband. These are truly golden and noble works.” Climactically, Luther writes, “When a father goes ahead and washes diapers or performs some other mean task for his child, ... God, with all his angels and creatures, is smiling—not because that father is washing diapers, but because he is doing so in Christian faith.”<sup>56</sup>

A fifth and final result of the Puritan elimination of the dichotomy of sacred and secular is that it opened the door to integrating all of life with the Christian faith. John Cotton wrote, “Not only my spiritual life, but even my civil life in this world, all the life I live, is by the faith of the Son of God; he exempts no life from the agency of his faith.”<sup>57</sup> According to Thomas Gouge, we should “so spiritualize our hearts and affections that we may have heavenly hearts in earthly employments.”<sup>58</sup> And George Swinnock said that the pious

tradesman will know that “his shop as well as his chapel is holy ground.”<sup>59</sup>

What I have covered thus far might be regarded as the theory propounded by the Puritans on vocation. As I turn now to Puritan practice, I will do so under the rubric of the system of virtues and vices that the Puritans evolved in regard to how we should and should not pursue our callings as Christians. A checklist bordering on something legalistic is discernible.

The starting point is that a calling needed to be “lawful” or “warrantable.” John Cotton wrote, “Faith draws the heart of a Christian to live in some warrantable calling; as soon as ever a man begins to look towards God, and the ways of his grace, he will not rest, till he find out some warrantable calling.”<sup>60</sup> William Perkins offered the rule “that we are to choose honest and lawful callings to walk in.”<sup>61</sup> John Downname said that the first rule governing a calling is “that our calling be lawful.”<sup>62</sup> What makes a calling lawful or warrantable? Richard Steele offers this definition: “A lawful Calling is that which some way tends to the Glory of God, and consequently doth some way further the true Happiness of Mankind, either Temporal, Spiritual, or Eternal. If the Calling do thus tend to the good of Mankind, it undoubtedly pleaseth and glorifieth God.”<sup>63</sup>

Once a calling meets the criterion of being lawful, it is subject to a framework of virtues and vices. Not surprisingly, no virtue was more prized in regard to vocation than diligence. Here is a sampling of the chorus that greets us the moment we begin to read Puritan treatises on vocation: “be diligent and industrious in the way of thy calling;” “be diligent in your callings;” “every man must do the duties of his calling with diligence;” “every man must attend his calling, and be diligent in it.”<sup>64</sup>

The corresponding vices that unleashed Puritan scorn were idleness and laziness. Robert Bolton called idleness “the very rust and canker of the soul.”<sup>65</sup> Richard Baxter wrote, “It is swinish and sinful not to labor.”<sup>66</sup> William Perkins brings some refreshing nuance to the subject when he writes that there are two “damnable sins that are contrary to this diligence. The first is idleness, whereby the duties of our callings, and the occasions of glorifying God, are neglected or omitted. The second is slothfulness, whereby they are performed slackly and carelessly.”<sup>67</sup> Richard Steele offers the following winsome appeal to his reader’s conscience: “I appeal to your own consciences, and to every man’s experience, whether you find not more inward peace and comfort at night after you have been diligently employed in your calling, than when

you have trifled therein.”<sup>68</sup>

Within the general framework of diligence and idleness, the Puritans elaborated further principles or rules on the practice of one’s calling. John Cotton, for example, lists and discusses seven “acts of faith” in regard to a calling.<sup>69</sup>

What was the source of the Puritans’ well-thought-out beliefs on the subject of vocation? The source was the Bible, in two forms—first directly, and then by logical inference from biblical data, accompanied by human reasoning and common sense. The data that comes directly from the Bible consists mainly by proof-texting. This is entirely appropriate. A Christian position on virtually any subject is based on Bible verses taken from many parts of the Bible. The Puritans’ proof-texting on the subject of vocation is somewhat loosely applied in the sense that the Puritans were ready to see the subject of vocation in places of the Bible where we ourselves are unlikely to see it when left to our own designs. We need to remember in this regard that vocation and calling were one of the “hot button” items for the Puritans. It was a subject on their minds. For Puritan preachers and writers, the subjects of vocation and work were capable of making an appearance from seemingly nowhere.

I will take Luther’s commentary on the account of Lot’s domestic life in Genesis 13 to illustrate the loose application of proof-texting that undergirded Reformation and Puritan views on vocation. From the domestic details that the Genesis text provides, Luther devotes two pages to asserting the ideas that I have covered in this article. Everything that a person “does in faith,” writes Luther, “even though in outward appearance it is most unimportant, such as the natural activities of sleeping, being awake, eating, and drinking, which seem to have no godliness connected with them, is a holy work that please God ... Lot’s wife milks the cows; the servants carry the hay and lead them to water ... These facts are related in order that everyone may have a sure comfort in his calling and may know that ‘the works of the body’ must be done too, and that one must not always devote oneself to ‘spiritual’ works.”<sup>70</sup>

As a literary critic, I am more inclined to condone this exegesis than most biblical scholars are. Literature is based on what older eras called “example theory,” meaning that it is in the nature of the literary enterprise that the author places examples of life before us. These examples are of two types—positive examples that we are intended to approve and emulate, and negative ones that we are intended to avoid. Unless the author manages the text in such

a way as to indicate disapproval, we can safely assume that what is portrayed is intended as a norm of what is good. Fiction writer Flannery O'Connor went so far as to write, "It is from the kind of world the writer creates, from the kind of character and detail he invests it with, that a reader can find the intellectual meaning of a book."<sup>71</sup> We need to let that sink in: "the intellectual meaning of a book" resides in "the kind of world the writer creates."

Surely we are expected to do *something* with the details that appear in the spare, unembellished stories of the Bible. I am less critical than I once was when the Puritans adduce the family stories of Genesis as evidence that God wants parents to prepare their children for a vocation. The stories of Genesis do not *prescribe* that parents settle their children in a vocation, but they offer a picture of it, surely for our edification and emulation. A certain sense of life comes through the text of the Bible, and that sense of life is one that views the tasks of life as something to which God calls people. The Genesis text tells us explicitly that God called Abraham to the life of faith, and it shows us by inference that he called Abraham to be a nomadic herdsman as his occupation and livelihood.

In addition to proof-texting, the Reformers and Puritans elevated certain key passages to the status of touchstones for their doctrine of vocation. One of these was the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30). In this parable, the Puritans saw the principles of God's calling of people to serve him, the obligation of creatures to be responsible stewards of what God entrusts to them, accountability to the God who calls and enables people to fulfill their vocation, and judgment based on the adequacy of one's stewardship.

A second touchstone was the story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42). This story relates to vocation because it weighs the comparative merits of spiritual contemplation and active work. The Catholic tradition had used the story to praise the monastic life and disparage ordinary life. Puritans interpreted the story in multiple ways, but always in such a way as to reject the Catholic interpretation. Certainly the story was used by Puritan commentators to assert the primacy of the spiritual life—the general calling of all Christians—over the particular callings of our hands and works. Even when Mary is offered as a sympathetic norm, Martha's behavior is interpreted in such a way as to maintain the Protestant view of vocation over against the Catholic view. John Preston, for example, claimed that Christ did not find fault with Martha "because she was careful to provide, but because her care went

so far that it troubled her, that she could not attend upon spiritual duties.”<sup>72</sup> Calvin used the story as the occasion to make a very strong statement of the Protestant view of vocation, asserting in his commentary on this text that “no sacrifice is more pleasing to God than when every man applies himself diligently to his own calling.”<sup>73</sup>

Among the Puritans’ touchstone passages on vocation, without doubt the chief one was 1 Corinthians 7:17, 20, and 24. I believe that this passage is the most far reaching biblical text for correct thinking about vocation, so I will quote it. As I do so, I will parse it according to the Puritan framework of general and particular callings (a format that William Perkins and Richard Steele also used in their commentary on this passage): “let each person lead the life that the Lord as assigned to him [particular calling], and to which God has called him [particular calling]. . . . Each one should remain in the condition [particular calling] in which he was called [general calling to salvation] . . . In whatever condition [particular calling] each was called [general calling to salvation], there let him remain with God.”

A modern scholar claims that Paul was forced to use the word *calling* in an entirely new sense to express the idea that one’s work in the world is just as much a calling from God as the call to the Christian life. He writes, “Quite deliberately he places these secular conditions and circumstances . . . on the same spiritual level as . . . conversion itself.”<sup>74</sup> Someone else writes that when Paul speaks of the new convert’s remaining in “the calling wherein he was called” (KJV), he “uses the same Greek in two different senses. The second is the usual NT meaning and refers to the summons by which Christians are ‘called’ into God’s Kingdom. The first is defined by the context as meaning one’s station or status in life.”<sup>75</sup>

The Puritans uniformly assert this same interpretation, and they were correct in doing so. Although most biblical references to God’s calling are to the spiritual life of conversion and sanctification, it is wrong to limit the *concept* of vocation to the specific *vocabulary* of calling, such as the Greek word *klesis*. Surely anything that God commands or expects of us is something to which he calls us. For example, God commands hospitality, and therefore hospitality is a vocation for Christians. Jesus commanded us to “consider the lilies of the field” (Matt 6:28), so we are called to find a time and place for beauty, contemplation, and contact with nature in our lives.

The concept of God’s *commandment* to work and serve is regularly invoked

in Puritan discussions of vocation and calling. I noted earlier Luther's statement that a maidservant can defend her daily work as important because she can say "I have God's word and commandment." What word and commandment? A command such as Colossians 3:23—"Work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men." Thomas Manton wrote that "a lawful calling is ... a duty, enforced by a commandment."<sup>76</sup> John Downame wrote similarly that "the duties of our callings must proceed out of ... obedience to God's commandment."<sup>77</sup> The logic of these assertions is impeccable: if God commands us to do something, he calls us to do it.

The Puritans were right to extend the concept of calling beyond what God commands us to do and include the role of God's providence in leading us into a position or role. Thomas Manton, for example, wrote that "what our callings should be is determined by providence giving gifts and education, and obtruding us upon such a course of life."<sup>78</sup> Richard Steele likewise claimed that God's "wise providence ... hath placed you in this your calling in particular."<sup>79</sup> Part of God's providence is his fitting of people to particular callings through abilities and inclinations, a subject on which the Puritans said much but that I do not have space to pursue here. It strikes me as entirely plausible that if God through his arrangement of a person's life opens a door of opportunity, buttressed by endowments to perform a certain kind of work or activity, we can view this as summoning or calling a person to enter the open door.

Thus far I have answered three questions, namely: What is the medieval background on the subject of vocation that the Puritans sought to reform? What was the early Reformation context in which the Puritans formulated their view of vocation? Exactly what did the Puritans say about vocation? My final question is, How might the Puritans reform our own thinking about vocation, just as they reformed thinking in their own day? I will make six applications.

The first is that it is important to give credit where credit is due. The Reformers and Puritans set the Christian world on the right track in regard to the doctrine of vocation. Even if current writers on the subject do not overtly draw sustenance from Puritan writings, they are nonetheless inheritors of a tradition that makes their insights possible. My heart leaps when I see contemporary writers on the subject of vocation adduce biblical data in support of their insights, but here, too, it was the Reformation that established



*sola scriptura* as the foundation for Christian belief and practice.

A second application flows from the Puritan framework of general and particular callings. The first lesson in this regard is the Puritans’ assigning primacy to the general calling of conversion and sanctification. In the current rediscovery of bringing faith into the marketplace, there may be a danger that the spiritual life is taken for granted and not properly attended to. It sometimes appears to me that leaders of the revival of interest in vocation leapfrog over the general calling in their hurry to reinstate Christian values in the workplace. It would be possible for us, at our moment in history, to produce a Christianized version of careerism. The whole drift of our culture at large is to elevate people’s careers to a position of highest priority in life. We need to find ways to set boundaries to the time and value we assign to our careers.

The Puritans can help us set that boundary by their way of placing career into a broader spiritual context. “Take this caution withal,” Richard Sibbes counseled, “that we more highly esteem our Christian calling than our ordinary vocations and duties.”<sup>80</sup> Richard Steele noted with disapproval the large number of those “that are very diligent in their worldly employments ... but neglect the welfare of their souls.” Steele then added the exhortation, “Let not diligence in your earthly callings thrust out the service of God ... You have a soul as well as a body, and both must live and consequently be fed ... Your work on earth will be done best when your work in heaven is done first.”<sup>81</sup>

Thirdly, we also need to embrace the other half of the Puritan paradigm of our twofold calling. Our work and activities in the everyday world are also a calling. They carry God’s approval and are subject to his interest just as much as our praying and reading of the Bible and attending church. Richard Sibbes wrote, “Our whole life, not only in the church, but in our particular places, may be a ‘service of God’... To ‘serve’ God is to carry ourselves as the children of God wheresoever we are: so that our whole life is a service to God.”<sup>82</sup> John Downname was of the opinion that “if we thus perform the duties of our callings, in love towards God, and in obedience of his commandment ... then shall we therein do service unto God ... as well as in hearing the Word, or receiving the Sacrament.”<sup>83</sup> We cannot remind ourselves of this truth too often, and the Puritans can help remind us.

Additionally, I believe that we can learn a salutary lesson from the way in which the Reformers and Puritans envisioned our particular callings as a

plurality and not only the primary job by which we earn our living or oversee the family and household if we are a homemaker. All of the roles and tasks that are entrusted to us are callings in the sense that God has called us to them. Mowing the lawn and vacuuming the house are things to which God calls us. Serving on a committee and teaching a child are callings. Taking time for leisure pursuits is a Christian calling.

Does it make any practical difference to view the myriad tasks of life as vocations? My answer is yes. I fulfill the duties of life with a much better attitude, and with greater excellence, and with a better understanding of how they fit into the larger context of life, when I view them as callings. For me personally, there is a difference between praying at the beginning of my day in the office that God will cause me to have a productive day and, on the other hand, praying that God will enable me to serve him well as I pursue my tasks of the day. Furthermore, our culture tends to demote tasks for which people do not receive pay. Placing these tasks under the rubric of vocation can serve as a corrective.

Closely related to this but deserving of separate mention is the Puritan embracing of the common life and the dignity of seemingly menial and undignified work. There is a permanent tendency in human nature to elevate what is prestigious and disparage what is common and lacking in glamor. Theoretically we deny that God has a low view of mundane tasks, but in practice we ourselves struggle to elevate such tasks to a position of being worthy and commendable and something that can be performed with zest. We also tend to make a transfer from the lowly nature of a task to the person who performs that task for a livelihood. The Puritans can help us curb this unworthy way of thinking. Richard Steele said that “no man should think that God likes him either the better or the worse, merely for his outward calling.”<sup>84</sup> Richard Sibbes claimed that “though the matter of my service be a common, base, mean matter . . . God hath placed and planted me here, and he will be served of me in this condition at this time, though the matter of it be an ordinary thing.”<sup>85</sup>

Finally, the Puritans offer a model of integration that is more nuanced than what we ourselves ordinarily practice and articulate in regard to vocation. We tend to conceive of Christian vocation in terms of carrying over Christian values and principles into our callings. It is a good model of integration. Nonetheless, when I read certain passages in Puritan writings, I catch a

glimpse of something that goes beyond merely carrying Christian principles into life in the world and focuses more on embodying or incarnating the Christian faith in oneself while pursuing the callings of life. I have already done justice to how the Reformers and Puritans work and the duties of life not only as an arena within which we can live the Christian life but also as the very means by which we serve God and relate to him. I will simply note here that this represents a very high degree of integration.

In the same vein are Puritan comments about *being Christians* in the workplace that go beyond simply applying Christian principles and values. Richard Steele, for example, wrote that “every man ought to manage his temporal calling in subordination to his spiritual, and must remember that in the throng of all his business he is a Christian.”<sup>86</sup> Similarly, William Perkins wrote, “It is not sufficient for a man in the congregation and in common conversation to be a Christian, but in his very personal calling he must show himself to be so ... A schoolmaster must not only be a Christian in the assembly, when he heareth the word and receiveth the sacraments, but he must also show himself to be a Christian in the office of teaching ... And therefore both callings must be joined, as body and soul are joined in a living man.”<sup>87</sup>

Can the Puritans instruct us on the subject of vocation? Yes, like David, they served God in their generation. Like Abel, they being dead, still speak. On the subject of vocation, they have bequeathed to us a birthright of excellence.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Holl, “The History of the Word Vocation,” trans. Heber F. Peacock, *Review and Expositor* 55 (1958): 126-154.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (New York: Scribner, 1966), 113.

<sup>3</sup> *Demonstratio Evangelica*, quoted in W. R. Forrester, *Christian Vocation* (New York: Scribner, 1953), 43.

<sup>4</sup> “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” in *Luther’s Works* (ed., Helmut T. Lehmann; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 44:127.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>6</sup> Luther, exposition of the Ten Commandments, in *What Luther Says* (ed., Ewald M. Plass; St. Louis: Concordia, 1959, 1986), 1501.

<sup>7</sup> Luther, *Works*, quoted in W. H. Forrester, *Christian Vocation* (New York: Scribner, 1953), 148.

<sup>8</sup> Luther, commentary on Genesis 13:13, in *Luther’s Works* (vol. 2; ed., Jaroslav Pelikan; St. Louis: Concordia, 1960), 349.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther, exposition of 1 Peter 2:18-20, in *What Luther Says* (ed., Plass), 1501.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, sermon on Matthew 6:24-34, in *What Luther Says* (ed., Plass), 56.

<sup>11</sup> Georgia Harkness, *John Calvin: The Man and His Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), 181-182.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.10.6 (trans. Henry Beveridge; 2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 2:34.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, commentary on 1 Corinthians 7:20, in *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (trans.,

- John W. Frasier; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 153.
- 14 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists* (3 vols.; trans., William Pringle; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1949), 2:143.
- 15 Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses* (4 vols.; trans., Charles William Bingham; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 3:291.
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- 17 Richard Steele, *The Tradesman's Calling* (London: Samuel Sprint, 1684), 2.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 19 John Preston, *The New Covenant, or The Saints Portion* (London: Nicolas Bourne, 1629), 600.
- 20 John Downname, *A Guide to Godliness; Or a Treatise of a Christian Life* (London: Philemo Stephens and Christopher Meredith, 1629), 861.
- 21 George Swinnock, *The Works* (5 vols.; Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1858), 1:307.
- 22 Perkins, 1:754, 757-758.
- 23 Gustaf Wingren, *The Christian's Calling: Luther on Vocation* (trans., Carl C. Rasmussen; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 5.
- 24 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:34.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 35.
- 26 Perkins, 1:250.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 1:750.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 1:752.
- 29 Steele, *The Tradesman's Calling*, 1.
- 30 Richard Bernard, *Ruth's Recompense* (London: Felix Kyngston, 1628), 405, 90.
- 31 *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes* (7 vols.; ed., Alexander Balloch Grosart; Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1862), 6:507.
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- 33 Perkins, 1:750.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 Steele, 3.
- 36 Downname 252.
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- 41 Steele, 37-38, 92.
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- 60 Cotton, *Christian Calling*, in Miller/Johnson, 1:319.

- <sup>61</sup> Perkins, 1:758.  
<sup>62</sup> Downname, 244.  
<sup>63</sup> Steele, 26.  
<sup>64</sup> William Burkitt, *The Poor Man's Help* (London: T. Parkhurst, 1701), 16; Baxter, *A Christian Directory*, 254; Perkins, 1:752; John Preston, *The Saints Qualification* (London: Nicolas Bourne, 1633), 42.  
<sup>65</sup> Robert Bolton, *General Directions for a Comfortable Walking with God* (Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1991), 77.  
<sup>66</sup> Baxter, *The Catechizing of Families*, in *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter* (4 vols.; Ligonier, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), 4:129.  
<sup>67</sup> Perkins, 1:752.  
<sup>68</sup> Steele, 89.  
<sup>69</sup> Cotton, *Christian Calling*, in Miller/Johnson, 1:319-324.  
<sup>70</sup> Luther, *Luther's Works* (vol 2.; ed., Pelikan), 349-350.  
<sup>71</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (ed., Sally and Robert Fitzgerald; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957), 75.  
<sup>72</sup> John Preston, *The Golden Scepter* (London: N. Bourne, 1638), 610.  
<sup>73</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:143.  
<sup>74</sup> Russell E. Kirk, *The Vision of God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1932), 81.  
<sup>75</sup> Wade H. Boggs, *All Ye Who Labor* (Richmond: John Knox, 1962), 30-31.  
<sup>76</sup> Thomas Manton, *The Works of Thomas Manton* (22 vols.; London: James Nisbet, 1872), 9:480.  
<sup>77</sup> Downname, 245.  
<sup>78</sup> Manton, 9:480.  
<sup>79</sup> Steele, 162.  
<sup>80</sup> Sibbes, 5:9.  
<sup>81</sup> Steele, 9, 92, 194.  
<sup>82</sup> Sibbes, 6:507.  
<sup>83</sup> Downname, 248.  
<sup>84</sup> Steele, 2.  
<sup>85</sup> Sibbes, 6:101.  
<sup>86</sup> Steele, 2.  
<sup>87</sup> Perkins, 1: 756-757.