

Exegesis: Work and 'Calling' in 1 Corinthians 7 Mako A. Nagasawa

In the Reformed Protestant tradition, the concept of one's individual 'calling' is the avenue by which the Protestant social vision becomes a reality for any given person. It has therefore been the most common Protestant method of beginning any discussion on work, since it seems at least somewhat logical that God would give us individual 'callings' to particular jobs in human society just as He gave us a general 'calling' to be saved through Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 7:20 and 24, the apostle Paul said, "Let each man remain in that condition (calling) in which he was called." Paul Helm, in his 1987 book *The Callings: The Gospel in the World*, regarded by some as the classic Reformed statement on occupational work, builds upon the notion of calling from his first chapter onwards. Since we are called to faith in Christ and called into holiness, we have all sorts of derivative callings that correspond to what job we have. Therefore, so the reasoning goes, we should emphasize those 'callings.' But is that the original New Testament meaning of the word 'calling'?

Radical Reformation and specifically Anabaptist attitudes came out of concerns for the church's purity and a general sense that the Reformation had not gone far enough in being separate from the world's political institutions. They accepted the widened Reformed definition of agency, affirming the responsibility of all believers. But responsibility to do what? Anabaptist thinking about work is centered around the church's work of reconciliation within itself to maintain its unity, a concern which, though perhaps too formally linked to church offices in medieval Catholicism, was left somewhat abstract by the Reformation. (Is unity evidenced by commonalities in preaching alone?) Anabaptists regarded valuable work as work done towards the church and for the church community. This led to the Anabaptists tendency to 'withdraw' from the world; historically they have tended not to enter into politics and ethically ambiguous places, nor have they evaluated work as a general strategy to engage and challenge the secular world. The Anabaptist emphasis on the church body not just as the agent of Christian work but as the scope of legitimate work invites the charge of being introverted and weak on evangelism and engaging social structures. We will have opportunity to evaluate this stream of church tradition more deeply, but for now, we focus on their exegetical position.

At least some Anabaptists and other Radical Reformers argued that our 'calling' is to be a part of a local church, which is the body through which God works.¹ Anabaptists tend to have a high view of church responsibilities and offices, similar to the Roman Catholic position, but not because Christian clergy have a sacerdotal, priestly role, since the Anabaptist position simultaneously affirms the universal priesthood of all believers. Rather, every person is called upon to be involved in the tasks of evangelizing the world and nurturing community life, and some people (pastor-teachers, evangelists, etc.) may be supported by the community to perform certain tasks as part of the church community, which is distinct from other organizations in the world. What is important is the life of the community, not the position or status of those particular individuals. This is why trades and professions take a backseat in Anabaptist theology. A woman with a doctor's training can be asked by the Christian community to be a full time Bible teacher and counselor; or, for instance, a man who is a lawyer can be asked by the church to take a small part time job to free up his time to mediate in racial reconciliation issues. A Reformed thinker would tend to be defensive, seeing these peoples' current vocation as a doctor or lawyer as their calling from God, but an Anabaptist would happily consider these possibilities because service within the body can be rendered.

The Anabaptist position makes a significant contribution in explaining the nature of a Christian 'calling.' Nowhere in the New Testament does God call His people into specific occupational jobs. We are called (*klesis*) first to what we are to be spiritually. That is, we are called "to eternal life" (1 Tim.6:12), "to fellowship with His Son" (1 Cor.1:9), "out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pet.2:9), and so on. God called us (2 Tim.1:9, 2 Pet.3:10), and "those whom He called, He also justified" (Rom.8:30). Then, some of us are called to particular responsibilities in mission. Paul used this word to denote that he was called to be an apostle (e.g. Rom.1:1), he and Barnabus were called to be apostles to the Gentiles (Acts 13:2-3), and Paul and his party were called to preach the gospel in Macedonia (Acts 16:10). Meanwhile, Paul was also a tentmaker, but nowhere is the specific word 'calling' used in conjunction with that part of his life. The New Testament does not record anyone being called by God to be a shepherd, a farmer, a

¹ An unpublished paper by John F. Alexander, *What is Good Work?* For a different perspective, see also John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 1972).

craftsman, or tax collector. Occasionally, people are called to give up such work, but never to take it up. Thus, Simon Peter was called away from his fishing and Levi was called away from his tax collecting. In effect, Paul called Philemon out of his former position because Philemon was useful to him and to the wider church (v.11). But no one is ever called *into* a job in that manner. A study of similar words and phrases – sent, ordained, anointed, chosen, or set apart – yields the same results.

In the Old Testament, various people were appointed, anointed, or otherwise called into specific roles having to do with the leadership of Israel, but they were not called into what we could call “vocational work” or “occupational work” outside of those positions. David, for example, was anointed king, but he was never anointed shepherd. Bezaleel and Aholiab were anointed to be craftsmen for God’s tabernacle, but they were not anointed to craft things of their own desires generally (Ex.31). The judges and prophets of Israel were always called to a special function within the people of Israel, but no one was called to take up a way to earn their living.

However, both Reformed and Anabaptist theologians have largely misinterpreted or ignored 1 Corinthians 7. Although Paul in this passage talks about circumcision, marriage, and slavery – and not ‘jobs’ as we understand it today – the principle he gives here can probably be applied to work, though not without qualification, which we will consider below. In the port of Corinth, where the urban setting allowed for more social possibilities, Christian slaves wanted to be free; some actually had this opportunity. While I have strong reservations about applying slavery passages to employment, which I will discuss later, by far, this is the best analog in the Bible we have to our present situation, where we are approaching the question as a question of changing our social and legal status. What then was Paul’s advice? He advised them *not* to become free. At least seven times in various ways (1 Cor.7:17, 18, 20, 21, 23, 24, 26), Paul tells us to remain as we are and not worry. “Let each man remain with God in that condition in which he was called.” While he did say, “If you are able also to become to free, rather do that,” (1 Cor.7:21) Paul simultaneously said that in most cases it did not make much sense in light of the eschatological events to come surrounding the second coming of Christ. He repeatedly asserts that “the time has been shortened” (7:29) and “the form of the world is passing away” (7:31). That is what their desires were compared against.

Whether or not Paul expected the world to end soon is immaterial. Some have argued that Paul was expecting a distressing upheaval of the socio-political order, or just a local event that was prophesied by someone in the early Christian community. Such theories miss the point. Paul was working from a Jewish framework of partially realized eschatology, or inaugurated eschatology, that was to be fully realized in God’s new world.² This is the most descriptive and precise way to understand Paul. Paul is constantly reminding the Corinthians about their now-and-not-yet situation which then culminates in the full blown explanation of the resurrection in chapter fifteen. There is a present age and an age to come that is partially but not completely here. The age to come will unveil the true reality of what people are doing now in the present. For instance, God is working at a project which is like a building and a field (3:6-15). What we do in the present will be validated or not in the future because we are either building with precious metals or perishable combustibles. The day that is to come will declare it. This is the fundamental element of apocalyptic Jewish thought, which Paul now reorients around Jesus. Paul ties up this thought in 15:58, “Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.”

Being joined to Jesus completely reorients our sense of responsibility. Some things we do as Christians will have eternal significance, and others will have no eternal value whatsoever. The “work of the Lord” is important and urgent not because the return of Christ is so immediate on our calendar but because all our activities will be judged in the final analysis. Paul is informed by a future that has bearing on the present, regardless of how quickly that event will arrive from our time-bound perspective. Significant works will be preserved through the judgment as if they were precious metals in a fire, while insignificant works will be burned up as irrelevant. The world to come will be a judgment on the world that is. Whether or not that event comes quickly from our perspective has very little if anything to do with it. The question has to do with what is ultimately and eternally significant.

The types of questions we would ask about occupational work, then, are the same types of questions Paul answered for the Corinthians in chapter seven. Does it make sense to change one’s social

² Richard B. Hays. *First Corinthians (Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*. John Knox Pr. 1997

position when the entire social structure will be overturned? Does it make sense to take on more ordinary human obligations and commitments simply for their own sake or for one's own sake in light of what will happen in the second coming? No. There may be other considerations that enter the equation, but the default posture is inertia and even slight disengagement. Paul says, "Those who have wives should be as though they had none" not to encourage Christians to abandon their marriage vows, but to limit the narcissism that can develop between two married people who think only of themselves. Also, "those who buy [should be] as though they did not possess, and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it" (7:30-31). This is probably a reference to commercial and economic relationships, and we cannot make the capitalist argument, that by plunging into the marketplace and buying and selling self-interestedly I am ultimately benefiting other people and therefore serving Jesus. Engaging more deeply in those types of commitments and contracts is to be looked at carefully and hesitantly. Now perhaps in some cases it would make sense to change stations in life, as Paul encouraged some people to become free from slavery if the pressures of sustaining an independent life were lighter than their workload as slaves. But Paul's driving concern in light of Christ's second coming was to "secure undistracted devotion to the Lord" (7:35). So if more worries about one's own life would be the result, then Paul's advice was to not become free.

In Paul's mind, serving another Christian is *not necessarily* the same thing as serving the Lord. Obviously, it can be in some situations, but it is not always so. Paul did not make human relationships, whether they be marital, legal/commercial, or cultural wholly equivalent to serving Christ. This corrects the Protestant tendency to think of any service in the world as a service to Christ: Being a good worker or employee does not necessarily mean that one is serving Christ, and working overtime simply to accomplish work or please one's boss certainly seems contrary to the spirit of what Paul is saying here. Even service to the Christian body is not necessarily the same thing as service to the Lord, and devotion to another Christian is *not necessarily* the same thing as devotion to Christ! If a fundamental relation like marriage between two Christians can be challenged, this does not mean that service to the church takes precedence over human marriage (and other human relations). It means that service to Christ bears a superior yet not intrinsic and not identical relation to serving even the church. This passage thus corrects the Anabaptist tendency towards introverted church-centeredness where there should be Christ-centeredness, since Paul went so far as to check marital love, cultural adjustment (circumcision), and legal service (slavery) *between Christians*.

Interestingly, both the Reformed and Anabaptist tendencies are present for the same basic reason. They involve the assumption that Jesus is *inherently* served when a Christian does something for a society, whether that society be secular (the world) or Christian (the church). But Jesus Christ exists as a singular person who stands related to but fundamentally distinct from the world and the church. Devotion to him is not necessarily equivalent to devotion to other people, whether they be Christian or not. He has expectations of his own, and fulfilling other people's expectations does not necessarily meet with his approval. Sometimes it does, surely, but sometimes it does not. So if we have been raised in basically moralistic traditions where Jesus is used as a way to achieve some sort of stable human community, then 1 Corinthians 7 raises significant questions about that. Being creation-centered or church-centered is not at all the same as being Christ-centered.

Furthermore, classical Reformed thinkers like Martin Luther and John Calvin, and modern ones like Paul Helm, all affirm one aspect of Paul's teaching – contentment – but completely miss the basis for that contentment in 1 Corinthians 7. Rather than radically throw into question society and all social relationships, the Reformers universally made social relationships more binding than before, using that as the basis for Christian contentment. Said Luther in 1520, in *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*:

A cobbler, a smith, a farmer, each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops, and everyone by means of his own work and office must benefit and serve every other, that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, even as all the members of the body serve one another.

Here is Calvin expanding on the same general sentiment in *Institutes*:

For He (the Lord) knows with what great restlessness human nature flames, with what fickleness it is borne hither and thither, how its ambition longs to embrace various things at once. Therefore, lest through our stupidity and rashness everything be turned topsy-turvy, He has appointed duties for every man in his

particular way of life. And that no one may thoughtlessly transgress his limits, He has named these various kinds of living 'callings.' Therefore each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wander about throughout life...Again it will be no slight relief from cares, labours, troubles and other burdens for a man to know that God is his guide in all these things. The magistrate will discharge his functions more willingly; the head of his household will confine himself to his duty; each man will bear and swallow the discomforts, vexations, weariness and anxieties in his way of life, when he has been persuaded that the burden was laid upon him by God.

The Reformers' direction was different from Paul's in some vital ways. Whereas Paul thinks very critically about what human commitments to make or modify, the Reformers blanketed virtually all jobs with God's approval, encouraging more productivity and perfection from the work itself. Whereas Paul encouraged us to live in the freedom offered by Christ and be governed by the Holy Spirit, the Reformers emphasized a Christian's inability to be trusted with that freedom and urged Christians to be governed by every human institution in existence. Whereas Paul emphasized the fact that Christ's return will overturn the world and judge all that has been done in this present age, the Reformers emphasized God's establishment of the world and downplayed Christ's return. Whereas contentment in 1 Corinthians 7 is based on the conviction that God has called us to something superior to the current world's arrangements, and that the world will pass away while one's service to Christ can and will be separated from that realm, contentment in Luther and Calvin is based on the conviction that God has deliberately placed you into an ethically affirmed social milieu and that one's service to Christ is identical with one's worldly duties. All this constitutes quite a dramatic departure from Paul.

This shift, however, continued to influence Protestant writers. The Puritan writer William Perkins wrote, in *A Treatise of the Vocations or Callings of Men*, published in 1603,

The action of a shepherd in keeping sheep, performed as I have said in his kind, is as good a work before God as is the action of a judge in giving sentence, or of a magistrate in ruling, or a minister in preaching. Thus then we see there is good reason why we would search how every man is rightly to use his particular calling.

Thoughts like these were produced in relatively rapid succession in the 17th century by other Protestant and especially Puritan writers like George Swinnock (1665), Richard Baxter (1673), and Richard Steele (1684).

Everything which human beings did that was seen as good for society was interpreted as an intrinsic blessing from God because it facilitated Protestant church growth and influence. The church's desire for organizational stability again precipitated this mutation of its teaching. The creation order was again emphasized without much regard for the theological continuity-discontinuity between creation, Israel, and Jesus. We will survey how this happened with Luther and Calvin by using well known biographical information about their social visions. Then we will delve into their exegesis of key texts.

While Reformed theology correctly responded to medieval Catholicism by expanding both the agency of that work and the scope of legitimate Christian work, they went too far in the latter category. They began chiefly from the standpoint of creation, neglected the social and political dimensions of the fall, and approved of any socially acceptable vocation as fulfilling God's command to rule the creation. With its emphases on the occupational equality of all believers and proper stewardship of creation's resources, Reformed theology has had a hard time dealing with passages like 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul says that devotion to Christ is not one and the same with common human relations. Reformed theology, in its quest for social stability, also tends to elevate marriage and childraising from a creational perspective, and Paul's check on that impulse here has often a point of discomfort.

We will examine the Reformers' position even more thoroughly in future sections addressing the idea of stewardship, but for now, let us conclude this discussion of 1 Corinthians 7 with an application. In our society, where the carrot of financial betterment dangles ever before us, where we can go back to school at any age to advance, where we constantly look upward on the career ladder, where we seem to psychologically depend on career progress for emotional stimulation, where we feel that we need to stay one step ahead of everyone else, where we would be contemptuously criticized for not giving enough to our children if we do not advance, what a strong reaction we often have to Paul. Paul challenges our career goals and tells us to stay where we are! This message for us now, as it applies to work and as we are systematically unraveling it, is to remain content in the presence of God, and to seek to serve Jesus Christ as much as we can.