Lee Hardy

WORK, LIFE, AND VOCATIONAL CHOICE

In this selection, Lee Hardy, who has taught philosophy at Calvin University for more than thirty years, recounts his own somewhat prolonged struggle to find his vocation – not only, as he explains at the outset, the "general" calling to discipleship, but also the "particular" calling "to do certain kinds of things." While this distinction is characteristic of Hardy's Reformed tradition, notions of general and particular callings are not exclusive to Protestants; St. Teresa of Calcutta, who serves as an exemplar of *caritas* for Josef Pieper (see pp. 92–96 above), spoke frequently of her "call within the call," by which she meant her particular call to serve the poor within her more general call to the religious life as a nun. Hardy changed occupations several times before he discovered his calling as a philosopher. A life that included several changes of occupation would have been extremely rare when the Protestant idea of vocation was first developed in the sixteenth century, but in our own time, among relatively affluent people in Western, postindustrial societies, changing jobs several times is commonplace. What counsel does Hardy provide to enable us to live through times of vocational uncertainty and change with integrity and a sense of overall purpose?

Hardy suggests that without an understanding of and belief in God's providential care for the world, we are apt to think that our occupational roles are mere accidents and that our task is therefore to *create* a significant life from circumstances that are arbitrary and without intrinsic meaning. If, on the other hand, we believe that our own lives are part of a divine plan for the redemption and transformation of the world, our task is to *discover* our role in that plan. Hardy elsewhere states that there may not be only one thing we are called to do. Is our challenge then to discern what our occupational calling really is, or is it to accept and interpret whatever we find ourselves doing to earn a living as part of a larger, perhaps a divinely ordained, plan?

From Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 80–91.

How exactly does the Christian concept of work as a divine calling bear upon the problem of choosing a vocation? Before we answer this question, we would do well to make two preliminary observations. First, to those of us who are familiar with the language of the Bible, there is something odd about the phrase "choosing a vocation." For in the New Testament the primary, if not exclusive, meaning of the term "vocation" – or calling *(klēsis)* – pertains to the call of the gospel, pure and simple. We are called to repentance and to faith (Acts 2:38); we are called into fellowship with Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:9); we are called out of the darkness and into the light (1 Pet. 2:9); we are called to be holy (1 Pet. 1:15, 1 Cor. 1:2); indeed, we are called to be saints (Rom. 1:7). Here we are not being asked to choose from a variety of callings, to decide which one is "right" for us. Rather, one call goes out to all – the call of discipleship. For it is incumbent upon all Christians to follow Christ, and, in so doing, to become the kind of people God wants us to be. The call of the gospel is not to a particular occupation, but to sainthood.

Yet we are also as Christians commanded, and therefore called, to love and serve our neighbors with the gifts that God has given to us. Each one of us, writes St. Peter, "should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms" (1 Pet. 4:10). For each of us has certain gifts, certain talents and abilities. Those gifts were not given that we might heap up fame and fortune for ourselves. Rather, the possession of those gifts places an obligation upon us to use them for the building up of the community of faith and the human community at large (Rom. 12:4–21). We are called, then, not only to be certain kinds of persons, but also to do certain kinds of things.

Because of this twofold character of God's call, the Puritans used to distinguish between the "general" and the "particular" calling. The general calling is the call to be a Christian, that is, to take on the virtues appropriate to followers of Christ, whatever one's station in life. St. Paul refers to these virtues as the "fruit" of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). It is not for us to pick and choose among these virtues. When it comes to being a Christian, the virtues come in one package. They are the fruition of the work of the Spirit in our lives.

The particular calling, on the other hand, is the call to a specific occupation – an occupation to which not all Christians are called. With respect to occupations within the church, St. Paul refers to such particular callings as the "gifts" of the Spirit: to be an apostle, a prophet, a teacher, a worker of miracles, an administrator, and the like (1 Cor. 12:28–31). Not all are called

to be apostles, prophets, or teachers. For here the Spirit fits each member of the body of Christ differently for a specific work: we are not expected or able to do all things, but only the things which God has enabled and called us to do. In the discharge of our various particular callings we together build up the interdependent society of the saints, which finds its unity in Christ, the head of the church.

With the distinction between the general and the particular calling in mind, talk about "vocational choice" – in the sense of choosing a particular occupation in which we will exercise our gifts – is both biblically appropriate and religiously important. At certain junctures in our lives we are confronted with the need to identify our gifts and choose an occupation; and an occupation can provide us with the concrete opportunity to employ our gifts in the service of our neighbor, as God commanded us to do. This holds not only for the occupations within the church, but in society as well. For although the Bible concentrates on the spiritual gifts and their employment in the community of faith, the Christian tradition has generally extended the Biblical principle, confessing that our "natural" gifts also come from God and are to be employed for the benefit of the wider human community.

As a second preliminary observation, lest we move too quickly from the question of vocation to that of paid occupation, we ought to remind ourselves that vocation is the wider concept. One need not have a paid occupation in order to have a vocation. Indeed all of us have, at any one time, a number of vocations – and only one of them might be pursued as a paid occupation. To put it in Luther's language, at any given time we occupy a number of stations: parent, child, citizen, parishioner, and so on. Each one of these stations entails a specific vocation. As a parent it is my vocation to love, discipline, and care for my children; as a child it is my vocation to honor and obey my parents; as a citizen it is my vocation to participate in the political process and abide by the decisions and rulings of the government; as a parishioner it is my vocation to exercise my spiritual gifts for the edification of the body of Christ. I may not have a paid occupation. But that doesn't mean I have no calling in life.

Furthermore, it follows from the broad concept of vocation that we will always have a number of vocations as a result of certain social relations and historical circumstances which we ourselves have not chosen. I, for instance, was born in a modern nation-state known as the United States of America in the mid-twentieth century of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant parentage. I did not ask or choose to be so born. I just was. From the purely human perspective it seems almost accidental that I should be who I am. Could I

not just as well have been a Chinese woman born during the Ming dynasty, or a Nicaraguan *campesino* born during the glory days of William Walker? Why was I born of this particular race and nationality, with this particular body and temperament? It's hard to say.

Existential philosophers of atheist persuasion have dwelt upon the apparently accidental nature of our identities, and refer to such as the brute "facticity" or "thrownness" of human existence. We find ourselves thrown into a particular situation with no apparent rhyme or reason, and our task as human beings is to appropriate our absurd circumstances into a meaningful life project which we ourselves freely choose.

But from a theistic point of view things look quite different. That I am who I am is not a result of chance, a mere cosmic accident. Rather it is the result of God's intention. There is a reason why I am who I am, although that reason may not be immediately apparent to me. I was placed here for a purpose, and that purpose is one which I am, in part, to discover, not invent. The facts about me are indicators of the divine intent for my life, indicators which are to be interpreted in the light of God's revealed Word. Perhaps, through no choice of my own, I inherit a vast family fortune and suddenly find myself wealthy to the point of embarrassment. An absurd event? No. A providential one in which I am to discern God's will for the shape and direction of my life. For the rich have at least one divine vocation just by virtue of being rich, namely, to use their money to benefit others. Many things about me I did not choose. But that does not mean that they are not meaningful, or that they have to be made meaningful through other choices that I make.

Even a vocation as a paid occupation may not be a matter of choice. In fact, for most people it never has been. Down through the ages and in many parts of the world today people did and do not have much choice in the kind of work they do. Their work was and is simply imposed upon them by circumstances beyond their control: the economic niche of the family into which they were born, or a combination of financial necessity and the existing job market. One is born a rice farmer or becomes a factory worker because that is the only line of work open at the time. "Today we consider it an imperfection of society for people to be fixed in their opportunities and jobs by class and birth," management theorist Peter Drucker observes, "where only yesterday this was the natural and apparently inescapable condition of mankind." Freedom of choice regarding occupation is a relatively novel social phenomenon. Those of us who are faced with such a choice are, historically speaking, a very small minority indeed.

It shouldn't come as a surprise, then, that guidelines for the responsible choice of an occupation have not been thoroughly worked out by the Christian community at large. The fact that in many parts of Christendom today work is still considered a secular matter, with little or no connection to religion, has not helped either.

But an initial attempt to formulate the principles of vocational choice was made by the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They were, on the one hand, firmly convinced that all of life, even the life of everyday work, ought to be lived to the glory of God. On the other hand, they were aware that in their time people were being granted a greater measure of freedom in the choice of occupations. The rigid structures of medieval society were crumbling around them and social life was opening up, differentiating, and becoming more flexible. Higher education was no longer the prerogative of the aristocracy alone. As a direct result, an increasing number of people had access to an increasingly wider range of occupational options. Thus it was given to them to work out the principles of vocational choice in the light of the Word of God.

How did they go about this? Taking their initial bearings from the biblical witness together with a reflection upon the human condition, they began with a definition of work that went something like this: work is the social place where people can exercise the gifts that God has given them in the service of others. For God did not create us as self-sufficient individuals. We all have needs which we alone cannot meet. By necessity we live in communities of interdependent individuals. And we are to make use of what talents we do have to serve others as they, in turn, serve us. Together we build up society as a mutual support system.

With this concept of work, two practical items immediately arise: the gifts God has given me, and the exercise of those gifts for the sake of others. The first step then, in making a responsible choice of vocation, is ascertaining precisely which gifts God has bestowed upon me.

This in itself can be a difficult, painful, and protracted process. We were not born with job descriptions taped to our backs. Our vocational aptitudes have to be discovered in that process by which we come to know ourselves. But the road to self-knowledge can be a long one, and often we don't possess a clear idea of exactly what our talents are at the time we must make vocational decisions. If we are not sure what we are good at, it often pays to reflect upon our past experience with precisely that question in mind. What have I done, and done well? What kind of skills did I make use of? Planning, investigating, implementing, building, repairing, creating, writing, teach-

ing, supervising? What kind of knowledge did I acquire? Knowledge about cars, computers, finance, administration, food, flowers, music, mathematics? What kind of objects did I work with? Numbers, words, people, mechanical things, living things, programs, institutions? In what capacity was I relating to others? As a team member, team leader, lone ranger, coach, manager, expert? Was I in a position with a lot of freedom and responsibility, or was I working in a highly structured situation, where my activity was thoroughly specified? With an autobiographical grasp of my talents I can begin, perhaps with some additional guidance, to see what kind of work I could do well.

Besides reflecting on past experience, remaining open to future experience is equally important. For self-knowledge is an open-ended process, a fact twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth underscored in his *Church Dogmatics:*

> In relation to the personal presuppositions which he himself brings, the action of man must be one which always and in all directions is open, eager to learn, capable of modification, perpetually ready, in obedience to the exclusively sovereign command of God, to allow itself to be orientated afresh and in very different ways from those which might have seemed possible and necessary on the basis of man's own ideas of his ability and capacity. In the last analysis man has no more knowledge of himself than mastery over himself. Again and again he must let himself be shown who he is. His faithfulness to himself, then, [consists] only in constant attention and openness to that which, as God claims him, will be continually disclosed to him as his true self, as the real aptitude which he has been given together with its limits, and then in the corresponding decision for perhaps a much more daring or possibly a much more humble action than that to which he has hitherto considered himself called.

Some experimentation, then, may be required in the process of career choice. If several occupational options lie before me, and they all look equally valid and interesting, rather than allowing myself to be paralyzed by the lack of a deciding factor, it would be better simply to choose one and pursue it. In the course of pursuing that occupation I will inevitably learn something I couldn't have known prior to its pursuit. I may become convinced that I had in fact made the right choice. On the other hand, I might find out in no uncertain terms that I made the "wrong" choice. Not to worry. I can still benefit from that. I have learned something about myself. And I can cross one occupational option off my list.

Besides, career decisions are rarely irrevocable. Most people nowadays go through four or five career changes in the course of a lifetime. When I was in high school I wanted to go into cinematography. I loved movies, and I wanted to make some. Instead I became an advertising artist. But later, while working in an art studio in the San Francisco Bay area, I found myself drawn into the discipline of philosophy. I needed to clarify certain issues in life. Today I am a professor of philosophy at a liberal arts college. And I suspect most people past their twenties have similarly crooked accounts of how they came to their present occupations. Career paths are rarely straight. Typically they are afflicted by detours, unmarked intersections, forced exits, blind alleys, and cul-de-sacs. When the philosophy majors I advise at Calvin College hesitate to go to graduate school because they are not sure if philosophy is their calling, I usually tell them that going to graduate school is the best way to find out if philosophy is their calling. We can't know everything before we act. An element of trial and error is unavoidable in the carving out of a niche for oneself in the world of work. Barth was entirely correct when he said that "a man can really learn to know his sphere of operation only as he sets to work in it."

Vocational counseling and testing can also help here. Not that the results of a vocational test are to count as the last word. The validity of the results depends upon how well the test was designed, how accurately and honestly you were able to answer the questions, and how carefully the results are interpreted. But a vocational test can at least do this: it can comfort you by confirming what you already thought you knew about yourself, but weren't sure; or it can challenge you by suggesting occupational possibilities you had never considered before.

An honest lack of self-knowledge is not the only problem in making a career choice. The sins of greed, pride, envy, and fear can enter into the picture too, clouding our vision of who we are and what we were cut out to do. We might have our eye on a certain career because of the salary. We approach our career as a means to untold riches and material delights. Or perhaps we find ourselves attracted to a certain career because of its social prestige. We want to prove to others – and perhaps to ourselves – that we are much more talented and capable than either thought. We treat our prospective career as a wand to wave before the crowds to command their respect, awe, and admiration. Or perhaps we are unhappy with the way God has made us, and we are envious of another person's gifts and accomplishments. In the course of our prospective career, we resolve to become just like her and excel where she has excelled. Our career becomes the tool of our covetousness. Or we

begin by being aimed at certain careers due to family expectations about what we are going to do with our lives, and we are afraid to disappoint our parents. We live in fear of what others would think of us were we to strike out on our own. Our career becomes a place where we hide from others, and especially ourselves. On the basis of these and similarly errant motives, we can convince ourselves that we are qualified for certain careers, while what led us to choose those careers had very little to do with our particular gifts or the human needs around us.

Perhaps I have been raised in a community where intellectual prowess is held in high esteem. Perhaps other features of my upbringing led to an overwhelming psychological need to be highly esteemed by others. Or, I may have been raised in a community with a substantial anti-intellectual bias and, due to other features of my upbringing, I have an overwhelming psychological need to distinguish myself over against that community, thereby establishing my social independence. At any rate, on the basis of some subterranean motive of which I am not fully aware, I find myself quite naturally drawn in the direction of intellectual pursuits. When I get to college I might even boldly stage a direct assault on the very pinnacle of mental achievement, surrounded by the chill, thin air of theoretical abstraction – I declare a philosophy major.

Thus I become convinced that in philosophy I have found my true calling. But have I? Has God really given me the appropriate intellectual gifts and a genuine zeal for the truth? Or am I just fooling myself? These are difficult questions to answer on the basis of private self-examination. The opportunities for self-deception along these lines are almost limitless. Even if I received lousy grades in all my philosophy courses – enough to thoroughly discourage the average mortal – I could still convince myself that this failure was wholly due to the clumsy pedagogy of my professors, or their inability to detect the secret genius of my work. Resolute in purpose, I go on to graduate school against the advice of my mentors. No one will deny me the glory associated with my chosen field – and I proceed to make a total fool of myself trying to prove to everyone else that I am not a complete idiot.

Because of the innate human talent for self-deception, it is a good idea to seek the advice of others known for mature and balanced judgment. I may be convinced that God has especially called me to a particular occupation. But do others recognize in me the gifts I think I possess? Can my friends detect in the pattern of my life the passions, the interests, and the concerns I claim to have? Do my teachers take me to be mentally competent and personally well suited for the career of my own choosing? Their counsel may be encour-

aging. Or devastating. But it must be sought. Often I must seek the help of others if I am to be honest with myself before God.

It seems, then, that perceived social status combined with certain psychological needs can push people into occupations for which they are not at all qualified. But it can work the other way too. Low social status plus similar psychological needs can drive people away from an occupation for which they are eminently qualified. I may have formidable mechanical abilities and a genuine love for the automobile as an engineered system of intake and exhaust manifolds, regulators and alternators, camshafts and crankshafts. In the world of car repair, infested as it is by rip-off artists, I may be able to perform a genuine service to the community as a mechanic. But I chafe at the suggestion. After all, who wants to be a "grease monkey"? What would my parents think? My friends?

Finding our niche in life may not only require that we be honest with ourselves. It may also require a stiff dose of humility. Yet, as John Calvin said, "No task will be so sordid and base . . . that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight." An occupation held to be of no account in the eyes of the world can nonetheless be important to God. The ranking of occupations in our society and in the kingdom of God are often two very different things. And it's important to keep the difference in mind. The garbage collector performs an infinitely more valuable social service than the advertising executive about to launch a campaign to convince the American homemaker that Pink Froth dish detergent is indispensable to gracious living. But the latter, for reasons difficult to fathom, enjoys more social status.

The first step, then, in responsible vocational choice is to identify the abilities and talents God has given us. Those talents and abilities, however, will probably not be unique. For that reason they will not, by themselves, lead a person to a unique job. That is especially true if we consider such things as the ability to grasp objects between the thumb and fingers. That ability is regularly exercised by the dentist, the electrician, and the surgeon – as well as the paperboy. Even rarer gifts, like a lightning-quick analytical mind, do not suggest only one profession. One could use such a mind in law, philosophy, or the CIA.

Although the absence of a unique gift may leave us in the lurch when it comes to choosing a specific career, we can take positive comfort in the fact that as generic human beings we already possess a wide range of abilities. And we can meaningfully put these ordinary abilities to use in a number of perfectly acceptable occupations. What is lost by way of unambiguous guid-

ance is made up by flexibility. And we are thereby relieved of the frustrating and ultimately self-defeating quest for "the right job," as if there were only one per person. As a simple matter of fact, we are qualified to do a number of things. And a number of the things we are qualified to do would be good things to do.

Nonetheless, God can give us two other things that will narrow down the field considerably. First, he can give us a concern. Of course, we are all concerned about ourselves and how we will fare in this life. No special work of God is required for that. But if we can detect within a growing concern for others, then we can be sure God is at work within us. But not all of us will be concerned for others in the same way. Some may be concerned for their health. Others may be concerned for their emotional well-being, their spiritual condition, or the integrity of their natural or cultural environment. Once we become aware of the specific concern God has given us, we can go about cultivating the skills required to follow through on that concern effectively.

Furthermore, God may have endowed us with certain lively interests apart from any other-directed concerns — interests in mathematics, music, or microbiology. Those interests lead us to cultivate skills which we can in turn use in the service of others. For example, based on an innate love of literature, I might acquire the skills of appreciation and criticism that would later qualify me, as an English teacher, to introduce others to the wonders of the written word. Or I might become a writer myself, and proceed to open up God's world to others through the medium of language.

The assumption behind these recommendations is that discovering God's will for one's life is not so much a matter of seeking out miraculous signs and wonders as it is being attentive to who and where we are. It is not as if our abilities, concerns, and interests are just there, as an accident of nature, and then God has to intervene in some special way in order to make his will known to us in a completely unrelated manner. Rather, in making a career choice, we ought to take seriously the doctrine of divine providence: God himself gives us whatever legitimate abilities, concerns, and interests we in fact possess. These are his gifts, and for that very reason they can serve as indicators of his will for our lives. In coming to know ourselves and our situation, we come to know God's will. The Protestant theologian Emil Brunner claims, in fact, that "the idea of the Calling and of the Call is unintelligible apart from that of Divine Providence. The God who says to me here and now: 'Act where you are, as you are,' is not One who comes on the scene after all that has been done previously has been done without

His knowledge. Nothing can happen apart from Him. . . . To Him it is no accident that you are what you are here and now, an accident with which He must come to terms. He Himself places you where you are." Too often our search for God's will in our lives has been skewed by a highly secularized view of the world. We don't really believe that God is present and at work in the concrete events and circumstances of this world. Rather we think of Him as distant, removed, putting in only occasional appearances here on earth. If God speaks to us at all, he must speak to us in the freakish and miraculous, but not in the normal, everyday course of affairs.

At this point, however, we might step back and wonder if doing what God is calling us to do is always a matter of doing that for which we are best qualified. Certainly the Bible records numerous instances in which this was emphatically not the case. Are we developing a truly biblical approach to career choice? After all, a stuttering Moses was called by God to speak before Pharaoh; Jonah was instructed to call the city of Nineveh to repentance, a city he himself would have liked to see burn under God's judgment; and the personally unimpressive Paul was prevailed upon to present the gospel to the entire Gentile world. It seems unlikely that a modern vocational counseling agency would have directed these biblical characters to their respective tasks on the basis of their native interests and talents.

True. And the point is well taken. God does sometimes call people to do that for which they are outstandingly unqualified; and sometimes he calls people to do what they are entirely disinclined to do. But when he does that, it is because he is about to give a special demonstration of his power. That is, he is about to perform a miracle – which is, by definition, a departure from the normal course of affairs. As a rule people are to do that for which they are qualified. Of course, there are exceptions to the rule. And we must remain open to the possibility of an exception in our own case through prayer and awareness of God's leading hand.