

Toward a Vision of Vocation

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American higher education is in the midst of profound challenge and transformation.¹ The cost of pursuing a college degree continues to increase by leaps and bounds as students assume enormous student loan debt.² Not long ago a college education almost guaranteed some measure of financial success and career stability, but those days seem long gone. Some wonder if the days of traditional classroom teaching and learning are over as well, as sweeping technological change, especially online instruction, is now forcing colleges and universities to reenvision how they can offer course content to students.³ These issues are by no means the only signs that the academy is experiencing change and stress.

Amid these challenges is growing confusion about what colleges and universities are supposed to do in the first place. Should they be primarily devoted to preparing their graduates to enter the workforce? Should they at the same time advance research across the disciplines in ways that expand the frontiers of knowledge? Should they seek to form their

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students intellectually, morally, and even spiritually while preparing them for responsible citizenship and civic engagement? Should they also be the places where passionate sports fans gather in grand arenas and stadiums to watch athletes pursue victory? The answer seems to be a resounding “yes” to all of these; with so many competing expectations from so many constituencies, however, the contemporary academy seems to be suffering an *identity* crisis, or perhaps something akin to cognitive dissonance. It is becoming increasingly difficult for colleges and universities to navigate these challenges.

Christian higher education in the twenty-first century is by no means immune from these difficulties. Even as colleges and universities point to mission statements steeped in the theological tradition of their founders, clarity of identity and purpose do not always follow. Still, there are things that Christian colleges and universities can do to help themselves better understand and lead from their mission, even as they navigate the challenges of the present. One of the essential things they can do is foster a *vision of vocation* whereby the goals and purposes of teaching, learning, research, and the like are motivated by and oriented toward a divine calling. In what follows, I explore three questions that may help illuminate what the phrase “vision of vocation” suggests. First, how might vocation be described as a summons from God, a calling that makes claims upon those who are called and yet promises them ultimate blessing? Second, how might the project of Christian higher learning be described in a way that captures well this commitment to vocation? Third, what practical efforts can colleges and universities make to cultivate a vision of vocation?

A VISION OF VOCATION

In my view, the most helpful and insightful single essay on vocation was written by A.J. Conyers. Entitled “The Meaning of Vocation,” Conyers’s essay is both an attempt to rescue the notion of vocation from some religious and secular misunderstandings and an effort to reimagine the notion of “calling” in an authentically Christian way.⁴ Conyers’s essay is steeped in theological and biblical insight; it is, likewise, a graceful articulation of vocation that suggests how calling is most fundamentally a summons from God requiring obedience from those who hear the call yet promising ultimate blessing. For all those reasons, Conyers’s essay is a rich resource for those seeking a clear, compelling, and faithful account of vocation.

Conyers sees the notion of vocation as particularly vulnerable to misunderstanding. On one hand, vocation seen through the lens of monastic life implies that calling pertains only to those who hear and respond to the divine summons to religious life. Those who become priests, pastors, and the like are the only ones for whom the notion of vocation applies. On the other hand, Luther and other Protestant Reformers tried to reorient vocation to apply to everyone. The effect was to broaden the notion of calling beyond religious life; the unforeseen consequence, however, was to make vocation more about being called into particular occupations—even bakers, boot makers, and farmers could be “called.” These two misunderstandings obscure a more powerful conception of vocation. Vocation does indeed matter to everyone, but it is much more than being called into a particular task or job. Being called is, as Conyers puts it, “life affirming.”⁵ Rooted in the Latin *vocatio*, vocation is a call, summons, or invitation to an entire life of faithfulness. The church, comprised of those who are “called out” both individually and collectively, expresses concretely the way that God speaks and God’s people respond. This conception of vocation leaves room for meaningful talk about how God calls people to service in particular times and particular roles, but it also affirms the view that God invites all of his people to follow the leading of God to lives of purpose, meaning, and fidelity.

The meaning of vocation, Conyers goes on to explain, must be dislodged from several Enlightenment assumptions that twist its true meaning. Toward this end, Conyers offers four corrective statements about the meaning of vocation that are worthy of reflection.

First, being called implies an agent outside of the one who is subject to the call. A calling implies a caller; a calling cannot come from nowhere or no one. Such an understanding of summons and response does not in the least undermine freedom, though it certainly challenges the modern conception of freedom as merely “freedom from.” As Conyers puts it, a Christian conception of freedom “is not an inner-directed impulse, but the use of the will to respond to an unforeseen and perhaps unknown reality.”⁶ The biblical tradition is replete with examples of such callings. Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Hannah, Mary, and Paul among many others are summoned by one who calls them into fullness of life.

Second, vocation is often against the will of the one who is called. Reflection on the biblical tradition again reveals that callings are often not what those who are called always wish for or want. The example of Jeremiah is powerful. Not only did Jeremiah struggle with God’s

summons to be a prophet to the nations (he thought himself too young and without words to speak), he likewise complained that the wicked, whom he has been called to rebuke, seemed to prosper while God's calling on his life had rendered him like a lamb being led to slaughter. Yet, God's calling remained. The summons was clear, though it conflicted with Jeremiah's own will. Conyers maintains that modern conceptions of reason do not account well for this kind of "contrary to the will" summons. For Kant and other Enlightenment figures, the guide of human action is not an external source (a law given by God or the state) but reason, an internal source of normativity that legislates with universal necessity what is to be done. As Conyers explains, "While vocation contradicts the will of the person being called, reason is the instrument by which the modern person thought his will could be enforced."⁷

Third, calling frequently involves great difficulties that must be overcome if the summons is to be answered. Vocation perhaps is too often idealized; the hard truth is that answering a calling can involve risk, injury, and even death. Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Paul, and a host of Christian martyrs answered God's calling even as they realized the threat and reality of losing their lives. As Conyers points out, the life and ministry of Jesus is the most profound example of how vocation makes incredible demands on those who are called, for it is Jesus, willing to die for the sake of all others, who likewise asks his followers to take up their own crosses and follow him.

Finally, vocation is made difficult not simply because those who answer may encounter great struggle but because those who seek to follow their vocation must be ever on guard to becoming diverted or distracted from achieving the task set before them. Following one's vocation, Conyers explains, is fraught with opportunities to lose one's way, to become disillusioned, to succumb to temptation. Jesus's prayer "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," expresses the deep truth that following the summons of God may well be full of twists and turns—obstacles and distractions encountered along the way, some of our making.

These four features of a Christian inspired conception of vocation challenge the view that callings emanate from no one in particular, make few claims upon the called, and are easy to discern and follow. Nothing could be further from the truth. For those who seek to cultivate a culture of authentic vocation, a right understanding of calling is required.

Yet there is another aspect of Conyers's treatment of vocation that is particularly insightful. Beginning in the New Testament, the notion of vocation makes a key transition. While Old Testament figures respond to the call of God, their response is also toward a covenant nation. In the New Testament, those who respond to God's summons are called to an entirely new kind of community, one that is above and beyond any particular historical nation and one that resists the divisions of race, creed, color, and the like.

More importantly, as Conyers describes it, Christian vocation does not trade in the legacies of the past but in the hope-filled promise of the future. For Christians, Jesus's life, death, and resurrection call them toward a new destiny—namely, to become a part of the redemptive and reconciling work of Christ. While our eternal goal is fixed, it would be a mistake to envision vocation as something akin to having a roadmap or travel itinerary always before us, charting each move we need to make as we live our lives. Here is the power and indeed the mystery of God's calling and a brute fact that any Christian vision of vocation must embrace: as Conyers puts it, "vocation is something that happens to us. It is an experience. Its truth is captured in the words 'we are his workmanship'" (Eph 2:5, 10 RSV).

FAITH *ANIMATING* LEARNING

Conyers's effort to disentangle vocation from various modern assumptions helps to show the mystery and power of a distinctively Christian account of calling. Now allow me to focus on an image that Conyers employs to envision how, as he puts it, vocation "happens to us." I find Conyers's image powerfully suggestive of how the project of Christian higher education might be described, especially when it is practiced through a faithful vision of vocation. Conyers writes:

We might think of Jesus' raising of Lazarus as a rich image of the deepest meaning of vocation. Lazarus is not merely healed, but raised from the dead. From the isolation of death, he is called by Christ's powerful voice to the community of the living. His grave clothes, in which he is bound, are loosed and he is made free to respond as one living before God and in the power of God. Each of us is so called. Vocation, *vocatio*, is about being raised from the dead, made alive to the reality that we do not merely exist, but we are "called forth" to a divine purpose.⁸

Simply put, Lazarus is more than healed. He is brought back from the dead. But he also is more than “no longer dead.” He is remade, his whole being repurposed to respond to God’s calling, free to live out the summons that God has voiced through Christ. When Jesus tells Lazarus to come forth, to be alive again, it is toward something grander and fuller than just living. Lazarus is called to fulfill his God-given vocation, to realize the summons to be as he truly ought to be. Lazarus is quite literally *animated* by faith. The calling of God summons each of us toward new life.

The example of Lazarus, which Conyers so strikingly frames, suggests a different way of describing the task of Christian colleges and universities, especially when the project of Christian learning is envisioned through this account of vocation. Very often, the task of Christian higher education—which includes the wide scope of teaching, learning, research, mentoring, and student life—is described as the “integration of faith and learning.” As Perry Glanzer observes, the exact origins of the phrase are difficult to trace, though Arthur Holmes and other influential Christian scholars used the term so often and with such great effect that it has become a foundational phrase in the vocabulary of the Christian academy, perhaps especially at Protestant institutions.⁹ The image of the resurrected Lazarus, however, points helpfully to an alternative way of describing the task of Christian higher education. Beyond integration, faith actually *animates* the sacred task of learning. Put differently, when a vision of Christian vocation is embraced, the appropriate response to the divine summons is an expression of profound faith. When such a response is offered, those who are “called” are transformed. Vocation thus gives life to all we are, imagine, and do. Likewise, a vision of vocation, when cultivated in the context of Christian higher education, animates learning.

There are three advantages, I believe, in adopting this way of describing the project of Christian higher learning. First and foremost, *faith animating learning* envisions faith as the motivating force of learning; in Aristotelian terms, faith is the efficient cause. As such, faith inspires, directs, and moves the effort to seek knowledge, grasp truth, and cultivate wisdom. In this way, faith is not just one side of the conjunction “and,” as in faith and learning, faith and work, faith and science, faith and economics, faith and politics, and so on. Nor is faith one category among others. It is at the heart of the mission of Christian

higher learning, not a mere add-on or something to be imported so as to provide the effect of “baptizing” whatever it is linked to. The language of the integration of faith and learning does not accurately capture the primacy of faith.

Second, the notion of *faith animating learning* better captures both the challenge and promise of distinctively Christian learning. Consider, as an example, Jesus’s injunction to “‘Love the Lord your God with *all* your heart and with *all* your soul and with *all* your strength and with *all* your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Luke 10:27, NIV). Jesus’s words commend to his followers the necessity of total commitment. The summons to love God and neighbor is not taken up in a half-hearted way or according to terms that we negotiate with God. Likewise, when faith truly animates the pursuit of learning, it ought to engage the entire range of capacities that are a part of one’s questioning, knowing, and understanding, including even one’s emotional capacities, which are an important part of our perception. As Aristotle puts it, humans desire to know. When faith animates, the calling of God reorients our path and purposes and similarly renews us in heart, soul, strength, and mind. In this respect, the notion of faith animating learning may avoid simplistic accounts of the relationship between Christian faith, teaching, learning, and scholarship. If faith can motivate learning in the all-embracing way that the image of Lazarus suggests, it is likely inadequate to claim that the defining characteristic of a Christian college or university is that its faculty are attentive and kind to students during office hours or that such faculty may freely quote biblical passages during lectures. Both of these things are doubtlessly important, yet they do not go far enough.

Third, in a world in which fragmentation reigns, the language of *faith animating learning* captures in a more complete way the theology of a Christian institution of higher learning. While the contemporary academy is often described as a “multiversity” where fragmentation abounds and the various disciplines lack a common language with which to speak to one another, Christians have a special reason to resist this trend.¹⁰ The reason that Christian teachers and scholars might realize relationships among their subjects is not simply a matter of referring to themselves as Christian economists or Christian sociologists or anything else. Instead, the reason is ontological in nature, built into the fabric of a Christian conception of reality. If faith is the very wellspring of all teaching and learning (i.e., if God is the creative source of all goodness, truth, and beauty), then each academic discipline, as it seeks to discover that source

of truth, will in some way find relation to other lines of inquiry that seek the same end.¹¹ Indeed, if faith truly animates learning, there will be no part of a Christian college or university that is not an expression, each in its own way, of a vision of vocation, each revealing an aspect of the Divine.

CULTIVATING A VISION OF VOCATION

And yet the practical question remains: how might a vision of vocation be fostered so that it serves as a counterbalance to some of the present challenges facing Christian institutions of higher learning? How might the notion of faith animating learning function as more than a rhetorical device but as an apt description of the practices that sustain the lives of colleges and universities with a Christian identity? Allow me in closing to describe briefly one such project that now thrives at Baylor University.

In 2009, a discussion began at Baylor about how to encourage graduate students—particularly those seeking doctoral degrees—to think in broad and constructive ways about their faith commitments and their emerging vocations as teachers and scholars. The editors of the present volume led the discussion among several of us who began to think in these directions.

The centrality of Christian vocation was foundational in our initial discussion. We realized the powerful ways that graduate education, by its very nature as a training in academic specialization, often works against the kind of broader formation that we were hoping to support. I remember distinctly an early conversation that I had with Jenny Howell in which we agreed that the notion of a *practice* was key. No effort of formation, no attempt to deepen the theological understanding of vocation, could flourish absent some set of activities that intentionally tried to shape what people ought to care about most. A successful program already existed at Baylor for undergraduate students that had the overall shape we thought might work for graduate students.¹² What if we gathered a small group of students who cared about extending their understanding of their Christian vocation as emerging teachers, scholars, and researchers? What if we enlisted the help of talented and accomplished faculty mentors who were willing to host dinners at their homes and lead discussions around engaging readings that would lead to further reflection and conversations? After not much deliberation, we created

a program that would be codirected by Baylor's Graduate School and Institute for Faith and Learning. But we needed to name the program.

That choice was easy. A.J. Conyers (1944–2004) had been a founding faculty member at Baylor's George W. Truett Theological Seminary. A beloved teacher whom students described as gentle, gracious, kind, yet challenging, Conyers and his theological writings were well-known and appreciated by a wide audience in both the academy and the church. He was a scholar whose writing resisted easy categories. He thought deeply, rooted in ancient texts and traditions.¹³ Moreover, he loved the church and poured into its future by pouring into his seminary students. He himself was a powerful preacher.

With a small cohort of twelve doctoral students representing the disciplines of philosophy, religion, and English, the Conyers Graduate Scholars Program met for the first time in September 2010. In addition to faculty leaders, we included a local pastor to explore the importance of the relationship between the church and the academy. Nearly seven years later, the Conyers Scholars Program has blossomed into two cohorts, four leaders, and a diverse group of students from across the disciplines. Students in history and political theory are routinely joined by engineering students, chemists, and sociologists. Though there has been some variation in the reading selections over the years, one reading is a constant. Conyers's essay on "The Meaning of Vocation" is the first reading discussed with each new cohort.

The program has been remarkably successful. Its influence is palpable in the essays in this volume. The authors were shaped by their experiences as a Conyers Scholar. They read together. They discussed. They sometimes disagreed and challenged one another about very important matters, some intellectual, some theological, some having to do with matters of pedagogy. Yet they gathered around the table of fellowship and broke bread. They prayed for one another often. They have become not only colleagues but also friends. These various practices have nurtured a shared vision of vocation. Future academic leaders are being prepared in a significant way to steward the cause of Christian higher learning in the coming decades. This seems precisely the response that is needed in the present moment. In an age abounding with mission drift and institutional identity crises, the best response is to prepare those who will one day teach students, write books, and lead departments, programs, and entire institutions by nurturing in them a vision of vocation.

From the beginning, Conyers Scholars and their leaders have grasped the importance of educating for wisdom. I have in mind here the effort to engage fundamental questions of human meaning in a way that transcends technical learning, or credentialing, or other instrumentalist accounts of education. An education that cultivates wisdom—not mere knowledge—extends the horizon and reach of students, initiating them into a lifelong pursuit of excellence, helping them to make sense of who they are and should become.

Yet the Conyers Scholars and their leaders also have grasped the unique way that educating for wisdom might be pursued from the perspective of the Christian faith. Put simply, Christians embrace the idea that educating for wisdom is, at its core, a matter of seeking divine wisdom; seeking divine wisdom does not depend on the working of human reason alone. As Thomas Aquinas explained in the very first question of his *Summa Theologica*, it is necessary for human salvation that there should be a knowledge that is revealed by God instead of by reason.¹⁴

The Christian faith is deeply steeped, of course, in the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament, where the imagination of the good life extends to what orthodox Jews would call “the life to come.” The book of Proverbs, most notably, is a sustained message about the necessity of discerning and following the wisdom of God and how those who do will find happiness.¹⁵ Divine wisdom brings human beings a more distinct awareness of how God is not only manifest in all of creation but also of the particular ways that God calls each person to faithfulness. Such wisdom can never come from sheer intellectual effort alone because it surpasses what can ever be grasped through the power of cognition. This is not to say that reason plays no role in the discernment of divine wisdom. Rather, grace perfects reason, revealing a transcendent source of guidance that outstrips the powers of human understanding.

Educating for wisdom, from a Christian perspective, is inherently vocational. The divine wisdom we seek to understand and follow is the summons from God to flourish, to be the people that God intends us to be. Against the backdrop of contemporary higher education, nothing is more vital than preparing Christian teachers and scholars whose faith can animate all they do, whose vision is ever alive to the reality of vocation.

NOTES

1. Among recent books that lament the present state of higher education are: Derek Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006); Harry Lewis, *Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education* (New York: Public Affairs, 2006); William G. Bowen, Matthew M. Chingos, and Michael S. McPherson, *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
2. Glenn Harlan Reynolds, "Degrees of Value: Making College Pay Off: For Too Many Americans, College Today Isn't Worth It," *The Wall Street Journal* (15 January 2014), <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303870704579298302637802002?mg=reno64-wsj&url=http%3A%2F%2Fonline.wsj.com%2Farticle%2FSB10001424052702303870704579298302637802002.html> (Accessed 21 December 2016).
3. See William G. Bowen, *Higher Education in the Digital Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013) and Jeffrey J. Selinger, *College Unbound: The Future of Higher Education and What It Means for Students* (New York: Amazon Publishing, 2013).
4. A.J. Conyers, "The Meaning of Vocation," *Christian Reflection: Vocation* (2004): 11–19.
5. *Ibid.*, 12.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 13.
8. *Ibid.*, 18.
9. Perry L. Glanzer, "Why We Should Discard 'the Integration of Faith and Learning': Rearticulating the Mission of the Christian Scholar," *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 12.1 (2008): 42.
10. Wendell Berry, "The Loss of the University," in *Home Economics* (New York: North Point Press, 1987), 76–97.
11. A colleague of mine in Electrical Engineering frequently teaches a course on solar energy in an especially interesting way. Besides teaching principles and applications in electrical engineering, he also encourages students to reflect about matters involving God's creation, human consumption, and conservation, Christian views of stewardship, and so on. These questions seek engagement with other academic disciplines, including theology, philosophy, economics, and environmental science.

12. Named in honor of William Carey Crane, the fourth president of Baylor, the Crane Scholars Program is an intensive program for Baylor undergraduates sponsored by the Institute for Faith and Learning that encourages and supports gifted students who are interested in the connections between faith and reason. The program seeks to identify and mentor students who are considering graduate school and careers in academic life in particular, though not all Crane Scholars pursue a vocation in the academy.
13. I am grateful to my friend Rev. Dr. Jeff Raines for his reflections on Conyers. Dr. Raines was a member of the first graduating class of Baylor's George W. Truett Theological Seminary in 1997.
14. *Summa Theologica* I, Q.1, Art.1.
15. Prov 3:13 (NKJV).



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