

Has our emphasis on the  
"Protestant work ethic"  
skewed our understanding  
of vocation and call?

# Practicing the Presence of Christ

**A**fter nearly twenty-five years with her company, Suzanne's position was eliminated, and she found herself wondering what to do next. In addition to the issues of loss of income, rejection, and feeling overwhelmed at the prospects of entering a job search, Suzanne faced spiritual issues. When she entered the business world, she had felt God's calling. Her work was more than a job, it was a vocation.

Suzanne felt that what she did was worthwhile. She performed well, earning excellent reviews and being put into responsible positions. Because she did her job well, her division of the company prospered, and she came to believe that she was a valued and important member of the corporation. Then she was suddenly dropped.

If God had led her to that position, and guided and upheld her in it, why did it come to a sudden end?

Mark was a mathematical genius, and after his school days found his way into the rapidly expanding software business. He worked with a sense of excitement and energy. What he did contributed directly to helping business in America prosper, added thousands of jobs, and made life better for millions of people. He was using his gifts and abilities fully, and he saw great benefit in what he did. Mark understood his job to be a vocation, a calling from God in the secular world.

One day the owner of his company explained that he was sending Mark to Asia for three months to train someone on how to do his job—and to take his place. When Mark completed that task, he would no longer be employed. The owner was sympathetic, but if the company was to survive, it simply had to reduce payroll.

Dave was at his desk by 6 a.m. each day. He brought perseverance and wisdom to his role as an administrator in a large school system that was making a difference in the quality of education students received in that city. The programs his team had developed gave classroom teachers excellent resources and significant training. It looked like after years of challenging and difficult work, an urban school system truly was going to prosper. Dave felt he had been doing God's work in a very important public institution.

Then state budget cuts forced a redesign of the school system. Dave's department was eliminated and in the reorganization he not only lost his job, but he watched everything he had worked so hard to accomplish disappear. It was replaced with a snappy slogan about "excellence in education" and a perception by some that part of the "fat" had been cut out of the bureaucracy.

For Suzanne, Mark, and Dave the economic and policy-making realities of today not only eliminated their jobs,

but also struck at their sense of call, their belief that they were serving God in the secular arena, and their convictions concerning what one should expect when one gives his or her life to doing God's will. From early days, they had heard a message in their churches. Seek God's will for your life, put your talents and abilities to your best use, work hard and well, doing your job "as unto the Lord," and God will uphold you and prosper you.

Where did these ideas come from? How does the church's understanding of work and vocation speak to people like Suzanne, Mark, and Dave?

In the new anthology of Covenant literature, *Glad Hearts* (Covenant Publications, 2003), James Hawkinson

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includes a paragraph on vocation taken from the old confirmation text, *Accord- ing to Thy Word*.

Long ago it was thought that a "calling" meant that one left the ordinary activities of the world and devoted himself only to religion. He became a monk or a priest and felt that he had a holy calling.

Of course even monks in a monastery had to do some kind of ordinary work, such as tilling fields, making shoes, and preparing meals.... [A] monk named Brother Lawrence, whose job was washing pots and pans... was a deeply spiritual man. While he worked in the kitchen he would remind himself that Christ was there at his side. He called this "practicing the presence of Christ."

Another monk, whose name was Martin Luther, came to see that if he could wash pots and pans to the glory of God within a monastery, it should be possible to do the same thing outside the monastery. This truth became vital in the Protestant Reformation and is equally important today. There

is no line to be drawn between sacred and secular work, for all honest, needed work is sacred if performed in a sacred way. Every calling is a divine calling if carried out in the spirit of Christ. Some . . . will become doctors or nurses; some will become farmers or clerks or secretaries; perhaps some will become ministers or missionaries. . . . But whatever your job may be, it is a divine calling in which you can serve God, if you think of it in that way.

The Protestant Church in America has tended to follow Luther to the exclusion of Brother Lawrence in its thinking about vocation and work. This has shaped the language of how Christians speak about work. We talk about

the "Protestant work ethic" and the importance of working diligently as part of one's stewardship of the gifts of God. We often speak of prosperity as the "blessing of God."

Those who are successful in their work are often honored in the congregation, and given leadership roles. There is not only a sense that such people will serve well, but also an underlying belief that they are chosen or favored by God. There is an expectation that work done honestly, diligently, and well out of a sense of calling will be rewarded.

While the development of Luther's ideas about work have some biblical basis, more and more the realities of work in our culture raise questions as to whether one's job can ever truly be a calling from God. In the Bible, calling or vocation is not defined as work or as a profession, but rather applies to Jesus' call upon our lives to seek the kingdom of God first (Matthew 6:33). People who are not involved in a paid

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career are still included in the call of Christ. Retired people, stay-at-home moms, those who are temporarily unemployed, and those who are unable to work at a paying job because of health or disability all have a vocation in Christ.

For Paul, the call of Christ is the call to be holy (Ephesians 1:4), to be committed to Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:9), to participate in corporate and personal worship (Ephesians 1:11-12), and to serve Christ through the use of spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). The primary meaning of calling in the Bible is that one enters into a style of life where attitudes, priorities, goals, and actions are all directed toward the life of Jesus and the kingdom of God. It is

become aware of many more opportunities to influence people for Christ's kingdom, thus putting it first in our lives.

Second, by practicing the presence of Christ in our work, we become attuned to how what we learn in the work setting can be applied to the work of God in the church or the community. This is not to say that the church becomes a business, or that evangelism is seen simply as marketing. Rather, it means that everyone's experience is valuable in the life of the church.

The church is not made up of a few experts and a multitude of passive followers. The church is people gathered around the authority of the word of God, each one bringing particular wis-

held at the noon hour in the conference room of a large corporation. I was moved to see how these people were able to pray together and to care for each other, and how interested they were in hearing each other's perspectives on God's word. God was very alive in their world; they just needed an opportunity to recognize it.

Finally, practicing the presence of Christ means that we will hear the call of Christ to leave our nets and follow him (Matthew 4:18-20). The first disciples had to step away from what they knew best, away from their particular skill and security, and put their faith in Jesus.

Leaving our nets does not always mean quitting our job. But it does mean that in following Christ there will be times when we are out of our comfort zone and in positions where we must rely on Christ because our own strength is inadequate. Calling is always a matter of faith. Practicing the presence of Christ in every setting of our lives helps us focus on a personal relationship. It is not so much what we know but who we know.

Last spring I had the opportunity to view one day of the U.S. Open Golf Tournament. We stood patiently at the ninth green, watching the groups of golfers slowly walk along and take their shots. After a few hours I began to get weary and one putt looked pretty much like another. I noticed a young boy who was with his father. The boy was also getting tired, and they were not just there for one day, but all four. Finally, he asked his father if they had to come back the next day. His dad said, "Yes, son, it is the final day of the U.S. Open. In a few years you will appreciate where you have been."

I am not so sure that in a few years it will matter where we have been. What will matter is who has been with us. If we practice the presence of Christ in every part of our lives, we will hear his call. In responding we find a value in our lives that cannot be taken away or cut short. The kingdom of God is eternal. □

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out of that total life commitment that specific direction for serving Christ in the church, in one's work, or in the family or community is given to an individual.

It is time to rethink our understanding of vocation and work by returning to the insight of Brother Lawrence. This will give a helpful balance to the exclusive emphasis on Martin Luther.

First, the practice of the presence of Christ in one's work life brings about an attitude of watchfulness. When we approach our work—whatever it may be—with an eye to the presence of Jesus Christ, we become aware of opportunities to recognize Christ, to serve Christ, and to influence others for Christ in our work.

For example, rather than understanding that one's calling in Christ is to be a doctor, Christian doctors will look for the healing presence of Christ as they treat their patients. They will be awake to the opportunities to connect people to the healing power of Christ. When we understand that our calling in Christ is to be watchful, we

dom and insight from their experience.

The Latin American church can teach us something. There, Bible study is not a matter of an "expert" giving information to learners. Rather it is people gathered around the word of God, sharing and valuing their experience and perspective. Our churches would be much more effective and lively if we would open our hearts to what each person brings from their experience, whether work related or from other parts of their lives.

Third, practicing the presence of Christ allows people to see Christ in the world. Rather than saying, "My calling is to do my work to the best of my abilities," and then waiting to be rewarded with material blessings, we can approach the workplace in secular society as a window through which to see God at work in the world. While there are many restrictions placed on Christians in their work, such as rules against witnessing or using religious displays in a public school, there are still many ways for people to recognize the reality of Christ in the world.

I was once invited to a Bible study