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Is passion a calling?

OPINION MOLLY T. MARSHALL | OCTOBER 3, 2012*By Molly T. Marshall*

When asked by young adults how to discern their life's work, guidance counselors (as well as career advice books) urge them to “follow their passion.” Cal Newport, a computer science professor at Georgetown, questions this directive.

In his **column** “Preoccupations” published in *The New York Times* this past Sunday, Newport questioned whether all persons have such a passion simply waiting to be discovered.

When faced with three very different vocational pathways following college, he ignored this “cult of passion” and made a choice based primarily on location rather than any sense that it was the only appropriate direction.

“The traits that lead people to love their work are general and have little to do with a job’s specifics,” he surmised. “These traits include a sense of autonomy and the feeling that you’re good at what you do and are having an impact on the world.”

The logic of the article seemed apt, yet I questioned his premise that many people lack a “true calling.” If we think theologically about humans — created in the image of the triune God — Christians confess that our whole being is a calling. We are called into life, and we are called to follow Jesus, through the power of the Spirit.

As far back as the Reformation persons were troubled by the notion that only the vowed religious had a calling. It was the great insight of Luther, declaring the priesthood of all believers, to argue that any profession could be a Christian calling.



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Luther was the first to use “vocation” to refer also to secular offices and occupations. In his day choice played a much lesser role, so his affirmation of a universal calling gave dignity to all kinds of work, from the milkmaid to the cobbler. Indeed, Luther believed that God hides the divine self in human work.

One of the gifts Christians can offer the world today is a theology of vocation that gives meaning and purpose, guiding persons toward the well-lived life. Here are my suggestions:

— God has called each of us into life, into faith, and into purposeful living.

God desires that each person’s life reflect the creativity and freedom that are the human birthright. Created after the likeness of God, humans pursue culture and community as expressions of God’s redemptive project.

— God can speak to us through the world’s groaning need.

Vocation often arises out of our concern about a deep need in the world. For me it was a clear sense that God wants the church to accept its daughters as well as its sons in ministry, and the call to me to assist the seminary in teaching and embodying this new reality.

— God has more to say to us than we can hear by ourselves.

It is helpful to listen to the questions people ask us, such as “have you ever considered working with young people,” a question my pastor asked me when I was an early adolescent. Also, learning to listen to key affirmations of our gifts can be of great assistance in vocational discernment.

— Vocation allows us to be most fully ourselves — and most fully God’s

Two questions that point toward authentic vocation are: What makes your heart rise up? And, where do you feel most at home? God beckons us toward the fullest expression of personal identity, a place of flourishing in service to God and others.

— Vocation is that which keeps, in the **words** of American author Gail Godwin, “making more out of us.”



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Vocation is not static. There will be continuing opportunities to grow and learn. Christian vocation is a journey toward maturity in Christ, according to the measure of his grace.

— Vocation always requires the assistance of the Holy Spirit

If we think we can accomplish the Lord’s calling in our own strength, we have shot too low. The Holy Spirit kindles our giftedness and sustains the long obedience in the direction summoned by God.

— Vocation is for the Body of Christ. It is offered in community

Our gifts belong to everyone. Spiritual gifts are not possessions; they are grace gifts to assist the common good — both within and without the congregation.

Professor Newport believes that passion is not something you follow, but what emerges as one gives oneself fully to the vocational pursuit. On that, at least, we agree.

OPINION: VIEWS EXPRESSED IN BAPTIST NEWS GLOBAL COLUMNS AND COMMENTARIES ARE SOLELY THOSE OF THE AUTHORS.

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