

INTRODUCTION

The Importance of Recovering Vocation

Robert Bellah's landmark book, *Habits of the Heart*, helped many people name the thing that was (and still is) eating away at the cohesiveness of our culture—"expressive individualism." Elsewhere, Bellah argued that Americans had created a culture that elevated individual choice and expression to such a level that there was no longer any shared life, no commanding truths or values that tied us together. As Bellah wrote, ". . . we are moving to an ever greater validation of the sacredness of the individual person, [but] our capacity to imagine a social fabric that would hold individuals together is vanishing. . . . The sacredness of the individual is not balanced by any sense of the whole or concern for the common good."² But near the end of *Habits*, the author proposes one measure that would go a long way toward reweaving the unraveling culture:

To make a real difference . . . [there would have to be] a reappropriation of the idea of vocation or calling, a return in a new way to the idea of work as a contribution to the good of all and not merely as a means to one's own advancement.³

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That is a remarkable statement. If Bellah is right, one of the hopes for our unraveling society is the recovery of the idea that all human work is not merely a job but a *calling*. The Latin word *vocare*—to call—is at the root of our common word “vocation.” Today the word often means simply a job, but that was not the original sense. A job is a vocation only if someone else calls you to do it and you do it for them rather than for yourself. And so our work can be a calling only if it is reimagined as a mission of service to something beyond merely our own interests. As we shall see, thinking of work mainly as a means of self-fulfillment and self-realization slowly crushes a person and—as Bellah and many others have pointed out—undermines society itself.

But if we are to “reappropriate” an older idea, we must look at that idea’s origin. In this case, the source of the idea of work as vocation is the Christian Scriptures. And so, taking our cue from Bellah’s challenge, in this book we will do what we can to help illuminate the transformative and revolutionary connection between Christian faith and the workplace. We’ll be referring to this connection—and all the ideas and practices surrounding it—as the “integration of faith and work.”

The Many “Streams” of Faith and Work

We are not alone in this attempt. Perhaps not since the Protestant Reformation has there been so much attention paid to the relationship of Christian faith to work as there is today. The number of books, scholarly projects, academic programs, and online discussions on this subject has grown exponentially in the past two decades. Nevertheless, Christians who are seeking practical guidance for their work are often poorly served by this growing move-

ment. Some, like Katherine Alsdorf (see the Foreword), have been frustrated by the shallowness of the advice and examples. Others are bewildered by the diversity—some would say cacophony—of voices giving counsel on how to be a Christian at work.

We can think of the current “faith and work movement” as a river being fed by a number of streams from very different headwaters. Perhaps most of the energy and most of the groups seeking to help people integrate faith and work are those with an evangelical understanding of the Bible and the Christian faith, but there have been very significant contributions from other traditions and wings of the faith. The ecumenical movement has contributed an emphasis on Christians using their work to further social justice in the world. That helped us understand that faithful work demands the application of distinctly Christian ethics.⁴ The small group movement of the twentieth century emphasized the need for believers to give one another nurture and support for the struggles and hardships of work. This showed us that faithful work requires inner spiritual renewal and heart transformation.⁵ The revivalist impulse within evangelicalism has seen the workplace especially as a place to be a witness for Jesus Christ.⁶ Faithful work indeed means some kind of public identification with Jesus, in such a way that a coworker might want to know more about him.

Many have also sought older sources for the integration of faith and work. The sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers, particularly Martin Luther and John Calvin, argued that all work, even so-called secular work, was as much a calling from God as the ministry of the monk or priest.⁷ The headwaters of Lutheran theology put special stress on the dignity of all work, observing that God cared for, fed, clothed, sheltered, and supported the human

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race through our human labor. When we work, we are, as those in the Lutheran tradition often put it, the “fingers of God,” the agents of his providential love for others. This understanding elevates the purpose of work from making a living to loving our neighbor and at the same time releases us from the crushing burden of working primarily to prove ourselves. Those in the Calvinist, or “Reformed,” tradition, such as Abraham Kuyper, spoke of another aspect to the idea of work as God’s calling. Work not only cares for creation, but also directs and structures it. In this Reformed view, the purpose of work is to create a culture that honors God and enables people to thrive. Yes, we must love our neighbor, but Christianity gives us very specific teachings about human nature and what makes human beings flourish. We must ensure that our work is done in line with these understandings. Faithful work, then, is to operate out of a Christian “worldview.”⁸

All of these different traditions give somewhat different answers to the question of how we should go about the task of recapturing vocation. The streams are often confusing to Christians, for they are not perfectly complementary to one another. Lutheran theology tends to resist the Reformed idea of “worldview” and argues that Christians should not do their work in a very different way from non-Christians. Much of the mainline church does not feel the same urgency that evangelicals feel to evangelize, because it does not see classical Christianity as the only way to salvation. Many find the emphasis of worldview-oriented writers and organizations to be too cognitive, with too little emphasis on inner heart change. And even those people cannot agree on what inner transformation and spiritual growth actually look like. So if you are a Christian who is trying to be faithful in your work, you might find yourself trying to weigh sentiments as varied as these:

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- The way to serve God at work is to further social justice in the world.
- The way to serve God at work is to be personally honest and evangelize your colleagues.
- The way to serve God at work is just to do skillful, excellent work.
- The way to serve God at work is to create beauty.
- The way to serve God at work is to work from a Christian motivation to glorify God, seeking to engage and influence culture to that end.
- The way to serve God at work is to work with a grateful, joyful, gospel-changed heart through all the ups and downs.
- The way to serve God at work is to do whatever gives you the greatest joy and passion.
- The way to serve God at work is to make as much money as you can, so that you can be as generous as you can.

To what extent are these sentiments complementary or actually opposed to one another? That is a difficult question, for there is at least a measure of biblical warrant for every one of them. And the difficulty lies not merely in the plethora of theological commitments and cultural factors involved, but also in how they operate in different ways depending on the field or type of work. Christian ethics, motives, identity, witness, and worldview shape our work in very different ways depending on the form of the work.

For example, suppose a Christian visual artist regularly shows concern for justice, conducts her career with honesty in all transactions, has support from others to help her navigate the ups and downs of life, lets others in her field know of her Christian faith, and

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understands her art to be an act of service to God and her neighbors rather than as a way to get self-worth and status. Is that all it means to integrate her faith with her work? In addition to these, does the Christian teaching about the nature of reality bear on what she depicts and how she depicts it through her art? Will it influence what stories she tells with her art? Will her art be influenced by her beliefs about sin and redemption and hope for the future? It seems that it must be. And so we discover that faithful work requires the will, the emotions, the soul, and the mind—as we think out and live out the implications of our beliefs on the canvas of our daily work.

On the other hand, what if you are a Christian pianist, or a shoemaker? How does a Christian worldview affect the type of shoe you make, or the way you play the *Moonlight Sonata*? The answer is not so clear.

Who will deliver us from all this complexity? Most people who have begun to read books or become involved in groups integrating faith and work have either (a) only partaken of one of the theological streams or (b) already been confused by reading or hearing contradictory teaching from different streams. There is a tendency for churches and organizations emphasizing faith and work to be somewhat unbalanced, emphasizing one or two of these story lines to the exclusion of the others. Yet simply combining all the emphases—and hoping they add up to something coherent—is not the solution.

We do not expect to resolve all these differences in this book. But we do hope to make things clearer. And we can begin by making two observations about the list of propositions above. First, if you revise each of the propositions by adding the word “main”—as in “the *main* way to serve God at work is . . .”—then the views do in fact contradict. You will have to choose one or two and discard

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the rest. In fact, most people who hold forth on issues of faith and work do exactly this, either tacitly or explicitly. But if you keep the propositions the way they are, claiming that each is *a* way to serve God through work, then the different statements are ultimately complementary. Second, as we have already noted, these factors can assume very different forms and levels of importance depending on your particular vocation, culture, and historical moment. When we keep these two principles in mind, we can move forward looking at the various streams, statements, and truths as a kind of tool kit to be used to build a model for the integration of faith and work in your field, time, and place.

Just as important as making these ideas clearer, we aim to make them more vivid, real, and practical. Our goal is to feed your imagination and stir your action with the richness of what the Christian faith says (directly and indirectly) about this inexhaustible subject. The Bible teems with wisdom, resources, and hope for anyone who is learning to work, looking for work, trying to work, or going to work. And when we say that the Christian Scriptures “give us hope” for work, we at once acknowledge both how deeply frustrating and difficult work can be and how profound the spiritual hope must be if we are going to face the challenge of pursuing vocation in this world. I know of no more provocative witness to this hope than the overlooked little story by J.R.R. Tolkien “Leaf by Niggle.”

There Really Is a Tree

When J.R.R. Tolkien had been working on writing *The Lord of the Rings* for some time, he came to an impasse.⁹ He had a vision of a tale of a sort that the world had never seen. As a leading scholar in Old English and other ancient Northern European

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languages, he knew that most ancient British myths about the inhabitants of “Faerie”—elves, dwarves, giants, and sorcerers—had been lost (unlike the myths of the Greeks and Romans or even of the Scandinavians). He had always dreamed of re-creating and re-imagining what an ancient English mythology would look like. *The Lord of the Rings* was rooted in this lost world. The project required creating at least the rudiments of several imaginary languages and cultures as well as thousands of years of various national histories—all in order to give the narrative the necessary depth and realism that Tolkien believed was crucial for the tale to be compelling.

As he worked on the manuscript, he came to the place where the narrative had divided into a number of subplots. Major characters were traveling to various parts of his imaginary world, facing different perils, and experiencing several complicated chains of events. It was an enormous challenge to unfold all these sub-narratives clearly and then give each a satisfactory resolution. Not only that, but World War II had begun, and though the fifty-year-old Tolkien was not called into the military, the shadow of war fell heavily on him. He had experienced firsthand the horror of World War I and had never forgotten it. Britain was now in a precarious position, with invasion imminent. Who knew if he’d survive the war even as a civilian?

He began to despair of ever completing the work of his life. It was not just a labor of a few years at that point. When he began *The Lord of the Rings*, he had already been working on the languages, histories, and stories behind the story for decades. The thought of not finishing it was “a dreadful and numbing thought.”¹⁰ There was in those days a tree in the road near Tolkien’s house, and one day he arose to find that it had been lopped and mutilated by a neighbor. He began

to think of his mythology as his “internal Tree” that might suffer the same fate. He had run out of “mental energy and invention.”¹¹ One morning he woke up with a short story in his mind and wrote it down. When *The Dublin Review* called for a piece, he sent it in with the title “Leaf by Niggle.” It was about a painter.

In the first lines of the story we are told two things about this painter. First, his name was Niggle. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, to which Tolkien was a contributor, defines “niggle” as “to work . . . in a fiddling or ineffective way . . . to spend time unnecessarily on petty details.”¹² Niggle was of course Tolkien himself, who knew very well this was one of his own flaws. He was a perfectionist, always unhappy with what he had produced, often distracted from more important issues by fussing over less important details, prone to worry and procrastination. Niggle was the same.

We are also told that Niggle “had a long journey to make. He did not want to go, indeed the whole idea was distasteful to him; but he could not get out of it.” Niggle continually put the journey off, but he knew it was inevitable. Tom Shippey, who also taught Old English literature at Oxford, explains that in Anglo-Saxon literature the “necessary long journey” was death.¹³

Niggle had one picture in particular that he was trying to paint. He had gotten in his mind the picture of a leaf, and then that of a whole tree. And then in his imagination, behind the tree “a country began to open out; and there were glimpses of a forest marching over the land, and of mountains tipped with snow.” Niggle lost interest in all his other pictures, and in order to accommodate his vision, he laid out a canvas so large he needed a ladder. Niggle knew he had to die, but he told himself, “At any rate, I shall get this one picture done, my real picture, before I have to go on that wretched journey.”

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So he worked on his canvas, “putting in a touch here, and rubbing out a patch there,” but he never got much done. There were two reasons for this. First, it was because he was the “sort of painter who can paint leaves better than trees. He used to spend a long time on a single leaf, . . .” trying to get the shading and the sheen and the dewdrops on it just right. So no matter how hard he worked, very little actually showed up on the canvas itself. The second reason was his “kind heart.” Niggle was constantly distracted by doing things his neighbors asked him to do for them. In particular, his neighbor Parish, who did not appreciate Niggle’s painting at all, asked him to do many things for him.

One night when Niggle senses, rightly, that his time is almost up, Parish insists that he go out into the wet and cold to fetch a doctor for his sick wife. As a result he comes down with a chill and fever, and while working desperately on his unfinished picture, the Driver comes to take Niggle on the journey he has put off. When he realizes he must go, he bursts into tears. “‘Oh, dear!’ said poor Niggle, beginning to weep, ‘And it’s not even finished!’” Sometime after his death the people who acquired his house noticed that on his crumbling canvas his only “one beautiful leaf” had remained intact. It was put in the Town Museum, “and for a long while ‘Leaf: by Niggle’ hung there in a recess, and was noticed by a few eyes.”

But the story does not end there. After death Niggle is put on a train toward the mountains of the heavenly afterlife. At one point on his trip he hears two Voices. One seems to be Justice, the severe voice, which says that Niggle wasted so much time and accomplished so little in life. But the other, gentler voice (“though it was not soft”), which seems to be Mercy, counters that Niggle has chosen to sacrifice for others, knowing what he

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was doing. As a reward, when Niggle gets to the outskirts of the heavenly country, something catches his eye. He runs to it—and there it is: “Before him stood the Tree, his Tree, finished; its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt or guessed, and yet had so often failed to catch. He gazed at the Tree, and slowly he lifted his arms and opened them wide. ‘It is a gift!’ he said.”¹⁴

The world before death—his old country—had forgotten Niggle almost completely, and there his work had ended unfinished and helpful to only a very few. But in his new country, the permanently *real* world, he finds that his tree, in full detail and *finished*, was not just a fancy of his that had died with him. No, it was indeed part of the True Reality that would live and be enjoyed forever.¹⁵

I’ve recounted this story many times to people of various professions—particularly artists and other creatives—and regardless of their beliefs about God and the afterlife, they are often deeply moved. Tolkien had a very Christian understanding of art and, indeed, of all work.¹⁶ He believed that God gives us talents and gifts so we can do for one another what he wants to do for us and through us. As a writer, for example, he could fill people’s lives with meaning through the telling of stories that convey the nature of reality.¹⁷ Niggle was assured that the tree he had “felt and guessed” was “a true part of creation”¹⁸ and that even the small bit of it he had unveiled to people on earth had been a vision of the True. Tolkien was very comforted by his own story. It helped “exorcise some of Tolkien’s fear, and to get him to work again,” though it was also the friendship and loving prodding of C.S. Lewis that helped get him back to the writing.¹⁹

Artists and entrepreneurs can identify very readily with Niggle. They work from visions, often very big ones, of a world they

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can uniquely imagine. Few realize even a significant percentage of their vision, and even fewer claim to have come close. Those of us who tend to be overly perfectionistic and methodical, like Tolkien himself, can also identify strongly with the character of Niggle.

But really—everyone is Niggle. *Everyone* imagines accomplishing things, and everyone finds him- or herself largely incapable of producing them. Everyone wants to be successful rather than forgotten, and everyone wants to make a difference in life. But that is beyond the control of any of us. If this life is all there is, then everything will eventually burn up in the death of the sun and no one will even be around to remember anything that has ever happened. Everyone will be forgotten, nothing we do will make any difference, and all good endeavors, even the best, will come to naught.

Unless there is God. If the God of the Bible exists, and there is a True Reality beneath and behind this one, and this life is not the only life, then every good endeavor, even the simplest ones, pursued in response to God's calling, can matter forever. That is what the Christian faith promises. "In the Lord, your labor is not in vain," writes Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 58. He was speaking of Christian ministry, but Tolkien's story shows how this can ultimately be true of all work. Tolkien had readied himself, through Christian truth, for very modest accomplishment in the eyes of this world. (The irony is that he produced something so many people consider a work of genius that it is one of the bestselling books in the history of the world.)

What about you? Let's say that you go into city planning as a young person. Why? You are excited about cities, and you have a vision about how a real city ought to be. You are likely to be discouraged because throughout your life you probably will not

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get more than a leaf or a branch done. But there really is a New Jerusalem, a heavenly city, which will come down to earth like a bride dressed for her husband (Revelation 21–22).

Or let's say you are a lawyer, and you go into law because you have a vision for justice and a vision for a flourishing society ruled by equity and peace. In ten years you will be deeply disillusioned because you will find that as much as you are trying to work on important things, so much of what you do is minutiae. Once or twice in your life you may feel like you have finally "gotten a leaf out."

Whatever your work, you need to know this: There really is a tree. Whatever you are seeking in your work—the city of justice and peace, the world of brilliance and beauty, the story, the order, the healing—it is *there*. There is a God, there is a future healed world that he will bring about, and your work is showing it (in part) to others. Your work will be only partially successful, on your *best* days, in bringing that world about. But inevitably the whole tree that you seek—the beauty, harmony, justice, comfort, joy, and community—will come to fruition. If you know all this, you won't be despondent because you can get only a leaf or two out in this life. You will work with satisfaction and joy. You will not be puffed up by success or devastated by setbacks.

I just said, "*If* you know all this." In order to work in this way—to get the consolation and freedom that Tolkien received from his Christian faith for his work—you need to know the Bible's answers to three questions: Why do you *want* to work? (That is, why do we need to work in order to lead a fulfilled life?) Why is it so *hard* to work? (That is, why is it so often fruitless, pointless, and difficult?) How can we overcome the difficulties and find satisfaction in our work through the gospel? The rest of this book will seek to answer those three questions in its three sections, respectively.