

*What Am I Supposed to Do
with My Life?*

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

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Hietbrink, my editor, has made the editorial process engaging and fun. Her questions about the manuscript have, in every case, enabled me to say more clearly and with greater precision what I intended to say. I am grateful for our collaboration.

I dedicate this book to my daughters, who are at that time in life when the sheer number of possibilities open to them makes vocational thinking seem daunting rather than exciting. My prayer for them is that they will continue to ask good vocational questions. And my prayer for myself is that I'll resist the urge to get in their way.

Introduction

I've been a pastor now for more than twenty-five years. I preach and lead worship, I teach, I go to meetings (lots of them), and I get calls from people who want to meet with me. Either I suggest that we meet at my office, or I suggest we meet for a meal — usually lunch, sometimes breakfast. Sharing a meal, breaking bread together, usually feels less formal, more intimate than meeting in my office.

In the course of my work over the years, I've listened to a lot of people talk about a lot of subjects. It's turned out to be one of the most enjoyable parts of my work. I've met many wonderful people, and I've learned a great deal from them.

As I reflect on all of this listening, however, it seems clear to me that the number-one subject people want to talk about is vocation. No other subject even comes close.

People seldom use that word, of course — or even its more familiar form, "calling." And yet, people seem to know the meaning of those words. They seem to know, perhaps intuitively, that their lives ought to mean something, that their lives *should* have both purpose and meaning.

So, they'll ask this question (or one much like it): What am I supposed to do with my life?

Early on, I became aware that the people I meet don't really expect an answer from me. They listen, of course, if I happen to offer one, but they really don't expect me to find their meaning for them. Asking the question, I've discovered, is a way for them to voice their own existential struggle, and most of the time I'm simply invited to listen in or to help them sharpen the question. Discussing the question with me is a way for them to understand it better, to get another perspective, or to find someone who understands.

And usually I find that I do. The questions sound similar to the ones I've asked myself.

In my experience, people ask this question at nearly every age and stage of life. Young adults certainly do, but so do older adults — and nearly everyone in between. I suppose that what I expected in my work was to hear mostly from people in their twenties, as they went through the inevitable process of sorting out their various life choices.

What I never expected to hear was a newly retired person say, "I wonder what God has in mind for me to do?" When that happened the first time, I knew that I needed to pay attention. Until then, I had always assumed that in retirement we no longer need to ask vocational questions. But I found out I was wrong.

We ask vocational questions for as long as we are alive. And asking vocational questions is a way of truly being alive — to God, to the people around us, and to ourselves.

So this is a book for seekers of all ages. It's meant to be a guide of sorts, but it's more than that. It's meant to help us ask good questions, pointed questions, questions that get us closer to hearing God's voice in our lives.

Vocation, as we'll see, is more than work, what we happen to do, how we make a living. Vocation includes all of life — everything we are, everything we do, everything we aspire to be. Vocation is a way of

life — or better yet, the journey of life. We live best, I think, when we live in response to a call, to God's call.

Vocational questions aren't easy questions — but then lives well lived are seldom easy. Vocational questions are complex and challenging, pushing us to look deeply into ourselves, and also compelling us to look beyond ourselves. They compel us — or they *should* compel us — to search out what is truly *worthy* of our lives.

So let me ask you: What are *you* supposed to be doing with your life? What would be worthy of the life that you've been given?

 CHAPTER 1 *What Am I Supposed to Do
with My Life?*

Not long ago, after I announced to my congregation in Wheaton that I would be leaving to accept a similar position in Ann Arbor, a parishioner called to — what else? — make an appointment. He said he'd been intending to talk to me about something that had been on his mind, and now that I was leaving, he figured he should finally get it off his chest. He said he had already waited too long.

I knew him well, respected him, and had always considered him to be a serious, hardworking, and thoughtful person. He was fifty-nine years old.

After he took a seat in my office, he started to speak with a look of what I took to be near-desperation on his face. His body language reinforced the intensity of his words: "I'm really struggling." I could see that he was. "I don't know what I'm going to do with my life," he said.

After he relaxed a bit, we had a wonderful conversation, and when it was over, we hugged before saying good-bye. At the time I wasn't sure why that conversation affected me so deeply. Looking back, though, I know I heard something of my own struggle in his words. Earlier in my life I had thought a great deal about vocational questions. That seemed utterly natural and normal to me then, and it

still does. What I found surprising — and even alarming at times — was to find myself thinking about those questions at mid-life.

The truth is, I've wrestled with vocational questions throughout my life. But after my twenties and thirties, I figured I was pretty much alone in my wrestling. Or I chalked up my questions to being a pastor. Pastors, I assumed, were *expected* to think long and hard about their callings, but other people weren't — and most likely didn't.

Called to Be a Loser?

Several years ago I wrote an article for a popular journal for pastors. The title — “Called to Be a Loser?” — was intended to be provocative, but the content wasn't. It was mostly a review of what most pastors already know — or should know — about vocation, especially pastoral vocations.

Ministry isn't easy, I wrote, and most of us wouldn't do it unless we truly *felt called* to do it. As a small but very real (for me) example

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Isaiah 6:8, NRSV

of my ongoing struggle with my call to ministry, I mentioned my lifelong love for cars and how conflicted I felt over the recent purchase of a small red sports car. I badly wanted the car, but I was unsure how appropriate it would be for me, as a pastor, to own a car like that. Driving a

sports car didn't seem to fit with the life to which I had been called. I felt that my identity as a pastor was at stake in some ways.

The journal that printed my article almost always includes the e-mail addresses of its writers, along with photos and bits of biographical information. To my surprise, for the next *two years* I received dozens of e-mails from colleagues, most of whom I didn't

know. They wrote to me — sometimes at considerable length — about their own far more serious struggles and questions. Some of those e-mails were heartbreaking. I answered each one, thanked them for writing, and encouraged them to find someone with whom they could continue the conversation.

On one level the number of responses was gratifying. I certainly learned that I wasn't alone. But on another level the volume of responses was somewhat distressing. Pastors may have the language and the tools to think about their callings in a way that others perhaps do not, but more of us than I would ever have imagined struggle with questions of vocation.

A COUPLE of years ago, I decided to preach a fall sermon series on vocation for my congregation in Wheaton.

Over the summer I read widely about the subject, which is one of the ways I like to prepare for a sermons series. But this time I even talked to people who had done scholarly work on the subject. I made appointments with college professors and authors, sat with them in their offices, and asked thoughtful and probing questions. I poured myself into the topic with an unusual degree of passion. This was more than research for a sermon series; this was in many ways a personal quest. I needed answers for myself.

I had hoped for a positive response to the sermon series, of course. But the strength of the response — like the response to my article — surprised me and even distressed me a bit. I quickly realized that pastors weren't the only people who wrestled with vocational questions.

Far more church members than I had anticipated followed the series with a deep personal interest. Those who had to be out of town on Sunday called the church office on Monday to ask for a copy of the sermon they had missed.

As the series went along, my calendar filled up with appointments. That fall I rarely ate a breakfast or a lunch at home. My words had definitely touched a nerve.

It's Not about You

Last year I was asked to preach the baccalaureate sermon during commencement exercises at a small Presbyterian college in a neighboring state. When the college president asked me what I thought I might speak about, I said that I'd been giving some thought to vocation (quite an understatement) and wanted to reflect on the subject with the graduating seniors and their families. He seemed delighted and told me that the school had, in fact, recently received a sizable grant to pursue the subject in more depth. He even directed me to the college web site so that I could read more about the grant and what the college was doing with it.

A few days later, however, after I had mailed my sermon title to his secretary, he called back. "Called to Be a Loser' is quite a sermon title," he said.

"Yes, it is," I agreed, not offering any further hints about what I planned to say.

"Well," he said, hesitating, as though unsure about how to continue the conversation, "we'll be looking forward to what you have to say." The tone of his good-bye suggested that I should behave myself — or this might be my last invitation.

As far as I could tell, the baccalaureate service was a beautiful one, and no one seemed particularly upset with what I said. I tried my best to be humorous. And brief. At times I even tried to speak over the heads of the graduates, so to speak, to the proud families and faculty also in attendance. But my message, I thought, was blunt and to the point: The "loser" in my sermon title was a reference to Jesus, who, according to the Bible, lost everything, but gained the whole world. "Give yourselves away through lives of service," I told the graduates, "and you will have all the meaning and purpose in life you can handle. That's your vocation." Then I added, "Now all you need is a job."

More than a few students approached me afterward and said, "Thanks for those words." One graduating senior, in cap and gown,

made a point of seeking me out and saying, "Thank you for your words. For some reason, our teachers are afraid to tell us that lives of meaning and purpose come from lives of service, even though we kind of expected that at a Christian college."

AFTER THESE experiences, it was certainly obvious to me that vocational questions are on the minds of many people, maybe even most people. The questions may be asked in different ways — pastors, for example, may have unique concerns — but lots of us have vocational questions.

So why are the answers so hard to come by?

I think I know. Vocational thinking is countercultural. It flies in the face of the message we receive daily from popular culture, which insists again and again that happiness and contentment in life can be found in gratifying our own desires and seeing to our own needs. Even the way the vocational question is often framed reveals the importance our culture places on the self: "What am I supposed to do with *my* life?"

God calls people to himself, but this call is no casual suggestion. He is so awe inspiring and his summons so commanding that only one response is appropriate — a response as total and universal as the authority of the Caller.

Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*

Rick Warren, a popular pastor in southern California, wrote a best-selling book entitled *The Purpose-Driven Life*, which begins with this sentence: "It's not about you."

I agree, but what's astonishing to me is that a book with that sentence as a starting point and premise has sold millions of copies. We don't often hear someone take that position. Popular culture tells us that it *is* about us. But people of faith know — or should know — that it's not about us. We have been called to love God *and* to love our

neighbor as ourselves. We have the ultimate example of Jesus, who gave his life for us.

Our chief end in life is not to gratify our every desire, but, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism reminds us, to "glorify God and enjoy him forever."

Something Bigger than Ourselves

In my reading about vocation, I've found a number of helpful and compelling books, many of which I've noted in the bibliography. In recent years, one author in particular has written in an especially engaging way about vocation, and he's found a wide audience for his insights and ideas. Although he speaks to many, his tone is warm and personal. His name is Parker Palmer.

In one of his more recent books, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*, he encourages readers to pay attention to what their lives are saying as a way of discerning their calling in life. Listen to your life, he says.

On one level, of course, I see the wisdom in that advice. I think that paying attention to our gifts and life experiences is a critically important step in the discernment process. I doubt that I would be in parish ministry today if I hadn't done a careful assessment of my gifts and interests, if I hadn't listened, as Palmer says, to my life.

Beyond that, I'm aware that early Christian mystics urged people of faith to listen for the voice of God within, and so from the earliest days of the church, Christians have practiced the discipline of being attentive to God's voice and direction.

And yet, I have to say that something about the "listen to your life" advice troubles me. It's not that God doesn't speak to us in this way — but is the message compelling enough? I like burning bushes rather than still, small voices.

When I think about vocation, I think about something far bigger

than myself. I think about something far bigger than what my inner voice might be telling me. I think about something far bigger than my own dreams and ambitions. I think about . . . well, I think about God. I think about God's plan. I think about how I might fit into that plan and be a part of it and participate meaningfully in it. I think about God calling me beyond myself to places I would never have considered on my own. That kind of call is so powerful and filled with purpose that it can only come from outside me.

To me, being called implies that there is something or someone beyond myself — in other words, that there is One who calls. When I am called, I am summoned or compelled to respond. I participate in the call, of course, through my response, but there's a sense in which I couldn't say no, even if I wanted to.

When God calls people in the Bible, they're often surprised. Being called was the last thing on their minds. Often they resist. Sometimes they're terrified. And they almost always complain that they're not up to the task.

They see, almost immediately, that God's call will take them in an entirely different direction from the one they had in mind for themselves.

To our way of thinking, God calls the least likely people. Moses was a murderer on the run. David was a lowly shepherd and the youngest of his brothers. Mary was a young peasant girl from Nazareth. And yet, God saw something in each of them that no one else could see. And when they didn't have what was required, God equipped them and gave them exactly what they needed.

Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."

Exodus 3:3-4, NRSV

Convince Me

As a preacher, I am keenly aware that the church no longer enjoys a dominant position within popular culture. In my childhood it did, but no longer. In my lifetime, the church has been disestablished. For most people, the church — and the faith it proclaims — is irrelevant. When I preach, I can no longer assume that my hearers will be in general agreement with what I have to say. Few of them regard the Bible as the truth — one source of truth among others, perhaps, but not *the* truth.

Most Sundays I speak to congregations that are full of seekers, people who are open to Christian faith but who don't fully embrace it. I sense that they want to be persuaded; they're open to what I say. But they're also skeptical. Their arms, in a figurative way, are folded across their chests, and the signal I receive from them is clear: "Convince me. Show me that I should care."

I write these words with those same seekers in mind, the same people who come to my church week after week, the same open but skeptical, hoping-to-be-persuaded people. I have come to see that my own calling in life, my vocation, is speaking to you, making sense for you of my own deeply held faith. In my preaching, teaching, and writing, I do my best to pass on the faith that I myself have received, but in fresh language.

After a lifetime of asking vocational questions, I'm convinced that my faith has compelling words to speak about the subject, words that deserve a hearing, words that have made a difference in my own struggle.

You should know, right up front, that what I believe about vocation swims against the current of popular culture. And for that reason, what I believe and what I have to say to you in this book may be difficult to hear: *It's not about you. It's about the One who calls you. Beyond that, God's call is often demanding. It will require sacrifice of some kind, and possibly some hardship. But it will result in meaning and purpose. You can be sure of that.*

But, difficult to hear or not, I believe these words deserve a hearing. The Christian faith provides a compelling answer to a question that many, many people are asking.

What are you supposed to do with your life? Do you know?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. The Bible is filled with stories of call. In this chapter I've mentioned Moses, David, and Mary, but there are many others who hear God's call in their lives and respond to it. Read a couple of these stories and notice both what they have in common and how they are different from each other:
 Abraham: Genesis 12:1-9
 Joshua: Joshua 1:1-9
 Samuel: 1 Samuel 3:1-18
 Jeremiah: Jeremiah 1:1-10
 Ezekiel: Ezekiel 1-3
 Simon, Andrew, James, and John: Mark 1:16-20, Matthew 4:18-22
 Matthew: Matthew 9:9
 Paul: Acts 9:1-18
2. What are some of the vocational questions that you've asked in your life? Did you talk about them with anyone? Did you read something that you found helpful? What process did you go through as you wrestled with your questions? Did you come to any conclusions about the meaning of vocation?



CHAPTER 2

What Does My Faith Tell Me about Vocation?

One morning, during the year I turned forty, I woke up and said to my wife, "I think I need to make a change in my life. I think I need to do something different. Other people change careers. Why can't I?"

I should mention that, by this time in my life, I had been pastor of three Presbyterian churches in three states and had enjoyed my work — mostly. As with any kind of work, parish ministry has its annoying features. Having to work most holidays and weekends, plus a lot of evenings, would be one.

Those annoyances, however, weren't the problem for me on that particular morning. Instead, I had the feeling that maybe, just maybe, there was something else for me to do with my life. I wasn't sure what that "something else" might be, but I wanted to look around and see what else was out there. In the course of my work, I encourage other people to make changes. Sometimes I *challenge* them. So, why shouldn't I do it too?

The risky part, for me, and the reason I couldn't simply act on my feelings that morning, was that I was married with two children who were rapidly approaching college age. Beyond that, I owned a house

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and had mortgage payments to make. Starting a career when I was in my mid-twenties was easy. Although it didn't always seem that way at the time, I now realize how simple it was. But now things were different: I had other people to consider, serious financial commitments to honor, and a solid track record in a single career path.

Facing the Challenge

I'll get back to my own story in a minute. But first I want to point something out.

I'm well aware that some people are very happy — or at least content — with their lives. Some people, I've noticed, find meaning and purpose in just about everything they do. They never wake up and wonder, as I did, if they should be doing something different with their lives.

Do you know something? I'm happy for them. I really am. To be honest, I enjoy their company. But there aren't very many of them — at least that's the impression I have. Most of the people I talk to in the course of my work tell me that they feel stuck — either in their jobs or, more generally, in their lives. They occasionally describe a place that feels hopeless and desperate, like a deep rut they can't seem to climb out of.

People who feel stuck in life can sometimes keep going for a fairly long time, longer than you might expect. Out of a sense of duty to their families, maybe, or simply out of inertia, they stay where they are and keep doing the same things they've always done. Not happily, not with a sense of purpose or meaning, but they keep doing it.

And then, typically, something happens — usually something big.

In my own case, I would say that what happened wasn't that big. But most other people hit a major bump in life's road. They lose their job, or they get divorced, or they lose a family member. Just about

anything in life will do it, any serious jolt or tremor, if they already feel discontented or unhappy with what they're doing.

Recently a fifty-six-year-old man in my church died very suddenly, without warning. Faced with the loss of financial security, his

Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my identity, not the standards by which I must live — but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life.

Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*

wife found herself in the painful position of having to reassess her life. I was sitting in her living room when she told me that she really didn't like her current part-time job and that it didn't pay much — certainly not enough to live on. But, she said, it had been convenient: good hours, a short distance from home.

"Now," she told me, "I not only have to find a new job. I have to figure out who I am and what I have to offer, which may be the hard part."

I promised that I and her friends in the church would walk

with her during this difficult time in her life, but I remember thinking, "You're in for the challenge of a lifetime."

Remembering the Call

Ten years ago, on the morning I told my wife that I thought I needed to do "something else" with my life, she did something that at the time I found very irritating.

She said, "Okay, if that's what you think you need to do."

What I had half-expected, half-wanted, was this: "Oh, Doug, you can't. Our lives are so good and so stable just the way they are. Please

don't do anything that would upset what we've worked so hard to achieve." If that had been her response, you see, I could have gone to work that morning and silently resented her. In other words, I could have blamed her for all of my unhappiness. And that might have been the end of it, as it is for many unhappy people.

Instead, what my wife said was something truly grace-filled. And the irritating part, I quickly realized, was that the ball was now back in my court. I had raised the issue, and she had given me the gift of allowing me to sort it out for myself.

That same day, armed with grace, I made an appointment with a person who talks to a lot of pastors asking the same kinds of questions I had. First this professional put me through the usual battery of personality tests, most of which I had taken years before, as part of the process leading to ordination in the Presbyterian church. Not surprisingly, most of the test results were similar to what they had been before. My hair may have been graying, but my personality hadn't changed much, which was reassuring.

Next I was asked to write a short essay about what I (not others) thought were the major accomplishments of my life up until that point. This assignment was a little more difficult than answering the multiple-choice questions on the personality tests, but I found it helpful and revealing. I surprised myself, and I recommend the exercise to others. It's a good one.

My final assignment was to talk to the professional about my feelings of wanting to do something different with my life. "Some days," I told him, "I feel like little more than the executive director of a non-profit. I raise money, I encourage a staff, and I worry about lots of inconsequential matters."

"Such as?" he asked.

"Parking," I answered. "When I first signed up for this job, I wanted to do ministry. I wanted to make a difference in people's lives. And what I find myself doing instead is listening to people tell me how hard it is to find a parking place on Sunday morning."

A good listener, the professional was mostly quiet during my whining. Which is all it was, of course. Once or twice he asked a clarifying question, probably so that I would know he was still listening. Finally he leaned forward in his seat and looked both thoughtful and concerned, exactly what you would want in a concerned friend.

"Hmmmmm," he said. "Sounds like you want to get back to whatever it was you originally felt called to do."

And there it was — that little expression I myself have used so often over the years. *Felt called*. What I was hoping for, in a way, was that he would give me an exercise to take home, five practical steps toward contentment and happiness in my life, a career makeover kit: "Tomorrow, Doug, I want you to get going on step one, which is..." Instead, what he gave me was a question, something for me to think about: What was it that I *felt called* to do with my life?

I want to ask *you* the same question: What is it that you feel called to do with your life? What is your vocation? Do you know? You might be surprised to learn that you have a vocation, but you do. You've been called to do something with your life, something that will give your life purpose and meaning.

Where Is Galilee in Your Life?

One Easter morning not long ago, I preached a sermon on Matthew's account of the resurrection. Over the years I'm sure I've preached about that story at least half a dozen times, but up until then I had never noticed something obvious in the story — the number of times the little word "go" is used.

In the space of just a few hours, several people visit the empty tomb, and each time the instruction they hear is basically the same: "Come see, and then go." Even Jesus gets into the act. "Don't be afraid," he tells the women who come. "Go — and tell my brothers to get going to Galilee, where I will meet them." Go, go, go.

The repetition has an effect. The people in the story are stunned, amazed, saddened, overjoyed — in other words, their feelings are all over the place — but always there is this command to get moving. Don't stand still, the story seems to say. Get out of here. Beat it. There's work to be done.

In my sermon I happened to mention a Gallup poll that was conducted among college students a few years ago. They were asked to name their primary concern in life, and by far the majority of them said it was the vocational issue.

Not really surprised by that, the researchers decided to ask people of other ages what they were concerned about, and this time they *were* surprised by the results. No matter what their age — whether young, middle-aged, or older — the respondents' number-one concern was essentially the same: What am I supposed to do with my life?

My sermon that Easter morning got some people talking — to me, to their family members, and in some cases, from what I've heard, to their therapists. "I hear Jesus telling me to 'go,'" they would say to me, "but I'm not sure where I'm supposed to be going. What does Galilee look like in my life?"

That's a very fine question — a *vocational* question.

I don't think I fully realized it at the time, but this was one of the best possible outcomes of preaching. My sermon had provided a nudge, perhaps even more, in some journeys of faith.

Let me ask you the question: What does Galilee look like in *your* life? Where is it God wants *you* to go?

The Scope of Vocation

Some Christian traditions — maybe you've noticed — focus on getting people saved. The main question they ask, or so it seems, has to do with your eternal destination. But it has always seemed to me that

my faith tradition is better known for something different, something more immediate. My faith tradition, the one in which I was raised, has always seemed to pay a lot more attention to what happens *after* you're saved.

What's supposed to happen after you're saved, I learned, is that you begin to live differently, gratefully, with a brand-new sense of meaning and purpose. And it's then, I was told, that you're pursuing your calling or vocation in life — in other words, what God saved you for. Your life has been altered and claimed and redirected. You're not living for yourself anymore; you're living for the God who loves you and, in a sense, *needs* you. God expects to work through you. God's work will be accomplished — in part — *through you*. (I'll be exploring this idea more fully in the last chapter of this book, where I talk about our being co-creators with God.)

For most of church history, vocation was thought to be what people in religious orders did with their lives. If you became a priest or joined the Benedictines, for example, you had a vocation. But not if you were a farmer. Or a teacher. Or anything else. Vocation was something that was reserved for religious professionals.

But church reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin emerged in the sixteenth century and took a very different view of work and the way we live our lives. What they did was broaden the meaning of vocation to include virtually all of life. Nearly everything we do with our lives, they said, can be thought of as vocation, as a response to God's claim on our lives.

Think of that. *Everything* we do. Everything we are. Vocation turns out to be a far bigger, far more encompassing concept than most people realize.

IN THE CHAPTERS that follow, I'll focus much of my attention on the part of our lives having to do with jobs or careers. I need to acknowledge that now. Vocation is far more than work, but work — for most of us — is what we do with the majority of our waking hours.

It's important to remember, though, that Luther and Calvin went well beyond work when they wrote about vocation.

Are you thinking about getting married? Well, they said, think about your decision as a calling. Maybe you're called to be married and have the gifts for it. But maybe you're not. Maybe, they said (actually the Apostle Paul makes the case in 1 Corinthians 7), your call in life is not to marriage at all but to singleness. Maybe your gifts make you uniquely suited for that life. If so, then be the best single person you can possibly be. Honor God with your singleness. Or if you really do feel called to be married, honor God with your marriage. Be the best married person you can possibly be. Either way, think of your life as a vocation.

Are you a son or a daughter? Think of your relationship with your parents as a calling. You can honor God, they said, by being an outstanding son or daughter.

According to Luther and Calvin, these callings are every bit as honorable and important to God as the calling to the priesthood. This was the spiritual breakthrough they achieved — that vocation is all that we are, all that we do.

At the time, this was considered a novel, even radical thought. And in many ways, it still is.

Life develops new purpose, value, and significance as we discover and share our mission. Life is more than a job. Our identity is not in a job. Jobs come and go, wither and fade. We may have several in the course of our lives. Our identity is not in some institution or business. That way of achieving identity no longer works. It is an illusion. The meaning of life is in the mission.

Kennon L. Callahan, *Twelve Keys for Living: Possibilities for a Whole, Healthy Life*

Older Adults and Vocation

People who lived at the time of Luther and Calvin obviously didn't think about retirement because life expectancies were relatively short, and retirement simply wasn't an option. But today, life expectancies are much longer, so asking vocational questions about retirement is important — in fact, I plan to do just that in a later chapter. I'm not aware that very many people are thinking about retirement in vocational terms, so maybe the time has come to start the conversation with some tough questions.

Here are a few: What does God call us to do with our lives after we retire? Is a life of leisure a fitting response to the call of God in our lives? If you're a person of faith, what would be a God-honoring way to retire?

Over the years, because of my work as a pastor, I've spent a great deal of time with older adults. I enjoy them, and I learn from them. (Soon I'll be one of them myself.) What I often find striking is how true the findings of that Gallup poll are: older adults struggle with the issues of meaning, purpose, happiness, and contentment in life as much as any other age group.

And there are older adults who have become models of what I (in a later chapter) call vocational integrity. James Fowler is a scholar who writes about faith development issues, and in his book entitled *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, he says, "There is an impressive quality of dignity, courage, and energy in the lives of those older adults who have found and been faithful to purposes for their lives that are part of the purposes of God."

Baby Boomers and Vocation

If you noted my age at the beginning of this chapter, you might guess that I'm a baby boomer. And you'd be right. I write these words as a

boomer, as someone who is keenly aware of midlife issues. Like other people my age, I never expected to be this old.

We baby boomers thought we'd always be young. Maybe every generation assumes that, but boomers in particular grew up with an obsession with youth. We celebrated it, we worshiped it, and at times we rubbed our parents' noses in it. We were people who weren't going to trust anyone over thirty. Remember? It's painful to recall, but true. Now we're so far past thirty we can hardly see it in the rearview mirror.

One newspaper article I saw recently described boomers as "has-beens." That was hard to read. With the burst of the stock-market bubble in 2000, many of those who lost their jobs were — for the first time — baby boomers. Numerous businesses were downsized, and many of us were let go to make room for a generation of younger, less expensive, and in some cases better trained and educated workers. Many of us may even be wondering if our best days and our greatest achievements are behind us.

A member of the church I served previously was forty-five years old when the telecommunications industry fell on hard times. She lost what had been a good job — good salary, benefits, and title. She told me that to get severance benefits she was required to sign a release promising not to sue for age discrimination. "That's when it hit me," she said. "I'm old." And job searching has led her into a period of extended soul searching.

For the first time in her life, she says that she's seriously considering work in the nonprofit world — partly because she needs to be flexible, but mostly because her goals have changed. For her, as for many others, midlife has been a time to reconsider, re-evaluate, and refocus.

I was sorry, of course, that my friend lost her job. It was a situation I wouldn't wish on anyone. But I can truthfully say that I've enjoyed the conversations we've had as a result — both about her job searching and about her soul searching. Midlife brings with it —

sometimes unexpectedly — a great deal of vocational struggle. James Fowler says that people at midlife are usually “prime candidates for a major encounter with vocational clarification.”

I like that term. “Vocational clarification” nicely summarizes the vocational task for most people at midlife.

Young Adults and Vocation

Older adults and those at midlife aren’t the only ones who ask questions about meaning and purpose in life. Young adults do too.

I have an unusually large number of nieces and nephews, and I’m grateful for all of them. I enjoy the time I spend with them, and I enjoy

A true calling reveals its presence by the enjoyment and sense of renewed energies its practice yields us. This does not mean that sometimes we do not groan inwardly at the weight of the burdens imposed on us or that we never feel reluctance about re-entering bloody combat. Indeed, there are times when we wish we did not have to face every burden our calling imposes on us. Still, finding ourselves where we are and with the responsibilities we bear, we know it is our duty — part of what we are meant to do — to soldier on.

Michael Novak,
Business as a Calling

being their uncle. Part of that relationship, of course, is watching them grow up. And in the last few years, as they’ve started making their way through college and thinking about life after college, our conversations have turned to vocation.

Older adults may think that young adulthood is fun and care-free, but often it’s not. Often the years of young adulthood are difficult, stressful, even frightening. At our holiday get-togethers, the conversation almost inevitably rolls around to school and work. “So, what’s your major?” “What do you think you’re going to do after college?” “Got any jobs lined up after June?”

Early on, I found myself wanting to tell my nieces and nephews what I thought they should do with their lives. But I soon learned that my advice wasn’t particularly helpful — usually it wasn’t even wanted. What I needed to do, I discovered, was to be available, to answer when asked specific questions, and to pray a great deal, right along with their parents. I now think the best possible thing an uncle (or aunt or any other family member) can do is to walk alongside these young people as they answer their vocational questions for themselves.

Trumpets in the Morning

When I graduated from seminary — a long time ago — the commencement speaker was a man named W. Frank Harrington. He has since died, but at the time he was the pastor of the largest Presbyterian church in the country and someone my classmates and I respected and admired.

One of his statements that day — it may have been part of the title of his speech — has stayed with me over the years. He was speaking about his zest for life and his passion for his work, and he said, “As far as I’m concerned, I still hear trumpets in the morning!”

I remember thinking, “Wow, what a way to wake up!”

It would be wonderful, wouldn’t it, to feel this way. Imagine it — waking up every morning as though you’re being summoned to something important, feeling as though your work is critical to the well-being of others, feeling as though there’s such meaning and purpose in your life that you can’t wait to start your day.

I’ve always wanted that feeling for myself. In reality, though, I only hear trumpets on some mornings. And some people, I realize, never hear them at all.

But I’m convinced that more of us would hear trumpets more of the time if we began to think of our lives differently — as a vocation, as a response to the call of God in our lives.

THE STORY I started this chapter with — the one about my relatively brief, midlife vocational crisis — has a happy ending. As I drove home after my last meeting with the professional who led me through all of the personality tests and conversations about what I really felt called to do with my life, an unexpected thought occurred to me: “I’m already doing it.”

What I’m supposed to be doing with my life, that is. I’d been doing it for a long, long time, as a matter of fact.

After all of the questions and tests and conversations, I ended up right back where I started. I ended up by reclaiming my vocation, my sense of calling. Ministry, I came to see, makes use of my gifts in a way that no other way of life possibly could. I suddenly felt as though my call had been confirmed, or reaffirmed, which came as both a wonderful relief and the starting point for renewed enthusiasm about my work.

How about you? Do you know what you’re supposed to be doing with your life?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What’s the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word “call” or “vocation”? Is it going to require an adjustment for you to broaden your thinking about what a call might mean?
2. Martin Luther and John Calvin revolutionized our thinking about vocation by including not only our jobs but also (among other things) our marriages and our family relationships. Can you think of other areas of life that have — or could have — the characteristics of a call? How would those areas be different if you began to think of them in terms of vocation?
3. To have a sense of meaning and purpose in life sometimes means the feeling of being summoned to a place or a situation where you’re needed. Where are the places in your life where you feel summoned?

CHAPTER 3 *How Do I Find Meaning and Purpose?*

A couple of summers ago I was on vacation with my family at our favorite vacation spot on Lake Michigan. What I ordinarily like to do during this time is sit on my beach chair and read books for two weeks — and not much else. Some of the books I read turn out to be helpful for my work, but many are just for fun. I’ve found that reading on the beach is just the right sort of replenishing break I need in my life. Occasionally I’ll get up and cool off in the lake, but then it’s back to the chair and the books.

One day as I was heading back to my chair after a swim, I saw someone walking along the shoreline, someone I’ve known for a long time. So I went over to say hello.

When she saw me, she said hello and asked if the girls sunbathing near my chair were my daughters. When I said yes, she said, “Oh, they’re so lovely.” And when I said, “Aren’t they, though,” she added, quite unexpectedly, “And they have their *whole lives* in front of them.”

Looking back on this exchange, I realize that I knew almost immediately that this was a comment begging for deeper attention. After all, I’ve known this person for a long time, and so at some level I knew she was expressing regret. I could feel it. I know the sound of re-