

GUEST EDITORIAL

IS THERE A CHRISTIAN VOCATION TO WORK?

TREVOR COOLING



Trevor Cooling is Director of the *Transforming Lives* project, a programme to promote teaching as a Christian vocation. Further details are available at www.transforminglives.org.uk.

"I NEVER WANTED A VOCATION, ONLY A JOB." HOW MANY CHRISTIANS HAVE FELT LIKE THIS I WONDER? THE PRESSURES OF WORKING LIFE AND PROVIDING AN INCOME FOR THE FAMILY ARE QUITE ENOUGH THANK YOU, WITHOUT HAVING TO ADD THE OBLIGATION OF FEELING THAT ONE'S WORK MUST ALSO BE A VOCATION.

This volume of *The Bible in TransMission* explores this concept of vocation. David Spriggs opens the debate by suggesting the Bible itself implies that the primary vocation in life is not our daily work. He observes that this impression is reinforced by the fact that sermons and teaching in churches rarely deal with workplace issues. This silence communicates that employed work does not matter as much to God as church work. Spriggs goes on to argue that such attitudes are a misreading of Scripture, but the fact that he even has to defend the place of work as Christian ministry is indicative that there is an issue to be faced.

In the remaining contributions we are introduced to vignettes from the workplace that tell a different story. Our authors reveal themselves as Christians who have a clear sense that, in their daily grind, they are doing God's work. In the slog of farming, in the pressures of business life, in the ethical complexities of providing care to the disabled and in the intensity of the operating theatre we see people who have given themselves to Christian service in so-called secular employment. Steve Holmes explores the idea that God calls us to several different roles and the challenge of balancing the vocation of work with the vocation of family. The idea that the Church's primary task is mission is currently enjoying a high profile.¹ My question is how can we enable Christians to see their work as a front-line mission task and to flourish under the pressure that this will bring? In this editorial I will suggest we have to ditch four assumptions and embrace three ideals.

FOUR ASSUMPTIONS TO DITCH

Our first assumption relates to the way that vocation is often seen as something that God predetermines in advance for us, with individuals having no role in its determination. God becomes the Victorian father who decides his children's future for them.

One reason why we need to ditch this understanding of vocation is its potentially destructive character. In their article on the vocation of the Christian teacher,² Sharon Hartnett and Frank Kline reflect on their work as trainers of aspiring Christian teachers. They identify a difficulty with students entering teaching with this sense of predetermined calling when they lack the skills

required to succeed in the classroom. To put it in more colloquial terms, they are not "cut out for the job". Hartnett's and Kline's observation is that if such people fail their teacher training, or subsequently fail as teachers, this creates huge pastoral problems. A similar issue faces those presenting for overseas mission work. A failed missionary is that for life.

Hartnett's and Kline's alternative is to propose that we have a primary vocation, which is to be in faithful relationship with God, and many secondary vocations of which our career(s) are one. Our calling then is to be faithful to God in the many different things we find ourselves doing in life. Changing careers or giving priority to family life is not then to abandon a vocation, but is to seek to fulfil a calling to be faithful in the different circumstances of life. To fulfil our vocation is essentially to embark on a life-long journey of faithfulness in relationship with God. It is not about trying to spot God's predetermined career for me.

The second assumption is that a vocation is always associated with a more sacrificial attitude than a "normal" job. Some people assume you will work for less and will be "open all hours" simply because you are involved in "full-time Christian work". David Lankshear in his research with the University of Wales (Bangor) has found that many Christian teachers reject the idea that teaching is a vocation simply because they perceive that as an excuse for others to exploit their goodwill. What is needed is a way of talking about the vocation of secular work that embraces the idea of professionalism.

The third assumption can be illustrated from a leaflet that arrived in my post this morning as I prepared to write this editorial. It is an exhortation to view the workplace as a context for spiritual ministry. So far, so good. However, it then goes on to paint the workplace as infused by the activities of "the enemy", where the forces of secularisation predominate. The difficulty with this approach is that it creates a mindset which sees the secular workplace as a dangerous place for Christians to be. To have a Christian vocation is therefore assumed to entail being suspicious of our colleagues. The truth is most Christians in the workplace do not think like this. They respect their colleagues and value their work. If having a vocation means having to adopt this "insurgent" attitude, they would rather not have a vocation.

The fourth assumption is exemplified by a question I was once asked. It ran like this: "How can teaching be a

“to have a Christian vocation is to be able to identify how our faith can transform the core function of our work”

NOTES

1. See, for example, the report from the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England called *Mission-shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004).

2. Sharon Hartnett and Frank Kline, "Preventing the Fall from the 'Call to Teach': Rethinking Vocation", *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 9:1 (2005), pp. 9–20.

3. I found Gerard Kelly's book *Stretch: Lessons in Faith from the Life of Daniel* (Milton Keynes: Authentic, 2005) particularly inspiring.

4. Readers are referred to the *Charis Project* as an example of this transformation of learning. Contact the Stapleford Centre for more information. For further details can be found at www.e-stapleford.co.uk

► Christian vocation when the teacher is appointed by the local authority, a secular body? Only the Church can appoint to a vocation since a vocation is work on behalf of the Church." This idea is surprisingly influential. Its impact is illustrated by the letters I receive from Christian teachers. One wrote: "In my church, it has puzzled me that, once a year, I am 'commissioned' and prayed for in my capacity as a temporary helper in the church crèche, which involves very little of my time and energy, but am never formally prayed for and supported in the extremely demanding job I do as a teacher of children with special needs, a job that God has specifically called me to do!"

I suggest that all four of these assumptions need ditching if Christians are to see their working life as a vocation. It is not that each is not encapsulating an important truth, because they clearly are. God is involved in shaping our futures; it is important that Christians go the second mile in their working lives; there is a spiritual battle and we need to be aware of being part of that; and pastoral work done in churches is very important. The problem is that the particular way in which these assumptions operate in many people's minds creates a culture in which the vocation of work in the "secular" world is implicitly denigrated.

THREE IDEALS TO EMBRACE

There are at least three ideals that will help to give due significance to the role work in the Christian life. The first picks up a word that is perhaps now becoming jargon, but expresses an important ideal, namely that the calling of the Christian is to be an influence for *transforming* society.

I am a great fan of Daniel. What appeals to me is the way in which Daniel became a trusted "employee" in Babylon while maintaining the integrity of his faith. The most important thing about Daniel was that he transformed the way those he worked with thought. So when asked to interpret their dreams he did not produce the standard "Babylonian" answers, but was able to transform their understanding with an interpretation that was imbibed with the thinking of faith. If Christians saw their secular work as an opportunity to be a Daniel, transforming the way things were done so that they were more earthed in the Christian faith, then the motivation is there to see work as a vocation.³

Following on from this, if we are to see our work as a vocation it is important that the core task, and not the peripherals, is the focus of any transforming ministry. I

was very struck by how the contributors to this volume were all convinced that what made their work important was not simply the opportunity to witness, but the opportunity to farm, to build, to heal and to care. The teachers I talk to often seem to feel that being Christian means being more caring and running Christian groups. Of course these things are important, but the core task of a school is to promote learning. If Christians are to be agents of transformation in schools, surely our role is to transform the way our pupils learn so that it becomes more profoundly Christian?⁴

The Dutch Bank ABN AMRO provides an interesting exemplar when it reviewed its sustainability policy. The company had ensured that its light bulbs, etc. were energy efficient and done all the other things that responsible companies do. But then the executives realised that they had not reviewed their core function, i.e. lending. In response, they instituted a policy that transformed their lending so that sustainable behaviour was a condition of every loan. Similarly, to have a Christian vocation is to be able to identify how our faith can transform the core function of our work and not just the peripheral activities associated with any working environment.

Finally, if the sense of vocation is to have depth there needs to be recognition of the challenges that Christians face in the secular workplace. Lynda Fisher draws our attention to this in describing the dilemmas entailed in supporting disabled adults. Her article reminded me of something I once heard Canadian theologian Brian Walsh say about a programme run by his church offering clean needles to drug addicts. He described it as the "most redemptive act possible in the circumstances". This is not to condone drug taking, but it is to recognise that what is ideal may not always be possible. In many work situations difficult decisions have to be made where none of the alternatives seem particularly Christian. Steve Holmes reflects on a situation that many readers will have experienced where the so-called work/life balance seems seriously out of kilter. To maintain a sense of vocation in such circumstances requires willingness to work in a less than perfect world and supportive understanding from the Christian community.

If we are to build a mission-shaped Church, we will have to equip Christians for the realities of work. My prayer is that this issue of *The Bible in TransMission* will offer inspiration and ideas in that task. ■