A Case for a Holistic View of Calling
Arguments and Applications

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Introduction

In my experience as a chaplain to La Trobe University (Melbourne, Australia) I have had numerous occasions to discuss with students the issues of calling and vocation. Judging from the perspectives of the Christian students in particular, it seems clear that these subjects have not been afforded a great deal of attention in the preaching and teaching of most evangelical churches (at least in this corner of the world). As a result of this neglect, scores of Christian men and women are pursuing tertiary education without the foggiest understanding of how their future vocations fit into the bigger picture of what God is doing or how their chosen fields function as an outworking of their life in Christ.

The understanding which I have most commonly encountered in my ministry is that “calling” refers to a special something that happens to certain people like missionaries, evangelists, and pastors, consisting of a specific and supernatural “impression,” “voice” or “burden” calling one to engage in a particular work, among a particular people, at a particular time. This experience is understood to be decidedly different from the vast majority of people who either “get a job” or, if more inspired than that, “pursue a career.”

By contrast, the most common understandings of vocation encountered by this writer are that it is either something you do to put bread on the table and to support people (like missionaries and ministers) who are doing really important things or, if not that, then it is the view that one’s work is something which provides a measure of personal fulfilment, but which is completely partitioned off from the “Christian side” of life. At best, having a “Christian” view of one’s vocation means that you endeavour to use your lunch hour to tell people about Jesus.

In the light of these sorts of unhelpful perspectives on calling and vocation, it is important to set oneself to the task of developing an understanding of these things that is thoroughly biblical and that sees the importance of maintaining alignment between them.

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1Both of these views are explored and exploded by Guinness, referring to them as the “Catholic and Protestant distortions”. See Os Guinness, The Call: Finding and Fulfiling the Central Purpose of Your Life (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998) 27-43.
Some Biblical Foundations

One approach to developing a biblical understanding of these things stems from an analysis of the early chapters of Genesis where God first creates people and then commissions them to undertake particular tasks and to assume certain responsibilities.\(^2\) In this approach, the truth that we are made “in the image of God” is foundational.\(^3\) However, it is not only true that we are made \textit{in} God’s image but also that we were made \textit{to image} God, to reflect Him. And so, being in the “image of God” refers not only to who we \textit{are} but also to what we \textit{are about}, what we \textit{are meant to do}.

This is an expansion of some more traditional views of what it means to be made in the image of God. These views seem to concentrate mainly on image as referring to the nature and character of humanity, but not to any sort of functionality.\(^4\) But, as Pratt explains, there is more to it than that:

Moses explained the image of God by emphasising the job God gave us to perform in this world. Immediately after making the man and the woman, God gave them a special commission. We read in Genesis 1:28, ‘God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”’ This verse commands us to be fruitful, increase, fill, subdue and rule. These five commands reveal our most basic human responsibilities.

Pratt continues:

We often call these tasks for humanity the \textit{cultural mandate} [sic]. It was God’s design that people build an earthly culture for his glory. This cultural mandate involves two basic responsibilities: multiplication and dominion. First God gave Adam and Eve a commission to multiply: “Be fruitful ... increase ... fill.” Their job was to produce enough images of God to cover the earth. Second, God ordered them to exercise dominion over the earth: “Fill ... subdue ... rule.” Adam and Eve were to exercise authority over creation, managing its vast resources on God’s behalf. Needless to say, these two mandates cannot be

\(^2\)I am here expounding the position held by an Old Testament scholar, Dr Richard L Pratt. A more complete development of this perspective is available in his book. See Richard L Pratt, Jr., \textit{Designed for Dignity: What God Has Made it Possible for You to Be} (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1993) esp. 1-35.

\(^3\) Gen. 1:26-27 NIV

\(^4\) For example, see Louis Berkhof, \textit{Systematic Theology}, 4th rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941) 203-205.
entirely separated from each other... Nonetheless, from the beginning these two sides of the cultural mandate were to be our main tasks in life.⁵

And so, from the very beginning, our purpose has been bound up with our identity. But as the biblical record indicates, not long after receiving this identity and this commission, Adam and Eve rebelled against God, and through their actions sin, with all its consequences, entered the picture, complicating things tremendously.⁶

Whereas before, with un-fallen humanity, natural reproduction would have also meant spiritual reproduction, now there was no such necessary connection. In other words, children born to Adam and Eve, in a sinless state, would have naturally grown up to mirror perfectly the image of God, both in their person and in their taking upon themselves the imaging tasks of multiplication and dominion. However, as Genesis 3 shows, both of these tasks are now under the curse of God, and their fulfilment is frustrated as a result of sin.⁷

With regard to multiplication, this means that if Christians today are to fulfil their task of multiplying God’s images in the world, it will require involvement in both natural and spiritual parenting, preaching the Gospel to our own children and the children of others.⁸

To put it another way, multiplying images, on this side of the cross, means showing people how they can be made right with God through trusting in Jesus’ death. So begins the process that may result, one day, in their full restoration as God’s fallen image bearers.

The imaging task of exercising dominion is also complicated by sin. Before the fall, the responsibility of exercising dominion was an opportunity to explore and develop God’s kingdom so that, as we uncovered its treasures, and as human culture was advanced, every discovery and every step forward would have been a vehicle of praise and honour to God for his wisdom and goodness. However, under sin’s curse

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⁵ Pratt, Designed for Dignity, 20-21.

⁶ Gen. 3:1-19; Rom 5:12-14.

⁷ Gen. 3: 16-19.

⁸ Commenting on Deuteronomy 6:6-9, Pratt writes, “Why does the mandate to train children follow on the heels of the greatest commandment in the Bible? Why is it given such prominence in the Mosaic Law? The answer is simple. Passing our spiritual inheritance on to future generations is at the heart of our job as God’s images. Without spiritual multiplication we fail to fulfil our basic purpose on earth.” See Pratt, Designed for Dignity, 28.
creation resists our efforts to subdue it. Our work is frustrating and toilsome. Individual and institutionalised evil constantly work against us. Within ourselves, we struggle to reconcile our own desires for self-glorification with the legitimate purpose of bringing glory to God. As a result, what we do, our work, is seldom viewed as fitting into God's greater purposes and is reduced to nothing more than a means by which we can pursue our own dreams.

However, just as we have been provided, through the Gospel, with a means of recovering our original commission to multiply God's images, so too does the Gospel provide us with a means to recover the original commission to exercise dominion, to the glory of God.

Because of Christ's death on the cross in our place, we have been brought into a vital relationship with our Creator God. Suddenly, the world that was there to be exploited is now understood to belong to another, not ourselves. We discover that we are not owners at all but rather stewards. This life and this world have been given to us in trust and for purposes that we did not invent, but which we can only discover by the revelation of God.

The calling of God helps us to restore a proper perspective to all of life, including our vocation. It means that we must never separate the "God imaging tasks" of multiplication and dominion into isolated compartments, but we must instead see that the two functions are part of the one task of bringing glory to God in every conceivable way. As we share with others the good news of Jesus Christ, some will respond in faith, and so the task of multiplying his glory by multiplying his images will continue. And, as we employ our time and talents within our chosen field, we manifest the glory of God both because our work is promoting some legitimate aspect of God's creation and because in the manner of our working itself — our attitudes, perspectives and objectives — people are led to honour the God we serve.

In addition to what we have seen in Genesis, there are a number of other passages in Scripture that also encourage us to hold to an integrated view of life

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9 Pratt writes, "The Great King has summoned each of us into his throne room. 'Take this portion of my kingdom,' he says, 'I am making you my steward over your office, your workbench, your kitchen stove. Put your heart into mastering this part of my world. Get it in order; unearth its treasures; do all you can with it. Then everyone will see what a glorious King I am. That's why we get up every morning and go to work. We don't labour simply to survive — insects do that. Our work is an honour, a privileged commission from our great King. God has given each of us a portion of his kingdom to explore and to develop to its fullness.'" See Pratt, Designed for Dignity, 32-33.
proceeding from our response to the call of God. For example, in the Psalms, there is a wonderful picture of David as God’s shepherd:

He chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens; from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance. And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skilful hands he led them [emphasis mine].

What is so fascinating about these verses is that the psalmist rightly saw that David was God’s shepherd both before and after David was king. The only thing that changed was the sphere and subjects of his shepherding. Just as David had faithfully shepherded the animals which God had created, so too did he faithfully shepherd the people whom God had created. Was David’s life and work less “sacred” when he was tending sheep? It seems to me that the Psalmist’s intent was that we would see the whole of David’s life as one continuous act of service to God.

In Luke there is an account where, after John the Baptist preaches to the crowds, the people are cut to the heart by his words and respond with genuine repentance toward God. As a result, some of the people come to John and ask him what they should do, how they should now live in the light of their repentance. To one of the inquirers, a tax collector, John says, “Don’t collect any more than you are required to.” To some soldiers he said, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely — be content with your pay.”

In other words, John told these people how their response to the call of God should affect the manner in which they carried out and even viewed their chosen vocations. But in no way did he encourage them to leave their vocations. He didn’t tell the tax collector that he should give up what he was doing and engage in something more spiritual. He didn’t urge the soldiers to abandon their positions and to follow him around as his disciples. Whatever else you might say about this incident, it seems clear that John the Baptist did not see responding to the call of God as requiring one to separate oneself from a “secular” world. Surely, the perspective evidenced here is one that was more integrated than that, and which saw the whole of life being lived out in the one arena: before the face of God.

Even more telling is the example of Jesus himself who, for most of his life, was engaged in manual labour. Because we have no explicit accounts of this aspect of his life, we are tempted sometimes to ignore the significance of it, and especially the length of it. And yet all those years were more than just “marking time.” Surely, we are not to view his life and labour in that time as mere “filler,” waiting for the big moment.

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10 Ps. 78:70-72 NIV
11 Luke 3:7-14 NIV
to arrive on a cross in Jerusalem. Certainly his work as a carpenter mattered to God as he laboured to show himself a good steward of his Father’s creation, as a contributor to the promotion, development and sustenance of legitimate human culture.

In these and many other ways, there is, at least in this writer’s view, abundant Scriptural support for an integrated view of calling as that which reaches out and embraces every aspect of our lives.\textsuperscript{12}

\textit{Some Suggested Applications}

The ways in which these truths could be applied are limited only by the imagination of the one doing the applying. Listed below then, and not necessarily in order of significance, are just some of the ways in which these truths might become lived reality at the level of a local congregation.

For starters, the biblical teaching on calling, work, leisure, stewardship, etc. needs to be addressed from the pulpit by teaching those portions of the Bible which speak most directly to these matters. In addition to passages already mentioned, one could look at Exodus 35:30-35; Psalm 127; 1 Corinthians 9:3-18; Ephesians 1:3-14, 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-25; and 1 Timothy 6:3-10, 17-19.

Another important area where change can be initiated is in the use of language, the ways in which we speak to and about one another in the local church. If it is true, as I have argued, that the secular/sacred distinction is a false one, then it is most important that we rid ourselves of all manner of speaking which encourages the continuation of that unhelpful relic from our past. Numerous examples come to mind.

For instance, on our church signs we often have information about the parish — what time the services meet, contact numbers, if there is a Sunday School, etc. And included on our signs, invariably, is something that says “Minister” or “Vicar” or some other such title, followed by the name of a salaried staff person who has been set apart to “run the church.” The significance of designating a single person as the minister on our signage says something about how we perceive ourselves as the people of God. It speaks directly against the clear teaching of the New Testament that God’s people are a “royal priesthood,” and that “ministry” and “ministering” is the responsibility and right of every Christian.\textsuperscript{13} Much more constructive than this practice is the example seen on a church sign in a Victorian country parish. On it were all the bits and pieces

\textsuperscript{12} For a more complete development of this, see Leland Ryken, \textit{Work and Leisure in Christian Perspective} (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1987) 119-156.

\textsuperscript{13} See, for example, 1 Peter 2:4-12 NIV
you might expect to find, with one exception: after the word “Ministers” it read “the entire congregation.” How refreshing that was!

And, following along that line, it is equally un-helpful when we talk about people who are pastors as people who are “in the ministry,” as opposed to other people who are in something else or have a job. One attempt at addressing this is when people refer to others as being “in full-time, vocational ministry.” But this still falls short of the mark, in this writer’s estimation. What is better is to speak about someone having a “ministry of the word” or “a cross-cultural ministry.” Or better yet, we might even drop this approach altogether and speak of what people do in terms that are more descriptive and less evaluative. For example, one might say that he is a Bible teacher, or a pastor, or a counsellor, just as another might say that she is an engineer, surgeon or factory worker. None is singled out with the evaluative term of “ministry” because all are recognised as having equal legitimacy, under God.14

And taking this even further, it would be a huge step forward if we could get past the practice of using titles such as “Reverend” and “Father” and “Reverend Doctor,” or any other such labels which communicate things that are simply not true. To be sure, in suggesting these things I am not intending to deny the fact that there are roles within the body of Christ. Certainly there are. Some have been set apart, by God, as elders, pastors, teachers, evangelists, etc. and, as such, there is nothing wrong in acknowledging this reality. But when we distinguish these people in ways which obscures the truth that all Christians have a role in the body of Christ, and that all of God’s people are “set apart” to serve Him, we do ourselves and our people a great disservice.

Another bit of language we need to change involves our use of the words “call” and “calling.” We need to avoid the practice of speaking of these things in ways which are foreign to the Bible and also to the experience of most Christians. And, at the same time, we need to speak to each other about our common and mutual calling to live as disciples of Jesus Christ so that it becomes common parlance among all of God’s people instead of the exclusive language of missionaries and Presbyterian ministers. It needs to become part of the very air we breathe. We all must learn to think of ourselves as a called people, living out our calling in a multiplicity of ways.

14 Stott writes helpfully, “All Christians without exception are called to ministry, indeed to spend their lives in ministry. Ministry is not the privilege of a small elite, but of all the disciples of Jesus. ...We do a great disservice to the Christian cause whenever we refer to the pastorate as ‘the ministry.’ For by our use of the definite article we give the impression that the pastorate is the only ministry there is, much as medieval churchmen regarded the priesthood as the only vocation there is.” See John Stott, The Contemporary Christian: An urgent plea for double listening (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992) 140.
Another area of change at the congregational level involves all the physical, material, and even spatial ways in which we introduce false distinctions among God’s people. Thankfully, the matter of wearing distinctive clerical dress has largely disappeared in the evangelical world. However, it retains a foothold in some places and in some ways through the use of special gowns and surplices, etc. We need either to abolish these or, alternatively, to make them available for every Christian. But to continue with clothing that distinguishes “clergy” from “lay people” only encourages the preservation of wrong categories of thinking.

And there is room for change in other ways related to the spatial and physical. In many churches, for instance, there is special furniture in the front of the sanctuary that is set aside for the preacher and which, to my mind, could be a bit more conservative than is commonly the case. In other churches there is still a “pageant” of sorts associated with the entrance and departure of the preacher, a kind of parade that happens before and after the service in which, inevitably, attention is drawn to the person of the preacher, over against the rest of the congregation. Of course, I have no quarrel with wanting to uphold the high place of the preaching of the Word but I do not believe that the pageantry associated with the preacher himself helps us toward this aim. What I would be more sympathetic toward is a pageant in which the Scriptures are “delivered” to the pulpit, as happens still in some Victorian churches. At least then the attention is not upon any one person but upon something more appropriate — the written revelation of God.

Another area of possible reform is in our manner of conducting communion services, and perhaps even in the administration of baptism. The current practice, at least in my own reformed circles, is to allow only a “minister of the word and sacrament” to preside on these occasions. This is, I believe, not biblically defensible, and unduly restricts to one elder privileges which set him apart from every other elder. And this in a tradition that, ostensibly, believes in both the plurality and parity of elders. It would help underscore this plurality and parity if elders who were not engaged in a ministry of the word were allowed to preside at the Lord’s table and to administer baptism within the congregation. Surely these men who have been entrusted with the spiritual oversight of the Lord’s people could be trusted to administer His sacraments aright. Surely these men who are entrusted with the teaching of the Scriptures can handle the “visible” sermon of the Lord’s Supper as well. And this would have a positive effect on those in the congregation, who perhaps see the elders as “one of them” (I have no better way to put it), and yet involved in the administration of those things which previously had been the exclusive preserve of “the clergy.” And, in addition to not withholding the administration of the Lord’s Supper from the plurality of elders, it would be a positive step forward if we did not withhold the distribution of the elements of the Supper from the congregation in general. In this way, both the elders and the congregation would be affirmed in their legitimacy as ministers and priests in God’s kingdom.
Still another area for change is in the manner in which we handle prayers during our times of corporate worship. Often it is the case that there is a “pastoral prayer,” which is part of the order of service and which in many places is done by “the minister” or perhaps the elders exclusively. In opposition to that we should invite the prayers of all of God’s people, and employ our more prayerful members to teach us all, including the elders, how to pray, and to model for us a life of prayer.

And then, outside the corporate setting, we need to find ways to legitimise the prayer and pastoral work of our people. For example, it is often the case that persons in hospital will complain, “The church has neglected me,” in spite of the fact that they have been visited, cared for and prayed for by half a dozen different people in the congregation. Why have they “not been visited?” Because “the minister” has not been to see them and, therefore, the church has not been to see them. We need to find ways to combat this sort of mentality. One such way is to make it a regular practice to share stories of how different people have been used of God, through prayer and pastoral practice, in the lives of others. We need to uphold these people as “heroes” of the faith and to thank God for them publicly and often.

Yet another area for reform is in the way we carry on when a person is “ordained” or “goes into the ministry” or prepares to depart for “the mission field.” Typically, these sorts of services are greeted with no small amount of fanfare, especially when it comes to a service of ordination. Perhaps it is good to celebrate these things. But surely we ought to have the same sort of enthusiasm and celebration every time a university student graduates and embarks on his/her chosen career path, or every time someone leaves one field to take up another, or when an unemployed person finally finds some meaningful work. It seems to me that we could hold, at the beginning of each new year, a special service whereby we recognise the call and commission of every person in the congregation to the service of the Lord Jesus Christ, in all its various ways. If we lay hands on and “set apart” people for work in China, why should we not do the same for people whose field of ministry is the Ford factory, the local high school or K-Mart? What a great day that would be for the entire congregation to commit themselves to live and work unreservedly both for the advancement of God’s kingdom and for the faithful management of His creation, all to His glory.15 Perhaps then we might one day replace the “Thank God it’s Friday!” mentality with something more like “Thank God it’s Monday!”

15 Stott’s illustrations of this very point are helpful: “…there is a crying need for Christian men and women who see their daily work as their primary Christian ministry and who determine to penetrate their secular environment for Christ. Christian people in business and industry are needed to specify ‘service to the public’ as the first goal on their ‘mission’ statement, to make bold experiments in labour relations, worker participation and profit-sharing, and to accept their responsibility to produce an annual ‘social audit’ alongside their annual financial audit….Christian politicians are needed
One final area where change can be introduced is at the very beginning, either in our follow-up of people who have recently come to Christ or in our assimilation of newcomers into the life of our church. In both these places we can take steps to insure that people have a biblical understanding of these matters. In this way we can build within them, from the very start, the perspective that their whole life is an offering to God and an opportunity to demonstrate the radical truth of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

to identify the major injustices in their society, refuse to come to terms with them, and determine to secure legislative change, however long it takes. And Christian economists are needed to find way of controlling inflation and reducing unemployment simultaneously. Christian film-makers are needed to produce not only overtly Christian or evangelistic films, but wholesome films which indirectly commend Christian personal and family values, and so honour and glorify Christ. More Christian doctors are needed who, in cooperation with moral theologians, face the contemporary challenges of medical ethics and develop ways of maintaining the uniquely Christian vision of the human person and the human family.” See Stott, The Contemporary Christian, 142-143.