
Work, Calling, and God's Providence

SCOTT HOEZEE

Centuries ago, Puritan Christians had the most intriguing saying: God loveth adverbs; He careth not how *good* but how *well*; and part of what that little saying means is that God attends to *how* we do our work; whether the task is ordinary or extraordinary, whether the job is done quietly off in some corner or more grandly on the world stage, what matters is how well we do what we are called to do. Christians have long talked about the idea of vocation, of the calling of God upon our lives; but in the Reformation era thinkers like John Calvin and Martin Luther advanced the idea of vocation in some powerful ways; ways that have changed how Christians have thought about work ever since. Today on Groundwork we will wonder about the notion of *vocation* and what it means for each of our lives. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and Dave, we are wrapping up now just a short, four-part series on the nature of work; and on this last program we are going to turn directly to something that we have touched on in the previous programs, and that is the whole notion of *vocation*, an English word that comes from the Latin *vocare*, which means to call. So the idea is that God has called us to whatever it is we do, and He wants us to do it well; and He has called us to do that. Now, back in the Reformation day, Martin Luther noticed something which some of us probably still notice yet today, and that is that Christian people in particular tend to restrict the idea of calling to just pastors and missionaries; and so, probably with you, too, when I was in seminary and in the early years of my ministry, I was peppered all the time with the question: Tell us your call story. How did God call you? So then, they expect you to say something like: Well, I was sitting in church one day and I heard a voice, clear as day, as though it was the person sitting behind me say: Become a pastor; and I knew I was called; or I was in college, I was premed, I was going to be a doctor, and I was sitting there one day looking at a diagram of the human heart and the Spirit put on my heart the verse: We are fearfully and wonderfully made; and then I knew I wasn't supposed to fix peoples' physical hearts; I was called to minister to their spiritual hearts; God called me to ministry. We expect those kinds of stories of pastors and missionaries, but not of other people, and that is a problem.

DAVE BAST

You know, it is kind of a pious term: vocation; in fact, in church circles it is often used very technically. In Roman Catholic circles if you are asked about a vocation it means are you going to be a priest or a monk or a nun; or even in our churches we speak of calling a pastor still; I mean, the pastor has to have that initial call... some sort of clearly supernatural sense of being drawn into this work, but churches call new pastors, so you may be working at one job, and you don't get a new job offer, you get a call to go serve, and you have to try to figure out... and that is all very true – it is all well and good; I mean, both of us have gone through that; it has been our lives; but the insight of the Reformers especially, Luther and Calvin, was that every Christian has a calling; every Christian has a vocation; and every job can be a calling or a vocation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

How did God call you to be a plumber should be just as legitimate a question as how did God call you to be a pastor. How did God call you to be a carpenter, a bus driver? They are all callings. The Reformation really brought that out.

DAVE BAST

Yes; here is a quotation from one of the great English reformers, William Tyndale, to whom we owe, frankly, our English Bible, and he paid for that work with his life; he was martyred because he translated the scriptures into English; but Tyndale wrote: Between washing dishes and the preaching of the Gospel, there is a difference, but for pleasing God there is no difference.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

I love that idea. You can be just as pleasing to God in your professional life – in your career – in your work life – in your job – if you are a dishwasher as if you are a great evangelist. It all depends on who you are and what you gifts are.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And when we factor God in, it is all a matter of what God has equipped us to do. Now, the Bible, in the New Testament, doesn't talk a lot about the work we do outside of church, but there is this well-known passage from I Corinthians 12, which gives us a principle that we will want to think about in this program, where Paul writes:

⁴There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. ⁵There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶There are different kinds of working, but in all of them, and in every one it is the same God at work. ⁷Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit; ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit; ¹⁰to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and He distributes them to each one just as He determines.

DAVE BAST

Right; so this is a passage that is, first and foremost, or primarily, about different forms of ministry in the Church, in the body of Christ for the building up of the body, Paul says, these different gifts are given...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

But by extension, we could say that it also applies to "secular work." There are different gifts that God has given to different people, and all of these gifts go together to make life possible, to make it even hopefully flourishing and joyful, creative, a delight, which was always God's original intention for life.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And indeed, even going beyond the very ecclesiastical church setting of I Corinthians 12, there, I think we have all had it in life, Dave, where we have seen somebody doing something, and we have said to ourselves: Boy, I would never want to do that job, but thank God somebody does; or: I could never do that; I am not skilled in that; but if somebody weren't, society would be in trouble. So you sort of get this idea of what Paul says: There are different kinds of working, but in all of them – every one – it is the same God who is at work

in them all; and you sort of say: Yes, society wouldn't work – society wouldn't function – if there weren't lots of different people with lots of different interests and lots of different skill sets. If we all were all good at the same thing – that would be Paul's analogy of the body, you know: If the whole body was a nose, you ain't going to go anywhere...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So... and that applies equally to society. So, God is really good at ensuring that everything that needs to get done gets done by gifting different people with different interests and skill sets.

DAVE BAST

If I could just give a personal example, I mean, I was recently in another country and I was teaching the Bible to a group of Christians from other backgrounds, and at the same place they were building a new building to kind of house more people in this conference center setting. A volunteer had come, who was the builder, to oversee that work, and I would watch him... I would go off and do this Bible teaching, and he would go supervise the construction site; and I was just amazed and filled with admiration for this guy. He was one of those guys who could just build stuff, and I could no more do that than I could fly to the moon. He probably could not have done what I was doing, but both things contributed in very different ways to the work of God in that part of the world; and it was wonderful to see and to be able to admire those different gifts.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is why the reformers in the Reformation era really democratized the idea of vocation, and they had some more things to say about that, and we will take that up next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee. In a book that came out about 30 years ago – a wonderful book by philosopher, Lee Hardy – he teaches at Calvin College – the book was called *The Fabric of This World*, and it was a wonderful book about vocation and work in which Dr. Hardy really dug into what people like Martin Luther, but also John Calvin, had to say in terms of wanting to say that everybody – not just clergy, not just the priests and the ministers and the monks – everybody gets a divine call in life, and we should be thankful for that. We should talk to each other about that, and it should also have a shaping influence for how each of us regards whatever it is we do. It is God's calling on your life. Just as surely as a pastor is called, so also is the baker and the craftsman and the carpenter you were talking about in the last segment, Dave; it is all vocation.

DAVE BAST

And interestingly, Luther developed the idea – he was very famous for this – of the two kingdoms; so there is the kingdom of heaven and there is the kingdom of earth; or there is the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world; and he based that on the great command, as Jesus summarized the Law: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. So the churchy kinds of vocations, you know, preaching and ministry and teaching and evangelism and mission work and all that, that was devoted to building up the kingdom of God – to reaching out to people and drawing them in through the ministry of the Gospel; but all these other jobs were really part of the kingdom of the world or the kingdom of earth, and they were in one way or another a fulfillment of the second part of that commandment, to love your neighbor as yourself.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, I love that. So, Luther liked to talk about the stations in life, and a station could be anything; being a spouse is a station, being a parent is a station, being a citizen of a nation is a station in life, as is being a baker or a soldier, a teacher, a police officer; these are all stations of life, and this is the stage, then, the kingdom of earth, as you just said, Dave, where we live out our obligation to love our neighbor as ourselves. When you do your job right, when you do your job well, you are loving your neighbor, and you are contributing to the kingdom of earth that God cares about just as much as He cares about the kingdom of God, because that is that two-pronged, great and first commandment: Love God with everything you've got and love your neighbor as yourself. Very clever of Luther to say: And how do you love your neighbor? Well, there are lots of ways to love your neighbor; one of them is: Do your job and do it well and do it as unto the Lord.

DAVE BAST

And this is what gave rise to the so-called Protestant work ethic. Sometimes it is called the Calvinist work ethic, but we have just been talking about Luther. He was equally influential in this. The idea that you approached your job, not simply because you had to... The only reason I am working is to pay my debts, to make money to buy the things that maybe I don't really need in the first place. That is a terrible cycle to get into. That is not why we work; that is not how we approach it. We don't approach our job simply as a means to express our own creativity because we are somehow passionate about this thing, but we approach our work as a means of service to God. We offer up our daily job to Him, ultimately, in obedience to the great commandment to love our neighbor.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And, you know, in Martin Luther's day, and in the era of history running up to the Reformation, if somebody had asked a priest: What can I do to devote myself to God and to His service? He might have been told: Well, become a monk. You have to withdraw from the world and go to a monastery. That is where you can exercise a vocation from God. Luther said: No. You don't have to leave the world to fulfill God's calling in your life; in fact, most of us will fulfill that calling right in the world; and in fact... Luther, of course, could be a little bit of a rascal and was known to exaggerate a bit. Somebody once said to him: Are all jobs holy? Is every piece of work holy? And Luther said: Yes, every job in life is holy except for being a prostitute, a robber, or a monk. So, he kind of got his dig in there a little bit about those who withdraw...

DAVE BAST

Yes, he had been a monk, so it was kind of an inside joke; but we get this sense again and again in scripture of the dignity of daily labor, even manual labor; so Paul, to take another example from the New Testament, Paul gave himself primarily to preaching and teaching. He wrote the New Testament, for crying out loud, but he also says he worked as a tentmaker to support himself. Literally, he had calluses on his hands as he plied the needle through that leather, you know, to put together the flaps of tents and awnings and what have you. He was a working guy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, Acts 18 – the first four verses of Acts 18 reflect this, where Luke writes (the author of Acts): ¹ After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife, Pricilla because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. ³ Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker, as they were, he stayed and worked with them. ⁴ Now every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. So, this is just a little snippet of early church life, right? So, Pricilla and Aquila are tentmakers, Paul is too. Paul doesn't come to them and say: Well, now I want you to work for the Gospel, so quit that. Stop being a tentmaker and just preach every day. No, they worked during the week making their tents, and on the Sabbath they would go to the synagogue and preach the Gospel. One enabled the other; but both were holy is the idea, that what we do, what we are good at, these things are holy.

DAVE BAST

As Tyndale said: Between being a dishwasher and a preacher, there is a difference, but not in the eyes of God. They are both equally valid and legitimate callings.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what an important thing that is to remember because we do... all of us, I am afraid, myself included... we do tend to judge vocations and jobs by what we see with our eyes. We do tend to think that white collar jobs are more important than blue collar jobs; that people who work in urban environments are more important than people who work in agricultural settings; and to that the Reformation, but I think scripture itself, wants to shout a very, very loud: No! We aren't supposed to be in the business of stratifying God's calling on other peoples' lives. That is not our place. Now, that is not to say that people who wash dishes don't hope they will do something different someday, either; and that is okay. But, you know, you do what you do, and you do it as unto the Lord. You do it well, because for this time in your life this is where you are and the rest of us are not supposed to kind of turn our noses up at that. That would be wrong according to scripture, because God is gifting everybody for these different tasks.

DAVE BAST

So, we are talking about vocation – the sense of calling – that everyone can have a vocation whatever their particular work; and there is one more thing we want to link this to, also a very important doctrine for the Reformers and for Christians of all times and ages, and that is the idea of providence. How does God's providence or God's provision for our needs fit in with His doctrine of calling or vocation? We will look at that in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork, and this final program in a four-part series on the nature of work and a Christian view of work; and Dave, we have been talking about in this program the idea of vocation, that God calls each of us to whatever we do, and we said in the run up to this last segment of this program that this intersects with another very important doctrine, and that is the doctrine of providence – of God's providing – of God's care for the world, and that He does that through what we end up doing, and a very famous example of this comes very early in the Bible from the story of Joseph.

DAVE BAST

Right; if you recall, Joseph had been sold by his brothers – his older brothers – into slavery in Egypt, and he went through a difficult time, needless to say; he spent time in prison, unjustly accused, but eventually he was restored; he was given a great position in Egypt. He became the prime minister. It was through Joseph's wisdom, God given, that he provided for the people during a time of terrible famine, including ultimately, his own family; and when he finally revealed himself to his brothers as they came down to Egypt, we read this from Genesis Chapter 50, almost the end of the story:

¹⁹But Joseph said to them (to his brothers), "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. ²¹So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children," and he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One of the things we often take away from this story is that, oh, see God is very good at bringing good out of evil, right? The brothers did an evil thing...

DAVE BAST

Right...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And God turned it to good...

DAVE BAST

You meant it for evil, God meant it for good, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But what we might miss by only focusing on that aspect, which is a very true and legitimate aspect of the story of course, but what we might miss is that this also means that in the midst of all that God provided for many hungry people, not just the Egyptians, but people from all over came to Egypt, as you said, Dave, including Jacob and the brothers eventually. Their lives are saved, but they are just part of a mass of people that God saved through Joseph; and so God called Joseph to become prime minister, the second-hand man to the Pharaoh of Egypt, imbued him with wisdom to know how to manage grain and storehouses for these seven years of famine or whatever it was; and that therefore God provided.

Martin Luther picked up on this, too. He said: You know, pious people gather at their breakfast tables in the morning and they say the Lord's Prayer: Give us this day our daily bread; and guess what, Luther said: Hours earlier, at 4:00 a.m. a baker rolled out of bed, switched on his ovens and started putting the loaves in, and God has already been answering your prayer through the baker...across town.

DAVE BAST

Through the baker... and I think we could extrapolate even further and add it was through the truck driver who picked up the loaves at the bakery and delivered them to the supermarket; and the stock boy who put it on the shelf and the cashier who runs your credit card as you pay for your groceries. God uses all these people to provide us with our daily bread; and by extension with everything else that we may need in life. Here is a basic biblical truth about providence: God does not simply wave His hand and create stuff out of thin air. That would be a constant miracle, but what God does is, as the Puritans like to say: He uses means, and the means often are you and me and the jobs that we have to do to provide for the needs of those around us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes. I can't remember where I heard this, but somebody once asked a pastor or a wise, wise Christian: Does God have hands? And the pastor took the hands of the person who asked the question and said: Yes; these are it. Your hands are God's hands; your feet are God's feet; you are the one through whom God gets His work done; which means that God needs a lot of people to do a lot of different things, as you were just saying, look at what it takes to get a loaf of bread into your house these days; lots and lots of people, lots and lots of hands, and we believe all of them were ultimately the hands of God; and so God has a place for us.

Sometimes people wonder... sometimes we can take this whole idea of vocation and rarify it and make it such a big deal that it seems overcomplicated; whereas really, when people say: What is God calling me to do? As the writer Frederick Buechner said: The answer to that question might be: What do you like to do? What are you good at? What are you passionate about? Buechner said: What is vocation? Vocation is where your deep gladness meets one of the world's deep needs. So, what does God want you to do? I don't know, what do you like to do? What are you good at? Maybe that is your first hint.

DAVE BAST

Yes, find something good and profitable and productive to do and then just do it; and I think in some way, shape, or form we are all going to have to take the big picture and realize that what I am doing might be a very small thing... and maybe it is not what I want to do with all of my life... and maybe there comes a time when I reach retirement age and I am no longer doing that; there are lots of ways we can fill a vocation. You might do a certain job because your vocation is to provide for your family primarily, and you are not necessarily in love with that job, but you keep at it for their sake. Maybe your vocation is expressed in beautifying your yard or your garden or growing flowers or growing vegetables and giving them away. There are all kinds of ways to participate in the work of God in providing – in providence.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And every once in a while we see the truth of that by seeing the flip side, that when people don't do their jobs well or take them seriously bad things happen. So, a police officer is careless at a crime scene and contaminates some of the evidence and a murderer goes free on a technicality, or somebody who is working on a food line in cereal factory somewhere gets a little lazy, doesn't pay attention, flips the wrong switch...four months later kids all over the country are getting sick or dying from their breakfast cereal because he didn't do his job well. Everything does matter; everything counts; and in the Christian perspective, we say: You know, God does need everybody. Yes, He needs preachers and teachers, but He needs people who are good at sending notes of encouragement; He needs people who are good at hospitality; He needs people who are good at baking apple pies and bringing it over to the sick neighbor; it all counts; it is all part of God's providence.

DAVE BAST

You know, as we said at the outset of this program, God loveth adverbs; He careth not how good but how well. It doesn't really matter what your particular job is, as long as you do it well, do it for Him, do it for your neighbor, do it because in this way God will somehow provide for our needs and those of others as well, and ultimately all the glory can be His.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Amen. Well, thank you for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee with Dave Bast. We would like to know always how we can help you to dig into the scriptures; so we have a website: groundworkonline.com, and there you can go and suggest some topics and passages for future Groundwork programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/work-calling-and-gods-providence>

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