

## Can we justifiably speak of our Work as a Vocation?

As Christians, what are we doing each Monday when we head off to work? Do our weekly efforts amount to anything? Should Christians replace their secular work with ministry work? The concept of work as Vocation can help us understand what we are doing when we engage in secular work. However Vocational views of work have recently been criticised by some theologians. In this paper we will answer the question “can we justifiably speak of our work as vocation or calling? Along the way we hope to show why vocation is a helpful, though not exhaustive, way to think about our work.

For our purposes here, Vocation is ...

- i) a providential grouping of responsibilities/life situations, that...
- ii) ...maintains its importance despite the expectation of a new creation.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. A Lutheran perspective: Work from the perspective of creation.

In much of Luther’s discussion of ‘every-day’ work, he makes use of the terminology of “calling” or “vocation”. In speaking of ones calling or vocation Luther is basically paraphrasing 1 Cor 7:17-24, where one is encouraged to stay in their “calling”, that is, the state the Lord has assigned to each. Work is an “external” calling as compared with our “spiritual” calling to salvation.

This way of understanding work had several implications:

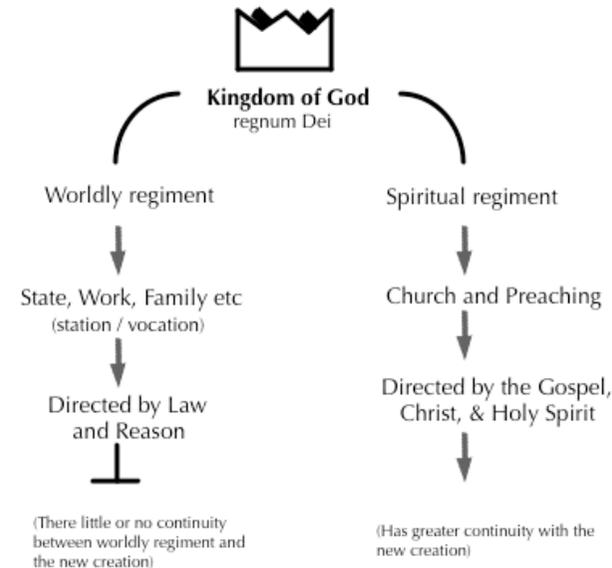
- 1) It ascribed much greater value to common work than was the case previously. Fulfilment of ones worldly duty was considered of the highest moral value.<sup>2</sup>
- 2) It overcame the medieval hierarchy between earthly activity and spiritual contemplation. Since every vocation rests on God’s call, every vocation is fundamentally of the same value before God. This turned the monastic system on its head.
- 3) However, paralleling *vocatio spiritualis* with *vocatio externa* ended up implying vocation (by analogy) the unchangeable nature<sup>3</sup> of ones vocation. When one speaks of work as immutable, it suggests that as our spiritual call is unchangeable and secure, so is our work situation unchangeable.

<sup>1</sup> By ii) we mean that a vocation is not overthrown by either one’s *experience* of a “soteriological call” nor the Christian *expectation* of eschatological consummation. This 2<sup>nd</sup> part will be important when we consider the co-creationist view on work.

<sup>2</sup> M. Weber, *The Protestant Work Ethic & the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner’s Press, 1958), 80.

<sup>3</sup> The term we will be using for this is immutability.

Weber sums up what became (*after Luther*) the standard Lutheran understanding of vocation. Ones calling or vocation was...“*that state of life in which the individual has been set by heaven, and against which it is impiety to rebel.*”<sup>4</sup> An understanding of Luther’s “Two Kingdoms” framework for theology (diagram below) can help in understanding how the static view of work that Webber describes eventually came about.<sup>5</sup>



Placing work (and vocation more generally) under the worldly regime had certain implications. For example, Luther resisted the Church (spiritual regiment) using the sword (worldly regiment) for the sake of the Gospel. He also resisted the peasants (worldly regiment) using the gospel (spiritual regiment) as a law on earth. Any structural change within the worldly sphere is postponed until the End or left to supernatural intervention.<sup>67</sup> Work is therefore seen as a “this-worldly” exercise. It’s an exercise that maintains the order God has already created.

<sup>4</sup> Weber, *The Protestant Work Ethic & the Spirit of Capitalism*, 209.

<sup>5</sup> Diagram adapted from the diagram in J. Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, (Philadelphia : Fortress, 1984), 73.

<sup>6</sup> G. Preece, *The Viability of the Vocation Tradition in Trinitarian, Credal and Reformed Perspective* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1998), 65.

R. Doyle, *Eschatology and the Shape of Christian Belief* (Cumbria: Paternoster, 2000), 175.

<sup>7</sup> “in the preaching office Christ does the whole thing, by his Spirit, but in the worldly kingdom men must act on the basis of reason. (Gen 2:15).” LW 46.242.

## THE RECENT CRITICISMS:

Vocational views of work as defined by creation have come in for some heavy criticism.<sup>8</sup> There are three reasons why it has been suggested we should get rid of vocational definitions of work:

- i) Vocation is easily **misused ideologically**. Some critics argue that oppression and exploitation of workers occurs in the name of maintaining the status-quo.<sup>9</sup>
- ii) Vocation is **tied to a static view of creation and eschatology**, which implies little or no continuity between this creation and the new creation, making work meaningless and irrelevant to our spiritual future.
- iii) Vocation, when considered unchangeable (immutable), **isn't relevant** to our mobile, industrial and information society. (to change one's employment is to be unfaithful to God's call).

As can be seen above, the main criticisms of vocation are related to its supposed "immutability" (unchangeable nature) and neglect of "eschatology" (specifically the new creation).

As could be implied by the  symbol in the above diagram,<sup>10</sup> some who followed Luther mistakenly believed he held to an *Annihilatio Mundi* view of creation. *Annihilatio Mundi* is a term referring to the idea that this world will be annihilated and is therefore insignificant.<sup>11</sup> Rather than positing *Annihilatio Mundi* many reformed theologies prefer *Transformatio Mundi* as a way of describing the transformation, rather than destruction, of this creation.

<sup>8</sup>Especially since Karl Marx.

<sup>9</sup> The examples of the peasants revolution (for Luther) and the industrial revolution (for later protestants) are often quoted. Volf, M. *Work in The Spirit* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 167.

<sup>10</sup> As well as the division between the worldly and spiritual regiments

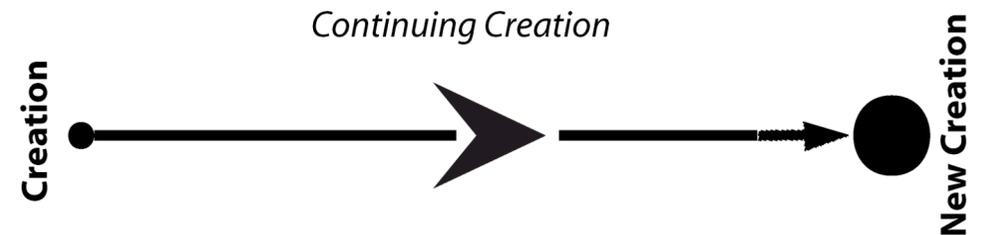
<sup>11</sup> It has been argued that *Annihilatio Mundi* is an overstatement of Luther's Apocalyptic type eschatology cf. Wingren, *The Flight from Creation*. However we will pursue it in this paper as reflective of the Lutheran tradition within which most discussion of vocation has taken place.

## 2. A Future focused or Pneumatological<sup>12</sup> framework for Work?

It is often suggested that the idea of work as vocation is necessarily tied to an *Annihilatio Mundi* view of the created order. Therefore vocation must go, and a new paradigm of work that fits *Transformatio Mundi* must be found.<sup>13</sup> One such view that focuses on the transformation of the world is a "co-creationist" view of work.

### A Co-Creationist view of Work:<sup>14</sup>

Rather than seeing the creation as something completed, a co-creationism sees creation as an unfinished work in progress.<sup>15</sup> Those who hold to this kind of view are less concerned with any completed order lying behind creation (of which our work is a part), than they are with the present and future transformability of the world.<sup>16</sup>



The Spirit so permeates creation that even human cultural achievements and social change expresses the Spirit's ongoing creative work.<sup>17</sup>

The  symbol in the diagram above represents human work/culture, which is used by the Spirit in bringing about the new creation.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> This just means a view of our work that is linked with the work of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>13</sup> We will call this assessment into question later in the paper.

<sup>14</sup> In dialogue with Marxist thought and under the influence of Hegelianism, Christian theology has begun to associate thought about human work more with the doctrine of eschatology than creation. This move reflects an attempt to avoid identification with the oppressive elements of capitalist work practices.

<sup>15</sup> This view considers creation as an eschatologically "open" or undefined entity. This approach is prominent in several of Moltmann's writings relevant to our topic. His *The Trinity and the Kingdom* set the tone for *God in Creation* in this respect Cf. also Preece, *The Viability of the Vocation Tradition*. 212.

<sup>16</sup> See J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (Translated by James W. Leitch. London: SCM, 1967), 272-82. for his focus is on Creation as an ongoing process. Diagram below is based on Doyle, *Eschatology and the Shape of Christian Belief*, 282.

<sup>17</sup> This view is often described as panentheism. A view sometimes attributed to Moltmann. Cf J. Moltmann, *Spirit of Life* (Translated by Margret. London: SCM, 1992) 240-1.

<sup>18</sup> Moltmann, "Unlike the more traditional outlook which does not expect the eschatological restoration of creation until the parousia, that is, after an apocalyptic judgement, Moltmann keeps the eschatological renewal

The theologian Miroslav Volf expresses a similar idea:

“In their daily work human beings are co-workers in God’s Kingdom, which completes creation and renews heaven and earth.”<sup>19</sup>

Volf suggests that all human work that assists in transforming our world is *Charisma* or the exercise of spiritual gifts.<sup>20</sup> Good work is an exercising of *Charisma*. But for Volf spiritual gifts are not limited to the Church or Christians. They can include ordinary, and non-Christian work if it is in accord with the Spirit and the destiny of the new creation.<sup>21</sup> This view also means that any work in which we don’t get to use our talents or gifts to their full potential is not truly pleasing to God, and demands change.

#### AN ASSESSMENT:

Those holding to the Co-creationist view are right in suggesting that God’s expected transformation of the world, rules out an *Annihilatio Mundi* view of creation. However, they do not take the finished nature of created order seriously enough.<sup>22</sup> Without a completed creation (or an exact knowledge of what the new will be like) we face the problem of how we can know what “good work” should look like. By viewing creation as an ongoing and unfinished project, they do away with the created structure against which we can evaluate the rightness of our actions. From the Co-creationist’s perspective, if there is dissatisfaction with the present order (for example one’s heterosexuality), we must remain open to changing/transforming it (homosexuality or transsexualism for example).<sup>23</sup>

“For all Moltmann and Volf’s emphasis on the priority of the transforming power of the future, they both need norms derived from creation to specify

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of the human individual in synchrony with the renewal of creation conceived of as both culture and environment” human involvement is therefore taken up into the history of God. Doyle, *Eschatology and the Shape of Christian Belief*, 175. , 283, Cf also Moltmann, *The way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimension*, (trans. Margret Kohl. San Fransisco: Harper, 1990), 45.

<sup>19</sup> The value of creation for Volf is in its historical teleological destiny. What is good will become the building blocks for new creation. Volf, *Work in The Spirit*, 100.

<sup>20</sup> Volf, *Work in The Spirit*, 25. Cf also Volf, ‘Eschaton, Creation and Social Ethics’, *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995):139.

<sup>21</sup> Volf, *Work in The Spirit*, 118.

<sup>22</sup> It seems difficult to escape the conclusion that their particular view of “transformation” weakens commitment to any notion of a stable created order.

<sup>23</sup> The present must stand in contradiction with the future: the promised future is the engine room which Moltmann and Volf believe drives reform in human work. One must always be disappointed with the present order of things. Hope must be not passive but a fervent summons to the creative transformation of society. J. Moltmann *Hope and Planning* (Translated by Margaret Clarkson. London: SCM, 1971), 194. O’Donovan thinks Moltmann unavoidably tends towards historicism, which is at odds with moral thinking because it makes all created goods appear outmoded. O. O’Donovan, *Resurrection and the Moral Order* (Leicester: Aplos, 1986), 70.

criteria for human freedom and social transformation.”<sup>24</sup>

What we need is some norm or standard by which to adjudicate which work is, and is not, appropriate to the promised future of creation.<sup>25</sup> In addition to the above criticism, we should also point out that Volf is using *Chrisma* or the notion of Spiritual Gifts, in a way that is foreign to the New Testament.<sup>26</sup> Instead the goal of *Charismata* is the “building” of the whole community of believers and each believer within that community.

### 3. In Defence of Vocation: creation, new creation and union with Christ.

In his book *Work in The Spirit* Volf seems to think that one must choose between either a “static” view of vocational work or his “dynamic / revolutionary” view of charismatic work. At least he entertains no other possibility.<sup>27</sup> However we will conclude the paper by considering whether it is still possible to hold to a vocational view of work that:

- a) takes seriously both the eschatological transformation of creation *and* the fixed nature of creations order.
- b) is resistant to ideological misuse, by avoiding the tendencies of immutability (unchangability) that vocational views of work have been accused of.

#### Consideration a)

The resurrection of Christ, upon which Christian ethics is founded, vindicates the created order in a dual sense: it both redeems and transforms it. When God raised Jesus physical body from the dead, he showed that he had not doomed this created world to the scrap heap, but had redeemed it. However as 1 Cor 15:35-44 suggests, the body that is raised is also in some sense transformed. The Christian’s union with the resurrected Christ has a corresponding dual implication for our understanding of work.

In *Resurrection and the Moral Order*, O’Donovan suggests that the “origin and end”, the creation and the new creation, are united in Jesus resurrection.<sup>28</sup> The same can be said of Christian ethics. It too looks both backwards and forwards, to the origin and to the end of

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<sup>24</sup> Preece, *The Viability of Vocation Tradition*, 259. referring to Moltmann *On human dignity*, 110 . and Moltmann, J. *The Crucified God* (Translated by R.A. Wilson and John Bowden. London: SCM, 1996), 317-38.

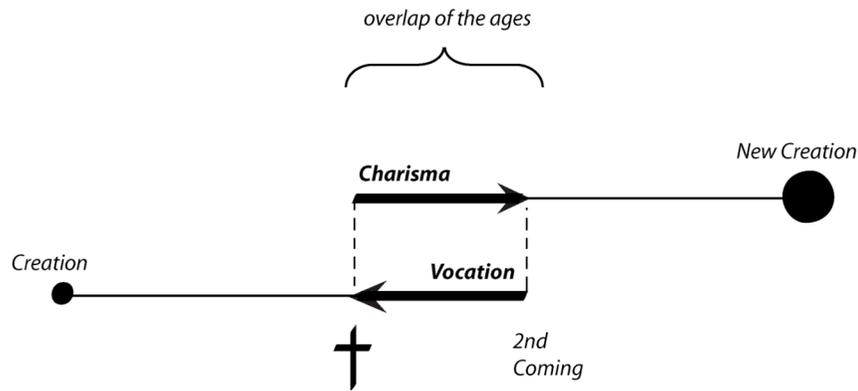
<sup>25</sup> See D.J. Schuurman, ‘Creation, Eschaton and Social Ethics: A Response to Volf’, *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995): 147.

<sup>26</sup> His view effectively opens the way for the secularisation of Spiritual Gifts. Werner Neuer, “The Spirit of Life: The Pneumatology of Jurgen Moltmann,” *European Journal of Theology* 5.2 (1996): 106.

<sup>27</sup> Volf, *Work in The Spirit*, 89-98.

<sup>28</sup> O’Donovan, *Resurrection and the Moral Order*, 57. Cf also Dumbrell *The Search for Order: Biblical Eschatology in Focus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 9.

the created order. It respects the natural structures of life in the world, including work, while looking forward and even concretely anticipating their transformation.<sup>29</sup> This is the substance of the diagram below.



*Vocation = the things we do that properly match how God created the world.  
Charisma = the things we do that point towards how God will and is transforming things.*

Vocation maintains creation's integrity in the overlap of the ages, and Charisma allows some work to point beyond present creation structures (within the Christian community). O'Donovan applies something like this diagram's overlapping of "vocation" and "charisma or gifting" in the sphere of relationships:

The gift of singleness points to a future (eschatological) reality of relationships which lies beyond the vocation of marriage (but this gifting must not overturn the vocation of marriage which accords with the vindicated natural order – 1 Cor7). Marriage declares that the natural order is good, and Singleness points beyond it to its transformation. But the co-existence of the two within the present order does not mean a loss of integrity to either. Neither should evoke evolutionary mutation in the other.<sup>30</sup>

Like wise with work. Work as *Charisma* anticipates God's future transformation of reality. Work as *vocation* is not overthrown by *Charisma* but rather respects God's ordained structure of creation while awaiting the time when **God** will renew all things. This pairing of vocation and charisma both declares that there is a good way to live (and

<sup>29</sup> O'Donovan, *Resurrection and the Moral Order*, 58.

<sup>30</sup> Paraphrase of O'Donovan, *Resurrection and the Moral Order*, 70. I also suggest that the vocation/charisma pairing in the diagram above has close affinities with O'Donovan's distinction between vocation/charisma in *The Desire of The Nations*, 218.

work) in God's creation, as well as a way to work that anticipates creation's transformation.

For example. That a certain Christian has been gifted for the work of preaching and teaching, does not mean that he no longer needs the vocational work that provides for his family.<sup>31</sup> The vocational work of cooking food, preparing tax returns and refilling photocopier toner must exist alongside the Charismatic work of preaching and teaching. Unlike the co-creationist view of work, vocation says that any work is pleasing to God when it maintains the order of creation, because the world God has created is good itself. This allows us to say that even that work that appears to have only transitory significance can none the less be good work.

However, what about when ones vocation appears to be less than an ideal reflection of created order, as might be the case with slavery. Volf might well ask, does eschatology have nothing to say when ones vocation is forced upon us? Paul's discussion of slavery in 1 Cor 7:17-24 (which is a "purple passage" for discussion of vocation), points the way forward. Paul's discussion here highlights that one's union with Christ *has concrete transformative power* even though it does not necessitate a supplanting of the present created order.

"for the one called in the Lord while a slave, is a freedman of the Lord..."  
1 Cor 7:22

This is not only a mystical or spiritual transformation. Within the community of believers the slave/master distinction has really been abolished and ones gifting makes possible work beyond the providential constraints of the present order. For example the slave who submits to the master in his vocation, may exercise authority over the master in the Christian assembly by virtue of being gifted as a teacher. Indeed this teaching itself will concretely transform the nature of relationships within the believing community to be in line with the promised new creation, where there will be brother and brother rather than slave and lord.

**Thus, by pairing Vocation and Charisma, it is possible to view work in vocational terms, while still taking eschatological transformation of the created order seriously.**

<sup>31</sup> Even if it is the vocational work of another Christian on which he ends up depending.

## Consideration b)

The second consideration of resistance against ideological misuse is easier to answer and will be treated more briefly.

Both Luther and Calvin spoke of love and service of one's neighbour as a control on what work (or vocation) was considered "good" or otherwise. Thus the reformed view of vocation is much more resistant to ideological misuse than has often been believed.

Much of what Calvin has to say about everyday work in *The Institutes* comes under the heading of "Self Denial". Work is service both manward and Godward, for the good of the neighbour (ie mutual love).<sup>32</sup> Under this guiding principle both Luther and Calvin directed criticisms towards Princes and other rulers who violated this principle in the way they treated those under their care. For both reformers, it was love and fellowship towards ones neighbours which formed the basis for reform and protest against unjust work practices. All vocational work is open to reform in line with God's intentions for creation that are imbedded in the created order and accessible to us through divine revelation.<sup>33</sup>

While vocational language is only properly applied to the Christian awareness that their situation in life is something that God has in a sense called them too, and is pleasing to God when done in accordance with the way God has created the world, its substance none the less can encompass the work of unbelievers as well. Vocational language itself though is properly applied to those situations and responsibilities in which God desires for us to remain following conversion. That work which is not in line with God's created purpose (for instance supporting our family through crime) needs first to be reformed before we can properly speak of it as vocation.

## CONCLUSION:

1. In this paper, we have suggested that the reformers discussion of work in vocational terms is not inherently open to ideological misuse, as for example, Volf's recent critique has suggested.

2. We have also suggested that the Christological notion of "union with Christ" is a powerful concept which can explain the ongoing integrity of this world's order while remaining open to eschatological transformation.

3. Lastly, by suggesting that Christ's resurrection vindicates the created order (as well as representing the in-braking of the new creation) we retain created order as a bench-mark by which the Christian can engage in the reform and transformation of "bad work" rather than relying on the more vague "evolutionary hope" of Volf and Moltmann.

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<sup>32</sup> Calvin's Commentary on Matt 25:20 Cf also *Institutes* 3.X.6 and 2Thes 3:10 Commentary.

<sup>33</sup> See Calvin's comments on 1 Cor 7:20 in his commentary on 1 Corinthians.

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