

Hearing God's call one more time: Retrieving calling in theology of work



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Calling is a very important concept in Christianity. In the medieval era, calling was restricted to ecclesiastical work alone, a devotion to the life of contemplation. Ordinary work or physical labour was not considered qualified to be a calling. Martin Luther was the one who taught that the ordinary work of the ordinary people was also God's calling and equally spiritual as the ecclesiastical work. However, Miroslav Volf, a Croatian theologian, criticised Luther that his view of calling was too static and irrelevant to the modern context where people often choose to quit a job because of its negative effects and some people have to do multiple jobs in order to make ends meet. While recognising the validity of Volf's critique, this article seeks to demonstrate that even in the modern context, calling is still a very important theological concept to reflect upon work. Luther's vocational view of work could be retrieved in discussing the theology of work by putting it in dialogue with Calvin, Kuyper, and other theologians.

Contribution: This article seeks to show that the concept of calling is indispensable in constructing a sound theology of work for the modern context. By understanding work as calling, Christian workers are enabled to see how they are participating in God's redemptive work through their jobs.

Keywords: calling; vocation; theology of work; labour; spirituality.

Introduction

The term 'calling' originated from the Latin word '*vocatio*', that later became the English word 'vocation'. The word means 'invitation' or 'summons', and the concept of God's calling is a central motif in the Bible (eds. McFarland et al. 2011:533). In the modern sense, the word vocation has equal meaning to the word work, job, profession, and occupation (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2023). Because of their equal lexical meaning, those words will be used interchangeably in this article.

Martin Luther was the one who popularised the understanding of work as a calling or vocation. Through his works, Luther made a tremendous change in medieval society on how they saw works outside of the church as something that could also glorify God. The Reformation revised the medieval concept that contemplating God was the highest form of work, for it started to refer to works such as farming and baking in equal terms to the life of godly contemplation (Veith 2011:121).

Luther (1958) saw vocation as a 'mask of God':

What else is all our work to God – whether in the fields, in the garden, in the city, in the house, in war, or in government – but just such a child's performance, by which He wants to give His gifts in the fields, at home, and everywhere else? These are the *masks of God*, behind which He wants to remain concealed and do all things ... God gives all good gifts; but you must lend a hand and take the bull by the horns; that is, you must work and thus give God good cause and a mask. (pp. 114–115)

Luther saw that God called his people into various professions so that He could scatter His gifts to the society. Instead of coming in uncovered majesty when giving those gifts, God chooses to do it through an ordinary person who performs her or his work on earth (Wingren 2004:138). Luther's understanding of calling was not restricted to church parameters but included all kinds of works that could act as a way to serve others. His understanding of work contrasts with the current popular understanding of work that sees it as a mere economic activity without connection to religion or spiritual life. The modern culture sees the life of contemplation and spiritual activities

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that do not lead to earning money as things unqualified to be called works or jobs, for it has no economic motifs (Ballor 2017:326).

Miroslav Volf, a Croatian Christian theologian, saw that Luther's perspective on calling was too narrow and unfit to be applied in the modern context. In Luther's time, people generally had only one profession inherited from the previous generations. That situation is in stark contrast to the modern condition where many people change their professions at least a few times, and many others have to do more than one job in order to meet their needs. He saw those two characteristics of modern workers as the primary reason why Luther's concept of calling is inadequate for modern society (Volf 2017:73–74). He suggested that work is better based on one's spiritual gifts or charisms instead of calling because the second is restricted theologically to calling into salvation alone. God's calling, in Volf's strict definition, is about salvation, whereas spiritual gifts are things given by God to equip people to work both in the church and the world. Volf argued further that should one's calling be equated to one's profession, then a person who changed her or his job would be seen as one who is unfaithful to God's calling. The position is untenable, considering there are many dehumanising jobs that require the workers to quit and find better jobs (Volf 2017:73–74).¹

In contrast to theology, modern psychology in the last decade found that associating one's calling and profession is very important for modern workers. By understanding a profession as God's call, a worker could get many positive psychological benefits. That positive psychological influence explains why Dik and Duffy wrote a book entitled *Make your job a calling: How the psychology of vocation can change your life at work* (Dik & Duffy 2013). There is a conflicting approach between theology and psychology when it comes to understanding the role of calling or vocation in the modern working context (Rotman 2017:24–25).

While seriously taking Volf's critique into account, this article argues that calling is indispensable to constructing a theology of work relevant to modern society. Volf was right on the inadequacy of Luther's conception of calling. However, the later development of the notion by subsequent theologians such as Calvin, Perkins, Kuyper, and others made the concept of *vocatio* more nuanced and relevant for the modern context. The contemporary doctrine of creation and exegetical works on Genesis 1–2 are also helpful to see how work has been an integral part of the pre-fall human identity. This article seeks to prove that understanding work as a calling is not only psychologically beneficial but also theologically defensible.

Research method

This article is a systematic theological work that Smith defines as a systematic study of what the Bible says on a particular topic (Smith 2016:139). This article will attempt to

1. For a fuller elaboration of Volf's position, see (Volf 2001).

construct a theology of work relevant to the modern context by highlighting important phases in its development and demonstrating the indispensability of calling in such an endeavour. In order to do so, this article will firstly highlight the development of the theology of work from the early church up to the Reformation; secondly, revisit the notion of *vocatio*; and thirdly, present how the vocational view of work could enable Christian workers to see their work as a participation in God's redemptive work.

Theology of work

Theological reflections on work are vital because Christians are not only Christians when they go to church for a few hours every week. Christianity is something to be practised daily, for it is a way of life. Because work is the largest portion of human life, it is only possible to have Christianity as a way of life by seeing its connection to work. As noticed by Berg (2017):

By its sheer domination of time and energy, work is one of the most important aspects of human life. No other facet of a human life takes up more time and energy. Arguably, no other feature of human life determines an individual's identity, value, purpose, and self-esteem as much as his or her occupation. (p. 2)

Throughout the history of the church, multiple theologies of work have been constructed, yet the term 'theology of work' itself is a quite recent development. The phrase 'theology of work' can be traced to the middle of the 20th century as coined by Catholic theologians² in their attempt to understand theologically the nature and meaning of work (Cosden 2006:5). After that, many resources emerged in academia and beyond. Not only are there books and journal articles on the issue but also conferences and establishments of some institutions related to faith and work.³

As mentioned earlier, although the phrase theology of work was coined in the 20th century, the concept has been as old as Christianity itself. Thus, it is important to briefly examine the development of the concept from the early church until now. In the early church, Christians were influenced by the Jewish understanding of work. When the Apostle Paul worked as a tent maker, he did not have to apologise; instead, he was proud of his job since it could be an example for others who minister to the Lord (Ac 18:3; 2 Th 3:7–10). In Jewish society, ordinary work was obligatory for the rabbis because they received no money from their teaching. The rabbis were expected to work out their financial needs by an honest toil (Ostring 2016:13). Abraham Joshua Heschel (1951), a Jewish theologian from the 20th century, observed:

2. A prominent example from the Catholic tradition is Edwin Kaiser with his *Theology of work* (Kaiser 1966).

3. The "Theology of work commentary" edited by William Messenger is one example of an academic endeavour to reflect theologically on work throughout the scripture. Published in 2015 in five volumes, comprising more than a thousand pages; see <https://www.logos.com/product/55574/theology-of-work-bible-commentary>; the "Faith and work summit" by the Oikonomia Network is a conference on the topic of faith and work; "Made to Flourish" is an organisation that was established to be a network of pastors who seek to integrate faith, work, and economic wisdom; institutions such as "Denver Institute of Faith and Work" and "The Center for Faith and Work in New York City" are established to seek integration between faith and work (Steiner 2018:1–2).

Just as we are commanded to keep Sabbath, we are commanded to labour. The duty of work for six days is just as much a part of God's covenant with man as to abstain from work on the seventh day. (p. 28)

Christian appreciative attitude towards work changed significantly in medieval times because of the influence of Greek philosophy. Plato (427–347 BCE) taught that the human soul is worth more than the human body that imprisoned it. Furthermore, because the human soul is eternal and the human body is not, pursuing knowledge is the only proper human work as it nourishes the soul. All kinds of physical work were regarded as inferior, a necessity to enslaved people who could not choose other works. Influenced by Plato and other Greek philosophers, church leaders in the medieval era, such as Augustine, St. Benedict, and Thomas Aquinas, regarded active working life as inferior to the contemplative life. The distinction between the two became more intense as the church distinguished between the clergy (*kleros*) and the laity (*laos*). The laity were ordinary people and because they lacked a special calling, they had to do the necessary physical work to survive. However, the clergy was whom God called especially into an elevated intellectual and spiritual work to nourish the soul. The clergy lived in monasteries, set apart from ordinary life to engage in contemplative life that nourished their soul (Ostring 2016:16–17).

While the medieval theologians tended to see work as punishment for original sin (Gn 3:17–19), Luther created a new look at work by recognising Genesis 2:15 as God's commendation of work before the fall. The text was a basis for Luther to say that work is not only an important task, but in God's original purpose, human beings were created for work. Through Luther, the Reformation brought back the appreciative attitude towards work that was lost in medieval Christianity (Ostring 2016:19–20). As he wrote:

If you are a manual labourer, you find that the Bible has been put into your workshop, into your hand, into your heart. It teaches and preaches how you should treat your neighbor ... just look at your tools ... at your needle and thimble, your beer barrel, your goods, your scales or yardstick or measure. ... and you will read this statement inscribed in them ... You have as many preachers as you have transactions, goods, tools, and other equipment in your house and home. (Luther 1962:39–40; cf. Marshall 2014:80–81)

John Calvin agreed with Luther that calling should not be restricted to ecclesiastical matters alone. Although he maintained the distinction between the church and the magistrate in Geneva, he nevertheless believed that the magistrates received the call from God as well. He saw the magistrate's work as 'a lawful calling approved of God' (Institutes IV.XX.3).⁴ Nevertheless, Calvin took a step beyond Luther in his sympathy towards the rise of commercialism in his day (Tawney 1954:92–93). Calvin accepted the legitimacy of the appropriate use of interest, which had been fiercely debated throughout the medieval era. Donald Heiges

4. All reference to Calvin's *Institutes* is from Calvin (2011).

observed the difference between Luther and Calvin, 'Luther was suspicious of, and opposed to, the rising commercialism of his day, while Calvin recognized the burgeoning world of commerce as an area of legitimate activity for Christians' (Heiges 1984:60). Another noteworthy difference between Calvin and Luther is that, while Luther taught that a calling was fixed and that changing one's job was seen as unfaithfulness to God's calling, Calvin saw that it was possible to change one's profession (Hart 1995:125). His position will be elaborated on in the next section.

For now, it is sufficient to observe that Calvin did not only bring back the positive outlook of work but further, he theologically sanctioned modern economy. The affinity of Calvin's thought to the modern economy is also a guiding indication of how his view on *vocatio* could be a help for current theology of work to retrieve that notion while at the same time being relevant to the modern context.

Revisiting *Vocatio*

As mentioned earlier, Martin Luther was the one who popularised the concept of work as a calling. He based the concept on the Latin word *vocatio*. According to him, every Christian has a twofold calling: a spiritual one (*vocatio spiritualis*) and an external one (*vocatio externa*). The first refers to God's calling for the people to enter the Kingdom of God through the proclamation of the Gospel, a universal call for every Christian. However, the second refers to God's calling to serve him and fellow humans through one's profession. In Luther's view, when God calls a person to become a believer, the profession of that person is seen as her or his calling. Thus, the everyday works of a Christian could be understood as a divine calling (Luther 1908:300; cf. Volf 2017:71–72).

Volf viewed Luther's understanding as based on a wrong interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:20. Calling in that text should not be seen as a calling into any particular job but a general call to be the people of God. Alternatively, it was a universal call to be a Christian. Volf argued that calling in that verse should be seen in a limited soteriological sense. To refer to a particular calling of one's profession, be it in or outside the church, the term *charisma* (spiritual gifts) is more suitable than *vocatio* (calling).⁵ Moreover, because the Holy Spirit is the one who is in charge of dispensing *charisma*, Volf's approach is called a pneumatological approach to work (Volf 2017:76). In Volf's strict use of the term, Christians receive only one call (*vocatio*), which is to be a member of God's people, but diverse spiritual gifts (*charisma*) so they could serve all kinds of tasks that are necessary in the church and the world. The spiritual gifts enable people to work in the Spirit. A pneumatological understanding of work could

5. Luther did not only interpret "calling" in 1 Corinthians 7 as job or profession, he rather interpreted calling in verses 17–20 as referring to various stations of life: marital status (v. 17), circumcision (v. 18–19), slave or freeman (v. 20–21). The last part seems to correspond more with the understanding that Luther equated calling with one's profession (Luther 1973:39–43); however, Luther's interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:20–21 is not totally static, because he allowed a slave to seek freedom if there are any legitimate opportunities. He wrote: "Therefore, it should be the same to your conscience whether you gain your freedom or remain a serf, provided it is done in God and with honor" (Luther 1973:43).

then lead the people to see how they are being enabled to work with God in renewing the cosmos (Volf 2017:75–76, 79).

However, it is too simplistic to say that Luther mistranslated the word *klesis*, Greek for ‘calling’, in 1 Corinthians 7:20, as *Beruf*, an ordinary German word for ‘occupation’. Hermeneutically, Luther was aware that 1 Corinthians 7:17 could be the basis to interpret calling in verse 20 as ‘occupation’. And moreover, he was aware of the peasant revolutions of his time. He had to be careful to not too much elevate individual person, for it would potentially incite social and political revolutions (Ostring 2016:20; cf. Tawney 1954:80–81).

Calvin agreed with Luther that 1 Corinthians 7:20 could be applied to vocations in the daily lives of ordinary people. In his teaching on the Christian life, he stated, ‘Finally, this point is to be noted: the Lord bids each one of us in all life’s actions to look to his calling’ (Institutes III.X.6). However, he went in a different direction than Luther in having a more dynamic view of vocations. To Calvin, the static understanding of *vocatio* cannot be accepted uncritically because the institutional shape of the current existence is a product of the human culture that is not free from sinful influence. His vocational view of work does not allow work that dehumanises human beings to be simply regarded as God’s calling. A clear example is Calvin’s commentary on Ephesians 6:5 where he stated that slaves in the ancient time might be imposed to do ‘the most degrading employments’ and he believed that although Christian slaves should heed Paul’s exhortation to obey their masters, the condition of bondservant could be considered as a disease that needs to be cured (Calvin 1841:313–314). Joel Beeke aptly observed, ‘Calvin had much to say about the freedom of the individual, the stewardship of earthly goods, the dignity of labor, and the rights of working people’ (Beeke 2009:245). Calvin agreed with Luther that we are called to use our talents and abilities to serve God and our neighbours. Nevertheless, he did not absolutize one’s station in life (Nel & Scholtz 2016:3). Calvin’s more critical attitude towards the sinful influence of the *status quo* is foundational to understanding his openness to changing jobs.

Understanding the specific calling to work as one’s *vocatio* does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of changing one’s job. The Dutch statesman and theologian Abraham Kuyper argued that God ordained both David’s first vocation as a shepherd and his latter vocation as a king (Kuyper 2019:259). Thus, Kuyper has a more dynamic view of calling. In his perspective, changing one’s job does not necessarily mean unfaithfulness to God’s calling, but it could be part of the calling that God has ordained for the person.

In understanding calling, it is helpful to distinguish God’s universal call for all humanity to work and God’s specific call to a person to work a particular job. Genesis 1:27–28 and 2:15 are clear biblical references to God’s universal call to work in the state of innocence. As observed by William Messenger, ‘God’s command or call to work comes at the very beginning

of the Bible, where God chooses to involve human beings in the work of creation, production, and sustenance’ (Messenger 2011). The Bible also provides reference for specific calling of work for individuals:

God called Noah to build the ark. God called Moses and Aaron to their tasks (Ex. 3:4; 28:1). He called prophets such as Samuel (1 Sam. 3:10), Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4–5), Amos (Amos 7:15), and others. He called Abram and Sarah and a few others to undertake journeys or to relocate (which might be taken as a kind of workplace calling). He placed people in political leadership, including Joseph, Gideon, Saul, David, and David’s descendants. God chose Bezalel and Oholiab as chief craftsmen for the tabernacle (Ex. 31:1–6). Jesus called the apostles and some other of his disciples (e.g. Mark 3:14), and the Holy Spirit called Barnabas and Saul to be missionaries (Acts 13:2). The word *call* is not always used, but the unmistakable direction of God for a particular person to do a particular job is clear in these cases. (p. 173)

In the case of a specific call to work for an individual to do a specific work, *vocatio* and *charism* cannot be separated from one another. Because when God calls someone to do a particular work, he also gives a particular set of skills for the person to do the work. In the Old Testament, God gave the skills needed for the work, as in the case of Bezalel and Oholiab (Ex 31:1–11). In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit always gives believers the skills they need to minister the church and the society (1 Cor 12:7–19). God guides his people to find what kind of work to do and how they would do it (Messenger 2011:176). The combination of *vocatio* and *charism* can also be found in the work of William Perkins, a leading Puritan theologian. As he wrote:

Everyone, rich or poor, man or woman, is bound to have a personal calling in which they must perform some duties for the common good, according to the measure of the gifts that God has bestowed upon them. (Harjanto 2018:15; cf. Perkins 2005:267)

Participating in God’s work

The working context in the modern era is challenging both in and outside the church. While the concept of work as God’s calling is important to retain, it should not be performed by neglecting the voices and experiences of workers in daily life. Economic inequality is real, considering the world’s 26 richest persons control the same amount of money as the poorest 50% of the global population.⁶ In Australia, the increasing economic inequality led many young people to be saddled with substantial education debts without the economic power to buy a house. Furthermore, the American Psychological Association tracks that money and work are still the top stressor factors for adults in America (Cremen 2020:123). The situation is even more difficult because of the disruption of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. As the world is now entering the post-pandemic situation, it cannot be regarded as the same world as it was before the pandemic. Because of the pandemic, pastors might lose their jobs, and churches might lose their members. Some churches could not gather for 1 or 2 years because of

⁶For an international perspective on labour and economic inequality, see Strümpell and Hoffmann (ed. 2023).

COVID-19; thus, they have a huge challenge to revitalise worship in their congregations (Tompo, Kristanto & Wicaksono 2022:685).

The dark side of the modern working context should not lead Christians into a pessimistic attitude. For Christians in leadership positions, they should see it as an opportunity to exert servant leadership. Those who are in leadership should acknowledge that authority comes from God and how, according to Christian principles, power and authority should be manifested in love so it could be a means to achieve God's mission on earth (Roberts 2015:22). The biblical teachings such as the Year of Jubilee or the Sabbatical Year (Lv 25; Dt 15) were solutions to fight economic inequality in ancient Israel. Although it cannot be interpreted literally in the modern context, in principle, the Bible teaches that poor people have a right to economic justice and are worthy of solidarity from their neighbours. In the New Testament, Jesus followed the spirit of solidarity contained in the concept of the Year of Jubilee (Lk 4:19). The Gospels testify to Jesus's specific mission for the poor (Mt 11:5; Lk 4:18). In the early church, they translated solidarity to those who are in economic needs as living and eating together so a condition of economic equality could be achieved (Freudenberg 2009:2).

By understanding work as a calling, Christians nowadays could see their work as a participation in Christ's redemptive work. The work of redemption could occur in the workplace through healing, justice, reconciliation, compassion, humility, patience, and kindness, as noticed by Colossians 3:12. The redemptive work of Christ is not limited to evangelism but including all things necessary to make the world as how God intends it to be (Messenger 2011:172–173). As Herman Bavinck wrote:

The rebirth by water and Spirit finds its completion in the rebirth of all things (Matt. 19:28). Spiritual redemption from sin is only fully completed in bodily redemption at the end of time. (Bavinck 2008:694)

The rebirth of Christians into the new creation is an anticipation of the rebirth of the whole cosmos. In that sense, regeneration is not just God's blessing for the individual but an invitation for each regenerated person to participate in God's work. Thus, modern Christian workers should see themselves as participants in God's redemptive work that will renew everything.

Not only does vocation have redemptive effects, but it also has sanctifying effects. God uses our vocation to form our morality. As Kuyper (2019) wrote:

... we therefore posit that it is God who, as all-governing King, has determined our vocation for us and related that determination of our vocation to our moral vocation. If our life vocation serves to elevate us, to spare us temptation, to stimulate us toward what is lovely and commendable, so that the fiery blaze of sin is tempered rather than fanned within our depraved nature, then our vocation is in God's hand a means to cause common grace, which stems sin, to work in us. (p. 259)

In Kuyper's terminology, vocation could be God's common grace that restrains the manifestation of sin in human life. Kuyper (2019) even went further when he observed how one's vocation could change the appearance of a person:

... the main vocational categories even put their stamp on the external appearance of the individual. Among a group of people who travel together on a ship we can readily recognize, without knowing anyone personally, who is the preacher, who the notary, who the doctor, who the schoolteacher, and who the storekeeper of the town. Even though all wear ordinary clothing, nevertheless their facial expression, their manner of behaving, their manner of speech, and their bearing soon give away whom we are dealing with. (p. 258)

The Roman Catholic tradition also recognises the sanctifying effects of human work. Pope John Paul II (1981), wrote in *Laborem Exercens*:

As a person, man is therefore the subject at work. As a person he works, he performs various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfill the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity. (p. 8)

Given that God works *through* and *in* the workers, the economic motif should not be the primary qualification for a job. God could use unpaid jobs to work both his redemptive plan in the world and to form the person's morals. For Kuyper, vocation is all kinds of regular daily activities to which one should devote her or his strength and time. That broad definition of vocation allows him to see that calling to work does not stop even after a person is retired (Kuyper 2019:258). Moreover, for John Paul II, human work does not only transform nature but also transforms the person to realise her or his humanity. Work is seen as the very essence of humanity and could lead towards its self-actualisation (Puen 2016:110).

The understanding of work as calling has also an eschatological dimension in the sense that Christians are called to participate in building the kingdom of God. The sense of calling could make Christians different workers who seek the 'things that are above' (Col 3:1 [ESV]) while they are working. In their work, Christians have to operate in a higher level of integrity than that of the world because they fix their gaze to Christ who is seated in the right hand of God while they are working. In that sense, working is both a self-actualisation of humanity by developing our hidden potentials through work, and also an eschatological participation in building God's kingdom (Quinn & Stickland 2016:50). As John Goldingay wrote, 'God's calling to us, our vocation, our summons, his invitation to us, gives us a confident expectation that he is going to fulfill his purpose for creation and for us' (Goldingay 2021:18).

Conclusion

Luther successfully taught that ordinary work is God's calling with tremendous spiritual significance. However, Volf was right in asserting that Luther's view of calling is too static and, thus, irrelevant to the rapidly changing working context in the modern era. While Volf's proposal to change

the association of work to *charisms* (spiritual gifts) is helpful, it does not necessarily lead to the exclusion of *vocatio* (calling) from discourses on the theology of work. By incorporating other theologians such as Calvin, Perkins, Kuypers, and other contemporary theologians, it is possible to retrieve calling while constructing a dynamic vocational view of work relevant to the modern context. By seeing their works as God's calling, Christian workers nowadays are enabled to see that their work is a participation in God's redemptive work that will renew their humanity and the cosmos.

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