



FORMED, NOT FOUND

A THEOLOGICAL LOOK AT VOCATION
BY TOD BOLSINGER

+ Professor Amos Yong of Fuller's School of Intercultural Studies helps form students sensing a call to missiology

Christian vocation, or “calling,” is woven through the great biblical narrative. From the moment that God kissed the figures formed of the dust and charged them to “cultivate and keep” creation, to the final summons to the nations of the world to enter the New Jerusalem, the invitation of God became the call that becomes the charge that transforms us all.

From the nomad Abram who left his country and kindred to follow a Voice; to the boy Samuel who was awakened by a Whisper in the night; to some fishermen who left their family business behind to follow an itinerant rabbi; to an angry Pharisee knocked blind from his horse; to the countless women and men through the ages who heard something, felt something—just *knew* that someone—was calling them by name and inviting them into a life they couldn’t imagine, the mystery has been not only *that* God calls us, but *how*.

For centuries this has been the question of the young entering adulthood. In a rapidly changing world, it is the question now being asked repeatedly throughout life. It can be as ordinary as a morning spent searching help-wanted ads or as aching as a prayer: “Lord, what am I to do?” The wish that seems promised in the biblical stories is that it will be a one-time, hopefully once-for-all announcement like a proposal for marriage. But more like marriage itself, one’s calling in life is not so much *found* as *formed*. Or to say it even more clearly, our vocation is not truly found until we are fit for it.

Discerning calling is the long, complicated combination of convictions and context, of passion and prayer, of knowledge and need that seems to tap us on



✦ Those interested in exploring vocations in psychology find guidance from Professor of Psychology Alexis Abernethy



the shoulder and call forth from us an invitation into a process of self-discovery and humility, of taking up and laying down, of embracing and letting go that over time forms a deep, confident conviction that, of all things there are to do in the world, “This is mine to do.” At Fuller we have embarked on an ambitious endeavor to recast the entire work of the seminary around this concept of formation for vocation. Our shared conviction is that the God who calls our names and offers us life and partnership in his own redemptive purposes fits us for the call. That calling is an expression of identity, and our ultimate calling is to express that identity in losing ourselves in something greater than us. And that requires us to grow, to be transformed—to become the people God intended us to be.

So, if calling is not found but formed, then how is it formed?

In the Scriptures and throughout the Christian tradition, this transformation does not happen in some individualistic or disembodied way. The formation of vocation is from start to finish a communal event that is both contextual and incarnational—from the call of Abram to produce a people who would bring tangible blessing to the whole world, to the witnessing communities of Acts whose very purpose was to form people for their apostolic vocation.

The vocation of God is a gift of grace mediated through the relationship and formation of the people of God. The call comes within and through the community. And if we, as a theolog-

ical seminary, are going to continue that pattern into the next century, what kind of formation should this community offer?

Our response is to draw on the rich tradition of our theological forebears, who wrote vast treatises on Christian vocation teaching us that Christian calling is formed through communities of *love* and *wisdom*.

For Luther, Christian vocation is expressed primarily through one command: To love our neighbor (Mark 12:31). For him, God’s calling of Christians to love the neighbor is indeed the way God loves the neighbor. Our vocation then is to participate in God’s own ministry to the world that he loved so much that he sent his Son.

For those of us seeking to discern our callings, the Reformers insist that living out the call of God is indeed a source of great joy and gratification. At the same time, those significant satisfactions are the blessed byproducts but never the point of vocation. Calling is formed through a commitment to fulfill the command to love the neighbor, not in the search for personal fulfillment.

To be sure, following the Reformers, we affirm that Christian vocation is an admonition to the entire people of God to respond to God and participate in God’s own ministry. The Reformers affirmed that God’s call was to the whole church in every part of life. Vocations are not just the domain of monasteries and priesthoods, but of marketplaces, homes, and professions. Since the call of Jesus is first and foremost to discipleship, none are excluded. Since disciples are instructed to the love of neighbor as the first priority,

then to be called is to be a follower of Jesus, revealing God's loving reign to the world. Since Jesus declared that the greatest commandment for all is to love God and neighbor, then it is indeed the vocation for all.

This means that the summons and demand of the gospel comes to people in every circumstance and station in life (1 Corinthians 7:20–24). Vocation is not so much a leaving of nets (though that certainly could be the case), but a learning to serve God and love neighbor in the very place where God called you. For the Reformers, Christian vocation was the assurance that you needn't receive a special call to the monastery or the ministry to be called by God; you could do so right in your family, at your workbench, in your village. Vocation does not begin with a search, but in a heart of service. It does not begin in "discerning the will of God," but loving the neighbor.

For Calvin, wisdom—"true and sound wisdom"—is indeed the very quality that should characterize the follower of Jesus. The faithful and fruitful life in every circumstance is the life of wisdom, and wisdom is the result of knowledge. The knowledge Calvin commends is not the speculative knowledge of theories and debates, but "knowledge of self" and "knowledge of God." Knowledge of self and God leads both to proper perspective regarding ourselves and to the right worship of God. "Knowledge of self" teaches us that vocation is always an expression of identity, and "knowledge of God" reminds us that our true identity is found only in the one in whom we "live and move and have our being."

For Wesley, this self-reflection helps



+ School of Theology faculty member Oliver Crisp found in himself—and nurtures in others—a love for systematic theology

us be mindful of both the gifts and graces that are required for our calling. Addressing clergy in 1756, Wesley exhorts them to consider the necessary “natural gifts” that ministry requires be both present and developed, as well as (and even more importantly!) the “graces” of God that cultivate those gifts into faithful action. What is notable is that the list of “gifts” is extensive! Even those called to the narrow confines of pastoral ministry are exhorted to cultivate knowledge in areas as broad as both the interpretation of Scripture and the understanding of science, psychology, and the various contexts and conditions in which people live.

For Calvin, knowledge of self and knowledge of God gives us eyes to see both ourselves and the world through the lens of God’s saving intention and to attune to the voice of God amidst the many voices of the world that beckon for our attention. For Wesley, this same self-reflection causes us to constantly consider our motives and even the possibility that our underlying desires can sabotage our best intentions.

While Calvin’s contemporary, Ignatius of Loyola, would develop an entire system for discerning the wisdom of God in everyday life, the awareness that God is the one who shapes and works through our desires (Philippians 2:13) is evident in many “call stories,” perhaps most famously Augustine’s—who wrote the following:

I panted for honors, for money, for marriage, and you were laughing at me. I found bitterness and difficulty in following these desires, and your graciousness to me was shown in the way you would not allow me to find anything sweet which was not you.

Ultimately, Augustine, so famous for reminding us that our “restlessness” will be sated only in God himself, also reminds us that God is intimately involved in each of our lives, as Paul wrote, “to will and to work” for his purposes. For the Reformers, this work of God forming us to fulfill his call on our lives is formed in the Christian community through the exhortation to love neighbor combined with the wisdom born of the knowledge of God and self. This love and wisdom is both an exhortation and grace. It comes to each of us in the very place—and within the community of believers—where we already reside, work, live, and love. It does not require that we necessarily “leave our kindred” (Genesis 12:1) or “leave our nets” (Mark 1:18), but it does require a life committed to ongoing formation (Galatians 4:19).

For the Christian, calling is formed—and thereby found—in the midst of the work of our hands, just as Jesus taught us that whatever we treasured enough to hold on to will eventually take hold of our hearts. We hear a voice, sense a nudge, and take a step of faith to follow, but we have really no idea where it will lead us. When the fishermen dropped the nets to follow the rabbi, they couldn’t have imagined preaching and dying in Rome or receiving a vision on Patmos. But they got to work following Jesus in his kingdom proclamation, and eventually found themselves sent as apostles with this good news.

Similarly, we too say “yes” in faith to the grace and calling of Jesus and—eventually—through communities of love and wisdom find ourselves being formed for that which we couldn’t fathom.



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In this document, Dr. Bolsinger explores Scripture and the teachings of our theological forebears to propose a view of vocation that lies at the foundation of Fuller Seminary’s vision for holistic formation.



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Read the complete article, with
footnotes, at fuller.edu/studio.

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