

“Living on Purpose”

Responsive Reading, “On Purpose”¹

When I left the pastorate more than thirty years ago to become a better pastoral counselor through more seminary study and a second residency, it was always my intent to return to pastoring, which I knew was my heart’s calling. It was rather a surprise that I found myself spending ten years on the staff of two large churches as Minister of Pastoral Care and Counseling and five years teaching Pastoral Care at Southern Seminary, but I can see now that all of that was a divinely-guided journey on the way back to pastoring in the local church.

Because returning to congregational ministry was always my intent, I focused my Ph.D. study on applying scholarly inquiry to practical ministry. My New Testament professors were sometimes frustrated by my predictable and repeated questions, “What difference is this going to make in our care of persons? How is this going to change what we have to offer to persons who are experiencing great trauma, grief, and pain?”

When the time finally came for dissertation research, I tried to focus what I had learned in ten years of graduate study in Fort Worth, Dallas, and Louisville on this same issue: given what the Bible tells us about God and about ourselves, what are the most important issues to raise with people whose lives are experiencing struggle and ferment, pain and growth? I wanted to discover the central theological factors that operate in our lives, to learn how best to talk with folks about those factors, and to find a way to measure changes in them.

Research led me to thirteen factors that looked like good possibilities, and I developed a questionnaire with more than four hundred questions that tried to measure those factors. Over a period of four years, I mailed out hundreds of questionnaires to random samples of people all over our nation, doing factor analysis of their responses to remove less powerful variables.

What I finally discovered was that those thirteen factors could be reduced to four, and that those four hundred questions could be reduced to fifteen. The hundreds of questions led to very interesting conversations, but I found that it’s possible to take a person’s “spiritual temperature” much more quickly using only fifteen questions, allowing more effective measurement of growth or regression.

The final four variables were “**vocation**,” our sense of life purpose and direction; “**responsibility**,” our sense of sin, forgiveness, and effective life choices; “**community**,” our sense of being meaningfully connected to other people; and “**hope**,” our expectations about the future. I think it was probably the study of these four factors that led me to the phrase that has become my life motto, “*A Life that Matters; Relationships that Last.*” You have the final version of that inventory as an insert in your order of worship, and I’ll be glad to talk with you about it privately, if you wish to do so.

You may have noticed that I talk about vocation, responsibility, community, and hope fairly often, though I seldom make this connection to pastoral research. As we begin a New Year, I’d like to think with you this morning about “vocation,” or “purpose,” using the title, “Living On Purpose.”

As we’ve noted before, “vocation” is derived from the Latin *vocare* (“to call”) and *vocatio* (“call” or “calling”), and the idea is reminiscent of 1 Peter 2:21, where we’re told, “*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*”

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on January 1, 2017. New Year’s Day.

Used in this way, “to have a vocation” means to have a purpose for living that is connected to the purposes of God. Part of the Good News of Advent—you may remember that we’re still in “the Twelve Days of Christmas”—is that God has graciously invited you and me to help move the creation toward its appointed end!

As exciting as this is, many Christians become anxious when the idea of “vocation” or “calling” comes up. As one such person reflected,

When I was a young man trying to discern my vocation, I was given the impression that sometime before Time, before the whole creation project got under way, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sat down and planned the whole thing out in detail, and that vocational discernment involved discovering the particular plan they had for me. *There was that one spot, that one slot for me, and it was all-important for me to find it and live in it.*²

Can you sense the anxiety in that statement? This may be an anxiety with which you’re familiar, because this approach to God’s will was pretty common in Baptist life when I was a youth and young adult. I used to experience this myself, but I’ve been very happy to discover that this is by no means the only way to think about God’s purposes in our lives.

Biblical scholars increasingly suggest that having a vocation is not something we do or something we find, but is rather something we are . . . something we become.³ And the distinction between these two approaches to God’s will might be described as the difference between “finding” and “being found.”

Edward Thornton, one of my teachers and mentors, noted that pursuing a vocation that emphasizes “finding” focuses on what the individual does himself or herself. I can attest that the attempt to “find” one’s vocation is a pretty stressful and anxious approach to life. Persons who are working hard to “find” their vocation frequently find themselves striving for moral perfection both in themselves and in the world, and they tend to be fairly unpleasant people to be around.⁴

On the other hand, persons who perceive themselves to “have been found” by God tend to experience themselves as accepted and loved by God, and they tend to be accepting of others as well. Such “found” persons are well aware of their imperfections and finitude, and they live in the glad amazement that God continues to use ordinary, fallible, sinful people to accomplish eternal purposes.

Understood as “being found” rather than as “finding,” the idea of vocation is less burdensome, because we no longer have to live in terror of missing that one spot which was God’s plan for our lives. This second approach to vocation focuses on what God does rather than on what we do, and persons who experience themselves as having been “found” by God tend to be winsome persons whom others find attractive rather than off-putting.⁵ But it gets better than this!

In the way that I am describing it, Christian vocation is really much more a journey or a pilgrimage than it is a role, a task, a job, or a destination. Indeed, there is a deep sense in which

² M. Basil Pennington, *Called, New Thinking on Christian Vocation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), p. 87.

³ Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, and James D. Whitehead, *Community of Faith: Models and Strategies for Building Christian Communities* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), p. 91.

⁴ Edward E. Thornton, *Theology and Pastoral Counseling* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 106.

⁵ *Ibid.*

each of us shares the same vocation, which is to follow Jesus, wherever He leads us.

And for nearly all of us, that following leads us through a number of different ministries and circumstances across the span of our lives. God's sovereign Spirit graciously grants many spiritual gifts—at least thirty different ones—and in exercising those gifts, you and I do many different things in both the church and in the world. And it takes all of our gifts working together to accomplish the purposes God has for our lives, our congregation, and our world.

My friend Mark Jensen helped me with this when he suggested that “**vocation is the calling that gives unity to the many roles through which we pass on our way to the Kingdom of God.**”⁶ *Defined as the pilgrimage itself rather than the waystations along the path*, vocation has sustaining power through social change and the differing roles we experience throughout the life cycle.

Mark suggested that “the deep meaning of Christian vocation has a more solid foundation than job or role. Christian vocation finds its foundation in the calling to be a follower of Jesus, and to join with a community of believers in welcoming the Good News of the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ.

“The role or job that we occupy at any given time is the *furniture* that we place upon the *foundation* of vocation. It is the chair we sit in, but it rests on a foundation that supports the whole house. Certainly some chairs are more comfortable than others. Some mean a lot to us because they have been passed on to us from another generation. Some suit our tastes better than others or fit with the rest of the furniture in the house. Some we might have built ourselves. But it is still *furniture*.

“Furniture can be moved. From time to time we might decide to rearrange a living room. That does not change the fact that it is a living room, nor does it change the foundation on which the house rests. Few of us nail our furniture to the floor or anchor it in a concrete foundation. We rest comfortably in our furniture because the furniture rests on a foundation that is secure.

“From time to time we might even decide to get new furniture. Sometimes even favorite chairs and sofas wear out and need to be recovered or discarded. It may be hard for us to do because we liked the old furniture, but it simply is not useful any longer. So from time to time we begin to break in a new favorite chair. It may take a while before it fits us like the old one did.

“Jobs and roles are the furniture that rest upon the foundation of Christian vocation. From time to time the furniture may change. When the chair wears out or breaks, we do not burn the house down. We seek a new chair that we think will fit us.”⁷

Now if Mark is right, and I think he is, then Christian vocation can be understood as a journey with five dimensions. Christian Vocation—for all of us—is the call . . .

1. to be faithful members of the household of God;
2. to respond in obedience to the claims of God upon our lives;
3. to rejoice in our present stations in life while regarding them as temporary;
4. to grow in our knowledge of ourselves and of the various implications of our personal vocation; and

⁶ Mark Jensen, *Shattered Vocations* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), p.26. Paul emphasized this point when he wrote to the Colossian Christians, saying “*whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him*” (Colossians 3:17).

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 162-163.

5. to pray for God's guidance and help in living out our vocation.⁸

Such a vocation as this is a glad thing indeed. Understanding vocation in this way helps us regard a New Year with anticipation and curiosity rather than with dread and fear.

We don't have to dread God's purposes in our lives. As Frederick Buechner wisely put it, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Let me say that again: "**The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.**"⁹

That's Good News. That's Really Good News. Christian vocation is about following Jesus in all the seasons and in all the places of our lives, no matter who the President may be, no matter which party is in power, and no matter how world history seems to be unfolding.

And whether this is "the best of times" or "the worst of times" depends on how we understand what God is up to. You and I can live joyfully and fruitfully in 2017, because God has told us how the Story ends. So let's conclude by reminding ourselves once more about what it means to "live on purpose" in this New Year. This is our original responsive reading once again:

Leader: *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take" (Proverbs 3:5-6).*

People: "Don't misunderstand why I have come," [Jesus said.] I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings or the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose (Matthew 5:17).

Leader: *"I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God's law will disappear until its purpose is achieved" (Matthew 5:18).*

People: "God's purpose in all this was to use the church to display his wisdom in its rich variety to all the unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 3:10).

Leader: *"And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them" (Romans 8:28).*

People: "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago" (Ephesians 2:10).

Leader: *"God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another" (1 Peter 4:10).*

People: "The purpose of my instruction is that all believers would be filled with love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and genuine faith" (1 Timothy 1:5).

Leader: *"If you keep yourself pure, you will be a utensil God can use for his purpose. Your life will be clean, and you will be ready for the Master to use you for every good work" (2 Timothy 2:21).*

People: "So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

⁸ Donald Heiges, *The Christian's Calling*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 77-79.

⁹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 95.