Christian Views on Calling and Work

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For many people, a student’s eventual career is just assumed to be *the main point* of the entire educational process. The familiar line of thought goes like this: if you get into a good preschool, you can get into a good elementary school, which can lead to a good high school and a selective college, which will lead to a “good” job. This thinking can lead, in some cases, to waiting lists for prestigious preschools that include not-yet-born children! Linking schooling with job prospects certainly affects the price of houses and factors into people’s decisions about where to live. This thinking is behind many of the typical student questions in high school English and math classes: “When will I ever have to use this in my job?” This thinking is behind the growing question: “Is college worth it?” So this article will unpack some of the assumptions and perspectives surrounding the concepts of work, calling, and also avocation as they all relate to education.

Secular View #1

I think there’s a big dose of American pragmatism attached to many people’s assumptions about the relationship between education and work. They assume that it’s *obvious* that education is preparation for work. So we all accept the idea that students destined for blue-collar jobs need to go through high school, preferably with the opportunity to learn a trade or two thrown into the deal. Maybe later these workers will go on for some additional practical, more specialized training to get certified in job-related skills like welding, air conditioning maintenance, or computer repair – and maybe even small business management.

In this view there is often an emphasis as well on the practical needs of the family, community, and country – that is, do we need Johnny or Susie (or Isabella or Anthony) to find work to help out the family finances (instead of delaying full-time work to get more schooling)? Do newlyweds decide one of them will work instead of going to college or grad school? Does the community need more people with diesel repair or welding or construction skills? Does the country need more skilled workers to install and service high-tech solar or wind energy equipment?

These are very practical approaches to the education and work connection (pragmatism). And sometimes a part of the conversation even includes a sense that the country also needs more generally literate workers and voters, or even that it needs more people who have all read the same books (perennialism, essentialism).

So the theme here is on practical needs (both personal and societal) and which specific jobs can address those needs and which specific educational experiences can most practically (pragmatically) prepare young people (or career changers) for those specific jobs.

Secular View #2

In these articles, I’ve been contrasting the more traditionalist, curriculum-centered, and society-centered perspectives in Secular View #1 with more progressive and humanistic student-centered views in Secular View #2. What this second view looks like in terms of calling and work is often referred to as self-actualization, which focuses on students exploring their interests and realizing their dreams and potential (rather than focusing on what their families or communities or states want them to do). Instead of learning to do something to help primarily their family or society, there’s more emphasis on individual choices, exploration, and just being yourself: “Be all that you can be.” Existentialism’s focus on individualism and “existence before essence” aligns well with this view’s concept that school is for exploring, for flexing one’s individual mental muscles, developing one’s potential in athletics or the arts, and just generally nurturing the budding self to “be anything you want to be.” This approach has a lot more room in it for exploring the arts, going out for a team, or joining chess club or the debate team. Or just immersing oneself in something for the fun of it – things that aren’t seen to be as valuable from a strictly pragmatic and utilitarian perspective.

So these less traditional approaches to education like progressivism, humanism, reconstructionism, deschooling, and some forms of homeschooling all look beyond jobs and see a broader purpose to education than merely training someone for his or her life of work. The emphasis can be on exploratory learning, trying new things, opening up lifelong passions and interests, joining teams or clubs, or just being freed from a lot of the constraints of formal schooling that may stifle student curiosity and interest.

Christian View #1

First, there’s the *Christianity-against-Culture* framework. This view rejects the way the secular views focus on society’s needs and the development of the individual. The primary focus here, although it can look very practical, is often centered on biblical injunctions to not be idle, to work hard as an act of worship, to provide for one’s family, and to contribute financially to the work of the church. There’s not as much room in this particular view for helping students discover their passions or engage in a lengthy preparation for a prestigious career. Manual laborers are seen as salt of the earth—good, honest people. Work may be toilsome and sweaty, or seen as a necessary evil. There may be some practical vocational training for a “good job,” since like the first secular view, this view shares the emphasis on weighing the cost of an education and the time commitment with the “benefits” it will bring, namely the salary. That is, does the salary justify the expense of the education? So, as with the first secular view, there’s a kind of consumerism here. The Parable of the Talents in Matthew is often taken quite literally – what’s the financial pay off for the investment? Although this Christian view may reject tying schooling to what the state or the industrial complex wants in its new workers, there may still be a lot of emphasis on what the family or church want as they set themselves apart from the secular values of the society at large.

Christian View #2

On the other side of the spectrum is a kind of *Christianity-Embracing-Culture* framework. This view, like the second secular view is more progressive and student-centered. Work is seen as more of a communal, social, and holistic concept – something you do for much loftier reasons than just to earn a living. E.g., your work is for the betterment of the current human condition. There are many ways to align such thinking with the Bible, since the emphasis is often put on the greater good. E.g., be an artist or musician to beautify the world, reflect God’s perfect creation, and give others a glimpse of the Divine. Or be a doctor or lawyer or counselor to help people, to right injustices, to heal the sick, to bring God’s mercy to the sick and suffering and downtrodden. So we see here a loftier vision of work and of the education that can help prepare one to do such work. And, also in this framework, there may be a focus on making enough money to really enjoy the great life and the great world and the many cultures that God has provided us – or a focus on making money to give generously to Christian causes. And through it all there’s a Christian version of using education to self-actualize, that is to be all that you can be with the unique gifts and personality traits that God has given you.

Christian View #3

Finally, a third Christian framework can be generated from a *Christ-Transforming-Culture* perspective. This view often combines the responsibility and the freedom themes from the other two Christian approaches. Wolterstorff (1980) has a whole book on *Educating for Responsible Action*– responsible action toward society, to right injustices, and to use the gifts that God has given us in some kind of service (calling) for God. In this view there is often an emphasis on teachers modeling a sense of divine calling, showing students by their own lives that it doesn’t have to be the case that those with the “most brains” grab the jobs with the biggest paychecks. It’s more about identifying what part of the body we are called to be and then preparing our minds and hearts and bodies to fulfill those roles. This view also includes an emphasis on being part of God’s kingdom building and cultural transformation for Christ. Like other Christian perspectives, this one also calls for personal lifestyle responsibility. But it’s not just about learning the rules and duties of being a Christian; it’s also about helping all students see their lives in this big picture of God’s work in the world. Educational options, lifestyle choices, and financial issues all fall into place as part of a student’s response to God’s call in their life.

In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray, “Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). To do our part in God’s fulfilling of that petition, we all offer our gifts and talents to God to mold and use and interact with us. Therefore, we are all in “full-time Christian service,” since we are all called according to His purpose, to work where he sends us.

Part of God’s calling to Christians, according to Wolterstorff, is to see and work against injustices in the world. After “inducing self-consciousness” of injustice in our students and “unmasking rationalizations” for preserving the status quo (p. 95), and actually working for liberation of the oppressed, Christian educators must ultimately strive for shalom, for otherwise liberation teaching is contentious and divisive. This means we’re not just having partisan debates in our classrooms. We, as teachers, are part of God’s call to the next generation to work –with head, heart, and hands – for God’s shalom in our communities and around the world. This work may or may not be paid, career work for our students. But it still involves preparing diligently for whatever God has in mind for each person and then prayerfully and wholeheartedly answering whatever the call ends up being.

So this is so much more than just being honest, solid, hard workers to support our families and give to our churches. It is so much more than individualistically (at times narcissistically) nurturing the seed that God has planted in each of us. Rather, this is looking at the world as God’s world in need of workers (“in his vineyard the workers are few”) and looking at ourselves as God’s agents, each with special gifts and talents to bring into service to his work of kingdom building.

So work is calling (in fact, *calling* is *vocation* in Latin). So all work, for the Christian, is a calling, and all education, then, is vocational education. And even our avocations, our hobbies and non-paid roles and family roles, are all part of our calling, part of the service that we prepare ourselves to do in God’s service and for his glory. So even our relaxation exercises, escapist novels or movies, exercise routines, small talk with close friends, and family vacations are part of how we respond to God’s calling in our lives. Educators have the huge task of helping students understand and prepare for all this as they seek out and address the specific callings from God in their lives.

Some brief case studies on calling and work:

1. Get the best education to get the best job.

Christians often talk about calling. What’s most often meant is finding the right job that fits the kinds of skills and interests God has given us. So parents and teachers look for the kinds of things kids are interested in and steer them toward more exploratory opportunities along those lines. Preferably opportunities leading to “good paying” jobs along those lines. So the kid likes bugs, maybe she can be an entomologist. Another kid likes horses and working with kids, maybe he can work at a horse camp in Colorado (but only for a few summers while preparing to be a veterinarian). So the salary ends up being a factor in the calling. Use the natural interests and talents to lay the groundwork toward getting a “good” salary.

Question: Are all of God’s callings tied to roles with a paycheck?

1. When will I ever need this in my job?

Christians adopt the culture’s “practical” attitudes toward the purpose the schooling – to get a better job. If that’s the prevailing mindset, then even in Christian schools, kids can often ask why learning about quadratic equations, mitochondria, or gerund phrases is necessary for their future jobs (most of which will never mention these things). But this is kind of like saying why should I eat broccoli when there’s little history of colon cancer in my family. Or why should I try to do ten pull ups when I plan to sit at a desk all day for the rest of my life. Being physically fit, mentally fit, emotionally fit, and spiritually fit aren’t preparation for a specific 40-hour-a-week role in life.

Question: Why should we try to be as mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually fit as possible?

1. Some people are professional students!

My father was one of these. He went to seminary after college. Then grad school in Amsterdam for five years. Then Harvard for six years. I was 11 when he got his first “real job.” I was 17 when he started working in his career goal of being a college prof. I was 30 and getting a master’s degree when he finally got his Ph.D. from Harvard. His doctoral dissertation was 1400 pages.

Sometimes admissions counselors are teased for not leaving the college they loved so much as students. Sometimes people don’t know what they want to do when they grow up and stay around in college for five or six years (or more) getting multiple bachelor’s degrees or they try some boring job for a while and then start in on a string of Master’s degrees.

In some of these cases, there’s probably a clear calling from the Lord – like the admissions counselors who prayerfully feel a tug to stay on after graduation and help spread the exciting word about their amazing experience at the college.

But sometimes there may be an unclear sense of life calling exhibited by the person’s continuous return to additional academic programs to try to find his or her calling. This is where it may be helpful to point out that one’s calling doesn’t always link up with one’s career or academic studies.

Question: How much emphasis should we put on a person’s education in the whole process of discerning one’s calling?

1. I’m at this college to find the right spouse.

Part of what God often does during the higher education process is introduce us to our spouses. At least, that’s been the assumption for a few generations of American Christians. And being married is part of God’s calling for many Christian people. But going to college for the “MRS Degree” or going just to find “a nice Christian bride” is a time-consuming and costly approach to a process that is getting less common during the traditional college years. That is, the marriage rate in America is plummeting over all, and the median age of a first marriage is now 27 for women and 29 for men. Most people are starting their first or second careers by then and/or living in their parents’ basement. (And they’re also buying their first house at a later stage of life, if at all.)

Question: Is finding the right spouse part of God’s “calling” in a person’s life? What ways besides going to college does God provide for this process?

1. Wisdom, education, and training are all different things.

The Bible talks about wisdom a lot. The words knowledge and understanding also show up a lot and seem to mean a lot more than just having some specialized facts memorized. So while the world may emphasize the role of education in training for job skills (everything from welding and book keeping to cellular experiments and courtroom discourse), Christians see education as a lot more than preparation for specific jobs.

Question: What all could be included in the idea that education can enhance one’s spiritual wisdom?

1. I don’t know what I’m going to be when I grow up, but I do know I want to be a Dordt grad.

There are probably as many reasons for going to college as there are college students. And then their parents may have additional reasons! Getting a good job, finding the good spouse – these are top reasons mentioned in our culture. Or just finding yourself. Or discovering your gifts. Or building your mental muscle. And maybe also developing athletically, emotionally, and spiritually. Maybe even aesthetically (did you attend the Shakespeare play last weekend?).

But sometimes going to college is kind of like going to the same summer camp that all your friends go to or that your parent went to. Sometimes college is more about making social and business connections for later in life and not so much about learning specific career skills.

Question: Is the choice of which college to attend part of God’s calling in a person’s life? What advantages for one’s *overall* life calling can God provide through a place like Dordt College?

1. How do you prepare for Christian avocations?

Some Christians downplay having professional full-time ministers, pointing to the Apostle Paul’s tent making job as a model of a minister having a job, a skill, an ability to support him/herself, and not taking a grander position in the community than anyone else. Someone doing “ministry” while having a different full-time job is doing what has come to be called an avocation. So it’s possible that one’s vocation from the Lord is an avocation in terms of the daily schedule and where the paycheck comes from. Examples might include doctors and dentists who do pro-bono mission trips to other countries. Or youth pastors who spend their days working at Walmart and evenings working for no pay at the church. Or people who teach Sunday School or run daycares for no pay. Or stay-at-home moms and dads. Or the thousands of volunteers throughout our society that do their volunteer work on top of or instead of a salaried career job.

These can all be strong callings from God. They can all have strong tie-ins with someone’s spiritual gifts, talents, and passions. So careers aren’t always the main ways we answer God’s calling in our lives.

Question: How can the educational process help people consider and prepare for possible avocations in their callings?

For Nov. 1, write 1.5 – 3.0 pages on your view of calling and work.

**View of calling/work (20 points)**

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| Developing5 | Competent 15 | Exemplary 20 |
| Paper shows limited awareness of the issues presented by the interaction of education and one’s calling. | Paper shows emerging awareness of the issues presented in the biblical concept of calling and emerging ability to present a coherent view of how education is involved in a student’s life calling.  | Presents a coherent view of the role of divine calling (vocation and avocation) in education. Presents a biblical perspective on the role of education in helping to form a student’s life calling.  |
| The best papers—drawing on the course textbooks and different philosophies studied—address both vocation and avocation (or other ways of addressing preparation for life) and education’s role in these. Excellent papers provide specific examples or metaphors to illustrate the role of education in one’s life. Excellent papers explain how a view of calling and work relate to one’s overall worldview and address briefly how the view of calling relates to other components of a philosophy of education. For example, excellent papers may address the sense of calling felt by the teacher and how that can relate to strengthening a sense of educational purpose for teacher and student alike.  |