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CARL S. HUGHES

The Dangers of “Vocation” for Students Thinking about Career

Why do Lutherans so often use the word “vocation” when what we really mean is “career”? As someone who graduated from an ELCA college and now teaches at another, I know that I have been guilty of this sin. Anyone who has hung around Lutherans knows that career and vocation are not supposed to be equivalent; this is why Lutheran liberal arts colleges are said to be the opposite of what are conventionally called “vocational schools.” Nonetheless, especially in the college setting, it is often tempting to conflate the two—to use vocation as a theologically glorified synonym for one’s present or future job. Vocation easily becomes a euphemism that allows us to distance ourselves from the distastefulness of actual remunerated labor. I have come to believe that this misuse of vocation language is extremely dangerous. Misappropriating vocation in this way distorts our tradition’s deepest insights about calling and, just as importantly, about work.

When Lutherans conflate vocation and career, notice that we’re never speaking of just *any* sort of career. We’re talking about careers that are “fulfilling,” “meaningful,” and “worthwhile”: work that is a “passion.” If we are privileged to have found gainful employment that suits us this way, then vocation language is seductive; if we are dreaming about pursuing such a career in the future, then it can be even more intoxicating. Yet what does this understanding of vocation imply to a student who follows

her passion and never finds a full-time job with benefits in her field? Did she misperceive her true vocation? Did she not work hard enough to live out her calling? In my view, the dangers of construing vocation this way are at least as great for those who *are* able to find meaning and identity in their jobs. Defining vocation as one’s career tips the scale in any reflection on work-life balance. It invites career to consume the totality of our lives—drastically constricting the scope of God’s calling to us.

When Luther wrote about vocation, he did so in order to resist the narrowness of the understanding of vocation that he had inherited. In his late medieval world, only those who pursued “religious life” as monks, nuns, and priests had vocations; everyone else did not. By emphasizing the universality of God’s grace and the priesthood of all believers, Luther argued that all people could be conduits of God’s love, in every arena of their lives. As Martin Marty has provocatively put it, according to Luther’s expansive understanding of vocation, “the mother suckling the baby and washing diapers, the farmer at work, the couple having sex were as likely to be engaged in God-pleasing activities as was any nun engaged in prayer” (104).



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In our society today, I don't think that most of us are tempted to limit vocation to service to the church. But we are constantly tempted to limit our vocation to our jobs. Think how readily we define ourselves and others by our professions. It is our first question at a party: "And what do you do?" *He's* an architect. *She's* a doctor. *I'm* a professor. "Oh, you're just some paper-pusher somewhere? Excuse me, I think I'll hit up the buffet table." When we fall into the trap of limiting vocation to career, the result is that we close ourselves to others as they truly are and constrict our sense of ourselves.

There is a Tyson chicken plant across the road from the Lutheran college where I teach. Do the minimum-wage workers there have vocations from God? Vocations as meaningful as those of our college pastor and president? I think the Lutheran answer to these questions is Yes. However, in order to answer the questions this way, I don't think we should have to pretend that menial labor is generally a source of deep personal fulfillment. Instead, we need to refocus what we mean by vocation so that it refers first and foremost to people rather than professions. People called to be mothers and husbands and mentors and friends. People called to hike and play sports and paint. People called to organize for their rights and those of others. People called to advocate for the humane treatment of animals. People called to vote with certain values in mind. People called to change babies' diapers. As a theological concept, vocation is both infinitely encompassing and infinitely particular. It affirms each facet of our created selves—including our professional selves.

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But it is always bigger and more numinous than any one aspect of our lives.

At its core, Luther's theology of vocation should challenge our society's paradoxical tendency to both fetishize and denigrate work. It should call into question our implicit assumption that only those fortunate enough to get paid for "doing what they love"—and who thus, as the saying goes, "never work a day in their lives"—are living out callings from God. Vocation should empower us to affirm work *as work* without suggesting that it is coextensive with God's calling to any human being.

"Luther's theology of vocation should challenge our society's paradoxical tendency to both fetishize and denigrate work."

So when we mean to speak of career on campus, why not just speak unblushingly of "career"? Our Lutheran tradition enables us to prepare students for professional practicalities without resorting to a loftier euphemism. At the same time, our tradition calls us to see our students as much more than their future professions. It calls us to think of vocational discernment as a never-completed process that implicates entire selves. Most fundamentally, it requires us constantly to question the limits we impose on how God can be present in our lives and in the world.