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Protestant and Catholic Meanings of Vocation: Is Business a True Vocation?

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I RECENTLY ASKED STUDENTS in my theology class for the meaning of the words “vocation” and “calling” in an effort to gain a practical understanding of these thematic words among today’s young adults. The class of thirty was evenly divided between men and woman, most in their late teens or early twenties and from differing Christian traditions, Islam, Buddhism, or no religion. Yet, their responses were similar. “Vocation” means: occupation, job, training, skill, profession, career, trade, what you do for a living, even “lack of higher education” as in “vocational training.” On the other hand “calling” had very distinctive meanings: inner direction, following the heart’s desire, duty in life, a force greater than self; what one is meant to do, mission, task God asks you to do; purpose from a higher power. Only one student replied “priest, nun, worker in the church,” and only one student included any notion of a call to service, “God’s drawing me into God’s service.”

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Although only a small sample, the exercise centers the areas of discussion in this paper on questions surrounding the meanings of business as a vocation, a calling. In contemporary usage, “vocation” has come to be identified with career or occupation at best, and often with job. While occupation usually indicates the general area in which one’s skills, talents and education are expressed, such as nursing, job generally signifies the particular, concrete expression in a given context, e.g., hospital nurse at Harborview Hospital, Seattle. Secondly, our examination must avoid the conflation of “vocation” and “work,” although we will be concentrating upon the dynamic understanding of work in the world as a vocation. In this context, then, we can ask how business can be seen as a vocation.

Student responses to the meaning of “calling” provide the bases for further discussion on the inner or subjective dimension of “calling,” and in particular the subjective dimension of work, as seen in the thought of Pope John Paul II in the development of Catholic Social Teaching. And, finally, at least one student’s response provides us with the sense of calling as being drawn into God’s service to the world. The fundamental religious and theological question is whether we serve God in the particular work we undertake or our state of life at particular times or whether we serve God *through* that work and state of life. In other words, is the work we do extrinsic to our quest for salvation or an intrinsic part of our working out of salvation?

The discussion first examines the meaning of work in Greek society, the early Christian community, the medieval concept of vocation in consecrated “religious” life as monk, nun, priest and the transformation of the meaning of vocation in Luther, Calvin, and the Reformed tradition. The discussion then moves to an analysis of vocation as expressed in work in the Roman Catholic traditions of Catholic Social Teachings, particularly in the writings of John Paul II from 1981 on. Finally, the reflection examines the contemporary confluence of Protestant and Catholic thought on vocation/calling in relation to work, and in particular business.

Background

In the ancient Greek world, work in any form was “an unmitigated evil to be avoided at all costs.”¹ Unemployment was the goal, leaving time for the pursuit of great deeds in the military, politics or the leisurely contemplations of philosophy. Work involved the unseemly

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activities of the body, drawing one away from the approach to the gods and the true vocation of souls. In the words of Plato, “It is the body and the care of it to which we are enslaved, which makes us too busy to practice philosophy. Worst of all . . . everywhere in our investigation the body is present . . . so that it prevents us from seeing truth.”² For Aristotle, since the highest pursuit of human life is contemplation in an attempt to approach the life of the gods, then humans must turn away from distracting worldly activities and pursue the contemplative life.

Within the early Christian community through the medieval period, a similar attitude toward work in the world as associated with the body and the lower elements of human nature prevailed. Through the influences especially of neo-Platonic thought, the emphasis was upon a life spent in contemplation, as reflected in these words of Augustine in the 5th century, “the contemplation of God is promised us as the goal of all our actions and the eternal perfection of happiness,” or Aquinas in the 13th century, “the contemplation of divine truth . . . is the goal of the whole of human life.”³ Work which meets the needs of the body, then, has “no lasting religious significance.”⁴ As theologian Ernst Troeltsch notes in his monumental study, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, “An ethic which starts from the point of view of an original equality, and which holds that the differences that do exist are due to sin, and which at its best regards the division of labour as a Divine arrangement adapted to the needs of fallen humanity, is inherently unable to see any value in ‘callings’ at all” (Troeltsch, *Social Teaching*, I, 121).⁵

The monastery or the nunnery, places of withdrawal from worldly activities, exemplified the most valued state of life, and even while bodily work occurred in those settings, the work was a means of purification and the development of virtue, not an activity to be pursued for itself.⁶ Furthermore, in the later medieval period as liturgical practices took up more and more of the roles and time of the monks and nuns, they no longer worked to support themselves; many lived off the wealth of the aristocracy through gifts in exchange for prayer. Even the wandering mendicant friars lived off the good will of those whom they met along the way.⁷

In the Catholic understanding, vocation was a response to God’s calling by removing oneself from the cares and concerns of this world. Sociologist Max Weber notes that in Jewish traditions, among the Greek and Roman classics, or in the medieval world of Catholicism, vocation had none of the contemporary meaning of a fulfillment of one’s duties

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to God by active engagement in the world. Further, in the medieval world someone who engaged in the work of business was certainly suspect; today's business state of mind "would both in ancient times and in the Middle Ages have been proscribed as the lowest sort of avarice and as an attitude entirely lacking in self-respect."⁸ "Business was only possible for those lax in ethical thinking."⁹ According to Aquinas, there is "something shameful about it [commerce], being without any honorable or necessary defining goal" (quoted in Tam).¹⁰

The Reformation Reforms Vocation

It was not until the Renaissance that the value of work was seen as a means of the glorification of God. Consequently, the emphasis was now not on the one who contemplates an idea reflective of the divine, but the one who brings that idea into fruition through work. Work both distinguishes humans from the animals through free, creative activities and brings us to "achieving divine status."¹¹

It fell to Martin Luther to envision an entirely new understanding of work in the world as a means of the glorification of God. Luther's distinction between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of earth is a key to understanding the meaning of vocation or calling. Our relationship to God, based on faith, refers us to the kingdom of heaven, while our relationship to the neighbor, based on love, refers us to kingdom of earth. Vocation belongs to the kingdom of earth. "More specifically," for Luther, "a vocation is the specific call to love one's neighbor which comes to us through the duties which attach to our social place or 'station' within the earthly kingdom."¹² And those "stations" refer to **all** the ways in which we relate to others. In Luther's words: "All the duties of Christians, such as loving one's wife, rearing one's children, obeying the magistrate, etc. are fruits of the spirit."¹³

Even more radical is the consequence of this notion of vocation through stations in life: "Through the human pursuit of vocations across the array of earthly stations the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the sick are healed, the ignorant are enlightened and the weak are protected. That is, by working we actually participate in God's ongoing providence for the human race."¹⁴ Thus all work has great religious significance: through our work we are co-creators with God in building the world. The monastery then is in fact a perversion of the idea of vocation, calling people away from service to their neighbor out of a self-absorption for their own salvation in their "works" of prayer; the monk attempts to

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achieve the kingdom through his own effort rather than relying on God's grace. As Lutheran theologian Gustaf Wingren notes in his study *Luther on Vocation*, the motivation for our worldly actions should not be our own holiness but the neighbor's good.¹⁵ To serve a neighbor in need is to serve God.

No longer is worldly activity just a necessary matter of the flesh, a neutral matter, but "vocation" now is a way of living acceptable to God precisely in "the fulfillment of one's obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. That was his calling."¹⁶ However, in itself the Lutheran evaluation of work was not sufficient to serve as the spirit which impelled the pursuit of work in the modern economic order. For Lutheranism did not require a transformation of the world in a rationalized, ethical direction,¹⁷ the cornerstone of modern industrial and post-industrial, capitalistic order.

As Ernst Troeltsch notes,

Although Luther pointed out that it is precisely through the ordered work of one's calling . . . that the preservation of the whole community is effected, . . . he attributes it all to the wise ordering and the kindly guidance of Providence, and not to deliberate human initiative. The vocational system was not consciously designed and developed for the purposes of the holy community and of Christian Society, but it was accepted as a Divine arrangement That is why it was possible for the Lutheran to regard the work of his vocation in an entirely traditional and reactionary way—as the duty of remaining within the traditional way of earning a living which belongs to one's position in society.¹⁸

Presbyterian Gary Badcock reminds the reader that Luther one's calling in the world did not involve the critical element of personal choice, but rather an acceptance of the "station" in life in which one found oneself. The idea of choosing a vocation in freedom, of "making one's own way in the world" would move Luther to judge such choices "works righteousness' and a kind of rebellion against divine order."¹⁹ In Luther's universe, one's calling remains a static notion.

In agreement with Luther, John Calvin asserts that all work is inherently religious, provided it contributes to the building up of the community. The knowledge of God pursued in the contemplative life while good can end in idle speculation. "The kind of knowledge of God that Calvin holds to be important is the knowledge that bears fruit in a person's life."²⁰ What the Calvinists added to the understanding of the value of human work was the understanding of a social order in which each is bound to the neighbor through an

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elaborate interaction of the gifts received in one's calling, "contributing according to his specific talents and receiving according to his need."²¹ The American Puritan Cotton Mather wrote: "We expect benefits from human society. It is but equal that human society should receive benefits from us. We are beneficial to human society by the works of that special occupation in which we are to be employed."²² We are obligated then to share our gifts and our proportion of material possessions, in Calvin's words, "so that there may not be some in affluence and others in need."²³

In Weber's analysis, for all of its weaknesses as an explanation of modern capitalism, the key to understanding the ultimate transition in views of vocation and work lies in the pietistic sects (a term used by Weber to denote a withdrawal from the world) which flowed from Calvinism and the "inner-worldly asceticism" emerging from their understanding of the relationship with the world and especially of economic activity. In this view, the Protestant

. . . takes as sphere of his religious 'vocation,' the bringing of this world and its sins under the rational norms of revealed divine will, for the glory of God and as an identifying mark of his own salvation. . . . Only ascetic Protestantism . . . created the religious motivations for seeking salvation primarily through immersion in one's worldly vocation.²⁴

As a result the ascetic Protestant, denying in work any impulse toward extravagance which might detract from work itself, engages in worldly work and economic activity. The world possesses unique religious significance and is the place in which the believer now organizes working life and one's whole life in a spirit of asceticism which does not deny the world but provides each person with assurances of religious salvation in an ethic of vocation: I am doing God's work in my calling.²⁵

Weber notes that this ethic of inner-worldly asceticism achieved its greatest power in the Puritan interpretation of predestination, which produced in its believers the strongest motives for acting in service of God's desires. "In the case of the Puritans . . ., [this] belief in predestination often produced ethical rigorism, legalism and rationally planned procedures for the patterning of life."²⁶ In his insightful essay in this volume, Johan Verstraeten traces this development into its later transformation: ". . . in the preaching of vulgarized Calvinism, economic success (earning money) was considered to be a sign of predestination. . . . Religious leaders were very well aware that the Protestant work ethic did not only bring a new spirit, but also a real accumulation of capital."

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Troeltsch remarked that this ethic of acquisition was held in check by an important set of religious principles:

This peculiar combination of ideas . . . produces active industry within the economic sphere, but not for the sake of wealth; it produces unceasing labour, ever disciplining the senses, but none of this effort is for the sake of the object of all this industry. The one main controlling idea and purpose of this ethic is to glorify God, to produce the Holy Community, to attain that salvation which in election is held up as the aim.²⁷

Such a conception provides a much freer sense of “vocation” or “calling” than a Catholic or even Lutheran conception by “a deliberate increasing of the intensity of labor.”

Thus the ideal was now no longer one of surrender to a static vocational system, directed by Providence, but the free use of vocational work as the method of realizing the purpose of the Holy Community.... One of the special tasks of the Holy Community was that of ascetic self-discipline in work and ascetic abstention from all worldly distractions in order to attend to the duties of one’s calling, the renunciation of the utilization of the profit gained by one’s labour for personal enjoyment....

[Thus] from a mere method of providing for material needs [work in one’s profession] became an end in itself.... That gave rise to that ideal of work for work’s sake, which forms the intellectual and moral assumption which lies behind the modern bourgeois way of life.²⁸

Yet the result in our time is that without the constraints of the “Protestant” religious dimension of the calling, “once this psychological state of mind has been created, it can then, through a process of metamorphosis of purpose, be detached from its original meaning and placed at the disposal of other ideas,” the plight of an acquisitive, consumer ethic which pervades modern life.²⁹

As Weber remarked in his conclusion to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, ascetic Protestantism has created the force so decisive to the effectiveness of the idea that faithful labor is highly pleasing to God: “the psychological sanction of it through the conception of this labor as a calling, as the best, often in the last analysis the only means of attaining certainty of grace,” and “it legalized the exploitation of this specific willingness to work, in that it also interpreted the employer’s business activity as a calling.”³⁰ In addition Weber then states what Troeltsch only indicated, namely that in our day the religious basis of this asceticism and valuation of work has “died away” with the result that “material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no

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previous period in history.”³¹ (For an excellent analysis of the ways in which Weber’s thesis has been upended to support modern capitalism in both Protestant and Catholic thought, see Verstraeten in this volume.)

In summary of these historical developments, theologian Lee Hardy writes:

Whereas for Luther our vocation is discerned in the duties of our station in life, for the Calvinists it is derived from our gifts. . . . Therefore we are obliged to find a station in life where our gifts can indeed be employed for the sake of our neighbor’s good. The station is no longer itself normative, but must be judged by its suitability as an instrument of social service. **If it is found to be faulty or ill-adapted to its end, it must be either altered or discarded altogether** [author’s emphasis].³²

This shift gave tremendous emphasis to the Calvinist thrust toward social reform in the next centuries, an emphasis which ties in well with developments in Catholic social thinking.

Vocation in Catholic Social Teaching

As long as the idea of “calling” or “vocation” was tied in the Catholic worldview to a removal from worldly activity in the monastery, nunnery or rectory, the only other meaning of “calling” by extension was to married life. The idea of a “calling” to productive activity in “worldly” work and much less in business was foreign to this world view. Correspondingly theologian David Hollenbach notes that it was not until the 1960’s that Catholic Social Teachings as a set of principles shed the hierarchical model of society in which one’s state in life was generally fixed by natural conditions of birth, etc. and embraced a more democratic social model and an ecclesiology in which the Church was engaged *in* the world.³³ In those transitions the idea of a “calling” to work gradually emerged not as the means of achieving salvation but as the fulfillment of one’s person *through* work.

In *Rerum novarum*, Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical on the condition of labor, Leo reiterates the traditional understanding of vocation as a “call” to a state of life: “In choosing a state of life [calling], it is indisputable that all are at full liberty either to follow the counsel of Jesus Christ as to virginity or to enter into the bonds of marriage.”³⁴ Even by Pope John XXIII’s writings in 1959, the word “vocation” was still used to refer to priestly vocations or more generally a calling of persons to Christian faith, i.e., a religious response to God’s call.³⁵

Then in his 1961 encyclical, *Mater et magistra*, John extended the meaning of vocation to include a more contemporary understanding of work as vocational: this requires “the

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establishment of economic and vocational bodies which would be autonomous.”³⁶ John here identifies vocation with occupation; “vocational bodies” are instruments for training in professions. However, in one brief reference John does imbue the word with a meaning which will emerge later, vocation as a calling to work in an industry or labor effecting the world: agricultural labor “should be thought of as a vocation, a God-given mission”³⁷ (*Mater et magistra*, www.osjspm.org) This is the closest John comes to a link between ordinary work in the world and vocation.

As the Second Vatican Council of 1963-65 wrestled with the difficult question of relating the Church to the larger world, the bishops refer to calling in the broader sense as the understanding that all people because created in God’s likeness “enjoy the same divine calling and destiny,” (*Gaudium et spes*).³⁸ Then, in one small remark the bishops open up the meaning of the word to a more specific understanding as a calling to work in the world:

They are mistaken, who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their *earthly responsibilities*. For they are forgetting that by the *faith itself* they are more than ever *obliged to measure up to those duties*, each according to his proper *vocation* [author’s italics].³⁹

This quote reflects a movement toward understanding vocation as engagement in the world as part of one’s responsibilities required by faith. Although couched in the language of “two cities,” reminiscent of Luther’s distinctions of the two kingdoms, the idea has begun to develop, and later John Paul II will then use the term in two senses: a transcendent calling to God of all people, and a specific vocation for each person in his or her work.⁴⁰ For a further analysis of the different dimensions of calling in the Roman Catholic tradition and its relationship to Protestant thought, the essay by Regina Wolfe and Shirley Roels in this volume adds important segments for further clarification. They note, for example, that in relation to business as a calling:

While many Protestant groups may affirm managerial leadership as a Christian calling, the scope of one’s responsibilities within that role may be perceived more narrowly [than in Roman Catholicism]. Love of God through active worship and evangelism are a priority. Work is seen as an inherent part of personhood with ethical parameters on one’s personal behavior. Yet Protestants may differ more widely than Roman Catholics on the reach and range of one’s social responsibility; and those differences in understanding are likely the result of a different balance in the sources of faith-related authority.

Pope John Paul II on Business and Vocation

In his 1981 encyclical “On Human Work,” Pope John Paul II outlines an important dimension of work essential to the understanding of a work as vocation namely, the *subjective* nature of work. In the pope’s words,

[M]an is a person, a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself and with a tendency to self-realization. As a person, man is therefore the subject of work . . . [His] actions must all serve to fulfill the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity [author’s italics] (“On Human Work,” O’Brien).⁴¹

Thus all work in this sense involves a calling to be fully a person. This subjective dimension “conditions the very *ethical nature of work* [author’s italics].” This changes the ancient and even medieval view that persons are classed according to their work done, since now the primary basis of the value of work is the person “who is its subject.” This subjective dimension of work has pre-eminence over the objective nature of work, “however true it may be that man is destined for work and *called to it*” [author’s italics] (O’Brien, 359).⁴²

In particular, the “ethical meaning of work” lies in two dimensions: not only do people “transform nature,” i.e. produce products, good, services, whether material or intellectual, but also and more importantly people achieve “fulfillment as a human being and indeed in a sense become ‘more a human being.’”⁴³ Then in words which might echo Calvinist thought, certainly in Weber’s analysis, John Paul notes that this consideration of the ethical nature of work posits industriousness as a virtue, that is, as a habit whereby one becomes good as a person in work.⁴⁴ Work “constitutes one of the fundamental dimensions of his earthly existence and of his *vocation*” [author’s italics].⁴⁵

This theme finds itself repeated and expanded in John Paul’s 1991 encyclical, *Centessimus annus*. The subjective, personalist dimension of work is complemented by the social nature of work: “At the same time, work has a ‘social’ dimension through its intimate relationship . . . to the common good.”⁴⁶

At this point, then, vocation has taken on a meaning similar to that found in ascetic Protestantism, i.e., a calling to work in an industrious manner in the world and in doing so to perfect oneself and to work toward the common good as part of one’s responsibilities to God and to others. Furthermore, vocation has come to express two different but related

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meanings in John Paul's writings, dramatically reflected in his use of the word "vocation" some 20 times in his 1987 encyclical letter, *Soliditudo rei socialis*.

First, John Paul refers to the "transcendent vocation of the human being" and the rights which follow from that vocation. Secondly, each person has a "natural and historical vocation," attained in one's specific work. Later in the document, John Paul again notes that a person's vocation is "at once both earthly and transcendent," and one's commitment to justice is "to be found in each individual's role, *vocation*, and circumstances" [author's italics],⁴⁷ a reference to *vocation* as one's individual calling to work toward the common good and perfect oneself in a particular occupation and job in life.

In other writings directed toward business people John Paul's two-fold understanding of work's subjective and social dimensions, along with its transcendent and historical meanings, leads him to see business as a community of persons: "[A] business firm is not merely an instrument at the service of the well-being of its management; rather, it is itself a common good of both management and labor, at the service of the common good of society" and "a community of persons."⁴⁸

In relation to business, then, when one is called to a particular business, that call challenges both the individual to take steps to ensure that his or her potential is developed and challenges the business to ensure first that employees have opportunities to develop themselves within the meaning of the enterprise and secondly that the business itself contribute to the common good of all employees and to the social and international common good.

In conclusion, in this analysis we have outlined the development of the meaning of vocation in Catholic Social Thought to include 1) a subjective dimension in which humans perfect themselves through industrious work, providing an internal ethical motivation for work far different from the "acquisitive" habits surrounding work which Weber analyzes in today's work ethic and 2) a social dimension in which the worker and the business as community contribute to the common good.

Convergence and New Meanings

John Paul II's writings develop a meaning for vocation which reflects a deeper, religious dimension to vocation as active engagement in the world for the common good.

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This newer Catholic view of vocation recalls much of the dynamics of vocation found in the Reformed tradition. At the same time current writers in both traditions are challenging the reduction of vocation to occupation, a perspective shared by students in my theology classes. For example, Methodist theologian James Fowler writes: “Christianly speaking, then, the human calling—the human vocation—is to partnership with God in God’s work in the world,” or more specifically, “Vocation is the response a person makes with his or her total self to the address of God and to the calling to partnership.”⁴⁹ Scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann in proposing covenant as a metaphor for vocation writes in language similar to John Paul’s emphasis upon the subjective nature of work that “such a view of reality *transposes all identity questions into vocational questions* [Brueggemann italics].”

. . . identity for a person is given in the call of the other One. . . . The dynamic of humanness is in the interaction between the One who *calls* and the one who is *called*. And the agenda between them is a *calling*. . . . That idea, perhaps, has lost standing because it seemed so classical, if not medieval, and so linked to a static view of society. . . . But we are not speaking of an occupation or a job or a profession, but of a purpose for being in the world which is related to the purposes of God. . . . [Brueggemann italics].⁵⁰

Quaker educator and theologian Parker Palmer emphasizes this personal, subjective nature of vocation when “we discover our deep identity—the true self within every human being that is the seed of authentic vocation.”⁵¹ Like Brueggemann Palmer sees that the deepest vocational question is “Who am I? What is my nature?”⁵² Yet, true vocation does not involve the search for one’s true self so characteristic of contemporary psychology but rather joins that self found in response to God’s initiation to service to community.

These views of Fowler, Brueggemann, Palmer and other contemporary theologians in Protestant traditions find counterparts among Roman Catholics. For example, the US Roman Catholic bishops in their 1986 pastoral letter, “Economic Justice for All,” note that Catholics “have much to learn from the strong emphasis in Protestant tradition on the vocation of lay people in the world.”⁵³ In looking at the work of business in particular theologian Denis McCann refers to the call in the pastoral for collaboration between bishops and business people: “The invitation is based, first, on the teleological definition of business in terms of its role in achieving the common good . . . , and, second, on a recognition that such an understanding of business should enable Christians to understand their business practice as an opportunity to exercise a ‘vital Christian vocation.’”⁵⁴ And he concludes with

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a significant remark that “Business has now become theologically significant for Roman Catholics, *as it has long been for Protestants, particularly in the Calvinist traditions* [author’s italics]!”⁵⁵ Protestant philosopher Lee Hardy of Calvin College calls this development a “reformed shift”: “With the publication of Pope John Paul II’s *Laborem Exercens* in 1981, the official Catholic theology of work virtually coincides with the traditional Protestant position at very major point.”⁵⁶

Several Catholic theologians prepared the way for these developments. Writing in 1959, just prior to the Second Vatican Council, 1962-65, Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan, S.J., declared:

One can conveniently distinguish between an ethics of law and an ethics of achievement. While an ethics of law regards rules of conduct . . . an ethics of achievement reveals that there is the world and that there is something for me to do in it. It includes the idea of vocation, not simply in the sense in which we use the word ‘priest’ [career, occupation] but also in a general sense, and of development in the apprehension of the good.⁵⁷

Karl Rahner expands on this insight in an article written during the Council itself. Rahner notes that in the Catholic tradition until the present (1964) “it has not been so immediately obvious that on God’s side there is also a *positive vocation* and mission to marriage *and to a worldly calling, to earthly tasks* precisely as the manner positively ordained by God for the individual concerned, in which he is to bring to their fullness the fruits of the Spirit” [italics Rahner, underlining author].⁵⁸ A “God-given vocation to worldly callings . . . constitutes a factor which contributes positively to the sanctification of man.”⁵⁹ Furthermore all Christians are called to concrete stations in life which constitute not only “the sphere and situation *within which* Christian living can be brought to its maturity and its fulness, but are also the means *through* which and the basis *upon* which the individual concerned grows toward the fulness of his perfection. And they constitute an *intrinsic* element in this fulness itself” [italics Rahner].⁶⁰ In other words, the calling and work in which one finds oneself is not irrelevant to achieving one’s salvation but is an intrinsic aspect of the purpose of one’s life.

Perhaps no Catholic theologian of the 20th century better prepared the way for this transformation of the idea of calling/vocation as did Swiss-German Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988). The full development of his ideas on vocation emerges from his basic anthropology and Christology. Although that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper,

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we can note that in general, following Roman Catholic views of the integral relation between nature and grace, reason and faith, von Balthasar posits the unique dimension of human person as that which God has called forth for union. As Presbyterian theologian Gary Badcock summarizes: “Balthasar insists that what most fully awakens a sense of the self as a person before God is participation in the mission of Christ,”⁶¹ and that participation is vocation.

At the heart of vocation, then, as a calling for service in the world, lies von Balthasar’s central concept of person and identity. As in Brueggemann’s statement that vocational questions are identity questions, von Balthasar might say all vocational questions are person questions: there would be no person without a call into existence by God. In addition von Balthasar’s Christological foundation for person adds the important dimension that responding to that calling means sharing the mission of Christ to build up the Kingdom of God and necessarily involves sharing in the suffering of the cross. The human factor in vocation then is essential; not only is each person redeemed but at the same time is positively called to service in the world.⁶²

Currently, Catholic theologian Michael Himes, a Holy Cross priest, sees vocation in terms similar to Fowler and Palmer in particular, namely, vocation is our self-gift. Himes notes that the unique gifts and abilities in vocation given to each in birth are from God as God’s self-gift. The conclusion is simple: “what you have been given as a gift, give to other people as a gift. That is why we must develop our talents” for community.⁶³ Jesuit Herbert Alphonso, S.J., writes that the “truest and deepest self,” our God-given uniqueness, is “Personal Vocation.” Trained in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, Alphonso sees as the goal of the Exercises themselves the discernment of “God’s will in the arrangement or ordering or orientation of my life for salvation.” The purpose of such discernment is to awaken each person to the personal vocation which was always there.⁶⁴

On the one hand the distinctive sense of each person’s unique gifts and abilities in the service of God’s will has given to the Protestant and Catholic traditions and current interpretations of work a distinctive sense of the importance of the freedom of persons, of fundamental questions of identity, of the subjective nature of vocation in recognizing and developing one’s gifts and abilities over one’s life differently in different circumstances and in different occupations even for the same person. At the same time there is in each tradition a recognition of the necessities for places of work to support and develop these

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gifts, a critical and prophetic dimension to vocation to examine the economic, social and political structures which enable work to be seen as vocation and not merely job or occupation. Whether the goal is the building of the Holy Community or the enhancement of the common good, there is a convergence of understanding on the nature of work as vocation which calls into questions those work structures which fail to allow the full development of persons through the expression of their talents, God-given gifts, talents and identities.

Lee Hardy sums up the “remarkable ecumenical convergence in the practical theology of work”:

That theology gives to human work a central role in the understanding of human life in its relation both to God and the world. Through work we respond to God’s mandate to humanity to continue the work of creation by subduing the earth; through work we participate in God’s ongoing creative activity; through work we follow Christ in his example of redemptive suffering for the sake of others.⁶⁵

However, we must still address the critical question of how vocation came to be reduced to occupation and career. We saw earlier that Pope John XXIII first used the term in a sense commonly used today, namely, vocation as “occupation.” For example, in 1963 John spoke of the establishment of “economic and vocational bodies which would be autonomous” (*Mater et magistra*, www.osjspm.org). In a different translation, the wording misses the meaning of “vocational” in John’s understandings: “This requires the orderly reorganization of society with smaller professional and economic groups existing in their own right.”⁶⁶ Later, John again refers to “vocational” as instructional bodies for workers or “vocational” training.⁶⁷

Reformed theologian Karl Barth had caught the drift of this trend away from a religious meaning earlier in the 20th century when he wrote:

We speak of the vocation of man confronting and corresponding to the divine calling. It is clear that in so doing we give the term a meaning which transcends its customary use in the narrower, technical sense. Vocation in the usual sense means a particular position and function of a man in connection with the processes of human work, that is to say, his job. . . . It is of a piece with the rather feverish modern over-estimation of work and the process of production that . . . it should be thought essential to man to have a vocation in this narrower sense of job or work. On such a view it is forgotten that there are children and the sick and the elderly and others for whom vocation, in this narrower sense

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of work can be only the object either of expectation and preparation or of recollection. It is also forgotten that there are the unemployed, though these certainly are not without a vocation.⁶⁸

As Badcock notes, this modern equation of calling and occupation is highly questionable. As currently used by many, “vocation” has little religious meaning as a word. Badcock traces this misunderstanding of vocation, its reduction to occupation, precisely to the analyses of Weber and Troeltsch:

... it is striking that the tendency to view the doctrine of vocation as if it were a question of secular occupation first arose at the turn of the twentieth century, being associated especially with the names of Weber and Troeltsch. Admittedly as these men pointed out, there were precedents of a sort in English Calvinism, but the approach characteristic of Weber and Troeltsch is one that we have had reason to reject. Classical Protestantism never committed itself to the view that the Christian doctrine of vocation was fundamentally a question of secular work. If nothing else, its attachment to the Bible as the Word of God preserved it from such a reductionist approach; for ... the Christian calling in the Bible is very much a religious rather than a secular concept.⁶⁹

We saw that emphasis strongly in Brueggemann’s reclaiming of “vocation” as a “calling” through the metaphor of Covenant. Brueggemann insists that “God’s speech is also address. He speaks not only of himself, but characteristically he speaks to his partner whom his word calls into existence.”⁷⁰ This distinctive character sets us in a different context: “the new situation is one of belonging with and belonging to.”⁷¹

For Luther, Calvin, Brueggemann, Fowler, von Balthasar, John Paul II, and others, vocation as calling takes place only in communion. Perhaps as Fowler notes the reduction of vocation to occupation and work reflects the contractual aspect of modern society: “There is no selfhood apart from community. . . no vocation apart from community. A community that centers its hopes and expectations for human excellence and contribution in the concept of vocation, however, is very different from the contractual society, with its ‘thin theory of the good,’ envisioned by the Hobbes-Locke-Smith tradition.”⁷²

Robert Bellah and colleagues described the change in the meaning of community as part of the transformation in the meaning of vocation and its reduction to career:

What the new idea of a middle class meant for individuals was summed up in another new term that only gained currency in the middle and later nineteenth century: *Career*, in the sense of “a course of professional life or employment, that offers advancement or honor.” *Profession* is an old word, but it took on new meanings when it was disconnected from the idea of a ‘calling’ and came to express the

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new conception of a career. In the context of a calling, to enter a profession meant to take up a definite function in a community and to operate within the civic and civil order of that community. The profession as career was no longer oriented to any face-to-face community but to impersonal standards of excellence, operating in the context of a national occupational system. Rather than embedding one in a community, following a profession came to mean, quite literally “to move *up* and away.” The goal was no longer the fulfillment of a commonly understood form of life but the attainment of “success,” and success depended for its very persuasive power on its indefiniteness, its open-endedness, the fact that whatever “success” one had obtained, one could always obtain more [italics Bellah].⁷³

Reclaiming “vocation,” then, as a term with a religious, Biblical, Covenantal root brings us to yet another issue in answering the question of whether business can be named as vocation or calling. In what way is vocation, and particularly then business as vocation, a *choice* of the individual and a calling by God? We live in a society of mobility far different from the static conception of social ordering which undergird the social structures of Luther’s day. Given the choice of careers faced today, the possibility of choices which effect entire lives and characters has “an intrinsic ethical dimension.”⁷⁴ How do the Protestant and Catholic traditions, with their coherence about the positive value of work in the world as serving God and neighbor in community and the subjective character of work, respond to this issue?

In the Roman Catholic tradition, John Paul II’s distinction between the transcendent and the historical nature of work as vocation is helpful. While each person is called to work out salvation through engagement of talents, skills, and abilities in building up the kingdom of God, that development will take place only in certain contexts and concrete, *historical* situations. No longer is one “assigned” to one’s station in life, but those concrete expressions manifest particular choices each person makes. Thus while the general, *transcendent* “calling” to serve God in the service of neighbor truly comes from God, in a derivative sense the particular expression in each person’s life history also participates in the transcendent calling. Consequently, business as a career/occupation in an individual’s life is but the historical manifestation of the transcendent calling of all. Fundamentally, the issues of vocation are issues of *identity and choice*.

In the Protestant tradition, Badcock captures the essence of this identification when he writes:

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[T]he question “What ought I to do?” really leads to another: “What kind of person ought I to be?” There is no clear answer to the first—insofar as it is concerned solely with career choice. However, much clearer answers can be given to the second question. I ought to be a person for whom love, service, and obedience to God are the major priorities. The Christian ethic is flexible insofar as it allows a multitude of possibilities by which one can fulfill such goals, but there is nevertheless an irreducible core concern within it, which can never be relinquished.⁷⁵

Thus there develops a twofold manifestation of vocation: to be a certain kind of person in the service of others and to do certain kinds of things (and as a corollary to avoid other things) as we engage in the world. As Hardy notes, the Puritans responded to these two dimensions of God’s call by distinguishing between the general and the particular calling:

The general calling is the call to be a Christian, that is, to take on the virtues appropriate to followers of Christ, whatever one’s station in life. . . . The particular calling, on the other hand, is the call to a specific occupation. . . . In the discharge of our various particular callings we together build up the interdependent society of the saints, which finds its unity in Christ. With the distinction between the general and the particular calling in mind, talk about ‘vocational choice’—in the sense of choosing a particular occupation in which we will exercise our gifts—is both biblically appropriate and religiously important.⁷⁶

In a footnote to this discussion, Hardy further develops this distinction: “As such, a vocation is still not something a person can choose. Strictly speaking, what we choose are occupations, where our vocations can be fulfilled. The locution ‘choosing a vocation’ . . . must be understood as shorthand for ‘choosing an occupation where one can pursue one’s vocation’” (Hardy, 81, n. 1).⁷⁷

In response, then, to the question posed in the title of this paper and in subsequent paragraphs, we can say that there is an intrinsic meaning to the concept that business is a vocation; it is not a mere *extrinsic* attribute to which we loosely assign the word “vocation” or “calling.” This preserves the Luther-Calvin grounding of vocation in a call from God which moves that calling into the daily world of work in which one expresses that calling in a faithful way.

Yet, Hardy offers two further observations which modify our immediate, and dangerous, association of “calling” with the word usually defined as “work.” He notes that “one need not have a paid occupation in order to have a vocation.” Thus people have vocations as children, parents, as citizen, as ill, disabled, as unemployed, as member of a

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group, church, mosque. Vocation is the broader concept here than paid occupation, usually recognized as “work.” Secondly, as we move through life, we will move through several different vocations, and at any one time we may have several vocations.

And this latter observation brings us back to the relationship between vocation and identity. Whether in such Protestant thinkers as Brueggemann and Fowler in their formulas that issues of vocation are issues of identity or in Roman Catholic theologians such as von Balthasar and John Paul II in their understanding of the “subjective” nature of work, vocation is fundamentally about the human person in response to God’s call to love God and neighbor in building up the kingdom not *in* the work one does but *through* the work (here in a broader sense than paid occupation) one does.

Conclusion

In these pages I have examined the development of the idea of “vocation” from its appropriation as a special calling to salvation through removal from concerns of the world in the early Christian community to work in the daily world precisely as a form of ensuring salvation. In both Protestant and Catholic social thought a similar understanding of “vocation” has emerged, namely, as active engagement in the world with the goal of building up a just society. In those discussions I also examined how our traditions are reclaiming a broader understanding of vocation/calling than the common use of the term as occupation. In this religious understanding of vocation then we have seen the role of work as not only an external activity but also as a means of the full development of the person, the “subjective” dimension of work in which the identity of persons is expressed. In that sense work as vocation in both traditions has two dimensions related to the nature of the person: a “transcendent” or “general” dimension drawing and pushing each person toward a “calling” by God to love of God and neighbor and a “historical” or “particular” dimension to work in a particular area of business as a co-creator with God in using the riches of God’s creation to build a better world in which humans and creation itself flourish. As John Paul II remarks in “On Human Work,” the human “created in the image of God shares by his work in the activity of the Creator and *within the limits of his own human capabilities* continue to develop that activity and perfects it.”⁷⁸

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In his examination of what he calls “a remarkable ecumenical convergence in the practical theology of work,” Hardy writes:

That theology, both Protestant and Catholic, gives to human work a central role in the understanding of human life in its relation to God and the world. Through work we respond to God’s mandate to humanity to continue the work of creation. . . ; through work we realize ourselves as image-bearers of God; through work we participate in God’s ongoing creative activity.⁷⁹

Hardy’s own study of vocation takes him into a further discussion of management theory and work, using his analysis of vocation as a normative standard for business. Although our discussions have ranged more broadly than Hardy’s analysis, his application could well sum up our concerns to examine the basis for naming business as one expression of vocation through work: “work is to be a social place for the responsible exercise of a significant range of human talents and abilities in the service of one’s neighbor. . . . The appropriate design of human work must seek to realize the norm of vocation in a way that addresses each of [the physical, psychological, social, ethical and political] dimensions of human existence as they pertain to the job.”⁸⁰ And while he notes that work at business or any other job should not consume all our attention since we have other callings, nonetheless “jobs ought to be designed so that we can in fact apply ourselves—our whole selves—to our calling.”⁸¹ These aspects of vocation as applied to business have been developed in relation to Catholic social thought by several authors (such as Alford and Naughton,⁸² McCann,⁸³ Kennedy,⁸⁴ and Chamberlain⁸⁵) and will not be developed here.

I hope that in the discussion I have provided a useful historical analysis of the meaning of vocation itself as it has emerged in Protestant and Catholic thought and recent Catholic Social Teaching. And at the same time the discussion has attempted to explain the basis for determining the ways in which business or any other “career” can be called “vocation” in a manner intrinsic to the occupation itself. Finally, the analysis touched briefly on the ways in which vocation can be used as a normative term for evaluating the shape of the business enterprise and the commitment of business as a focus of human work toward building the common good.

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- ¹ Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co, 1990), 7.
- ² Ibid., 16.
- ³ Ibid., 17.
- ⁴ Ibid., 16.
- ⁵ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches, Vol. I* (New York: Harper Torchbacks, 1960), 121.
- ⁶ Hardy, *The Fabric of This World*, 23.
- ⁷ Ibid., 50.
- ⁸ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 56.
- ⁹ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 220.
- ¹⁰ Clara Tan, "The Social Ethics of Luther and Calvin" (Seattle University, private circulation, May 27, 2000), 5.
- ¹¹ Hardy, *The Fabric of This World*, 28
- ¹² Ibid., 46.
- ¹³ Ibid., 47, quoted from *Luther's Works*.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 50.
- ¹⁶ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 80.
- ¹⁷ Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*.
- ¹⁸ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches, Vol. 2* (New York: Harper Torchbacks, 1960), 610.
- ¹⁹ Gary Badcock, *The Way of Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1998), 44.
- ²⁰ Hardy, *The Fabric of This World*, 58.
- ²¹ Ibid., 60.
- ²² Ibid., 61.
- ²³ Ibid., 60.
- ²⁴ Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 257-58, 269-70.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 166-67, 182.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 203.
- ²⁷ Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches, Vol. 2*, 607.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 609-11.
- ²⁹ Ibid. 611.
- ³⁰ Weber, *The Protest Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 178.
- ³¹ Ibid., 182-83.
- ³² Hardy, *The Fabric of This World*, 66.
- ³³ David Hollenbach, "Modern Catholic Teachings on Justice," *The Faith That Does Justice*, ed. John Haughey (Woodstock, MD: Woodstock Press, 1979) 216-17.
- ³⁴ David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, eds. *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 18, #9.
- ³⁵ "Princeps Pastorem," www.osispm.org

It is important to note that John XXIII's use of vocation in relation to agriculture refers to a whole culture of the farm, its place in society, and the kind of work involved. John's own roots were in farming communities (This observation thanks to David Andrews of the Catholic Rural Life Conference, personal observation, July 16, 2003).

- ³⁶ *Mater et magistra*, www.osispm.org.
- ³⁷ *Mater et magistra*, www.osispm.org.
- ³⁸ O'Brien and Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought*, 182, #29.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 192, #43.
- ⁴⁰ Paul VI does refer to the broader sense of vocation as a calling to everyone to fulfill his or her own destiny: "In the design of God, every man is called upon to develop and fulfill himself, for every life is a vocation. . . . Endowed with intelligence and freedom, he is responsible for his fulfillment as he is for his salvation" (*Populorum progressio*, #15, O'Brien, 243).
- ⁴¹ O'Brien and Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought*, "On Human Work," 358.
- ⁴² Ibid., 359.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 364, #9.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 367, #11.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 443-44, #6.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 425, #41.
- ⁴⁸ Jean-Yves Calvez and Michael J. Naughton, "Catholic Social Teaching and the Purpose of Business Organization," Cortright, S.A. and Michael J. Naughton, Eds. *Rethinking the Purpose of Business: Interdisciplinary Essays from the Catholic Social Tradition*, 3-26 (2002), 11.

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- ⁴⁹ James W Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1984), 92, 95.
- ⁵⁰ Walter Brueggemann, "Covenanting as Human Vocation," *Interpretation* 33, 2:115-129 (1979), 125-26.
- ⁵¹ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc, 2000), 9.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 10, 15.
- ⁵³ O'Brien and Shannon, eds. *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, 593.
- ⁵⁴ Dennis P. McCann, "Business Corporations and the Principle of Subsidiarity." Cortright, Naughton, eds. *Rethinking the Purpose of Business*, 169-89, 181.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 182.
- ⁵⁶ Hardy, *The Fabric of This World*, 68.
- ⁵⁷ Bernard Lonergan, S.J., *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, Vol. 10, *Topics in Education*. Ed. Robert Doran, S.J., and Frederick Crowe (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 106.
- ⁵⁸ Karl Rahner, S.J., "On the Evangelical Councils." *Theological Investigations*, Vol. VIII, *Further Theology of the Spiritual Life*, 2 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 136.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.
- ⁶¹ Badcock, *The Way of Life*, 65-66.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 66.
- ⁶³ Michael Himes, C.S.C, *Doing the Truth in Love: Conversations about God, Relationships, and Service* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), 57-59.
- ⁶⁴ Herbert Alphonso, S.J, *The Personal Vocation: Transformation in Depth Through the Spiritual Exercises*, 8th ed. (Rome: Gregorian Pontifical University, 2002), 14, 19, 51.
- ⁶⁵ Hardy, *The Fabric of This World*, 76.
- ⁶⁶ O'Brien and Shannon, eds. *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, 89, #37.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 99, #94.
- ⁶⁸ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 94-95.
- ⁶⁹ Badcock, *The Way of Life*, 88.
- ⁷⁰ Brueggemann, "Covenanting as Human Vocation," 119-120.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 120.
- ⁷² Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 113.
- ⁷³ Robert Bellah, et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 119-129.
- ⁷⁴ Badcock, *The Way of Life*, 46.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.
- ⁷⁶ Hardy, *The Fabric of This World*, 81.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 81, n. 1.
- ⁷⁸ O'Brien and Shannon, eds. *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, 385, #25.
- ⁷⁹ Hardy, *The Fabric of This World*, 76.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 178.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 174.
- ⁸² Alford O.P, Helen J. and Michael J. Naughton, eds. 2001. *Managing as if Faith Mattered: Christian Social Principles in the Modern Organization*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- ⁸³ Dennis P. McCann, "Business Corporations and the Principle of Subsidiarity." 169-81.
- ⁸⁴ Kennedy, Robert G. "The Virtue of Solidarity and the Purpose of the Firm." Cortright, Naughton, eds. *Rethinking the Purpose of Business*, 48-64.
- ⁸⁵ Chamberlain, Gary. 2004. "The Evolution of Business as a Christian Calling." *The Review of Business*. Vol. 25, No. 1, Winter, 2004, 27-36.