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Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life (Book Review)

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Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life by Douglas J. Schuurman. Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 2004. 204 pp. Reviewed by Dr. Carl E. Zylstra, President of Dordt College.

One of the best things to be said for Douglas Schuurman's exposition of vocation is that it ought to be mandatory reading both for those who have dismissed the classical notion of vocation or calling and for those who have recently joined the bandwagon of a renewed interest in the topic.

Schuurman simply takes us back to the Bible and to the Reformers. Clarifying the biblical concepts and the sixteenth-century Reformation's understanding of that biblical teaching, the author attempts to help both skeptics and enthusiasts confront the central issues surrounding the concept of vocation. He does a great job.

His central thesis becomes clear already in the introduction. All of us have a calling. We discern that calling as we explore life out of the perspective of our faith. Our calling will show up in all relationships and tasks in life. Indeed, not just paid work but all occupations (all legitimate activities that truly occupy us) are aspects of our vocation. And we must exercise those vocations under accountability to the God who calls, acting responsibly toward the accountability structures he has built into our world and that therefore exercise legitimate authority over each varied dimension of our vocation.

As a scholar working out of the Reformed tradition, Schuurman is liberal with his quotes from Calvinist authors, starting with Calvin himself and continuing through Barth, Gustafson, Wolterstorff, and Plantinga. As a professor working in the Lutheran tradition at St. Olaf, Schuurman also deals extensively with Luther's own perspective on calling.

In fact, one of my own difficulties with the book is that the author seems to be trying a little too hard to make Luther and Calvin sound as if they're saying the same thing on this subject. It certainly is true that in contrast to both the reigning Roman view of the sixteenth century and the Anabaptist reaction against it, Luther and Calvin were pretty much on a common path. It might have been helpful, however, for the author to have highlighted more explicitly the contrast between Luther's incarnational view of calling (what would Jesus have me do) and Calvin's cosmic accents (what command has been given me by the exalted Christ). But perhaps this is only somewhat of a quibble. Schuurman provides plenty of quotes and original citations; readers really can discern these differences in accent on their own.

At the same time, the strength of this volume is its

unrelenting attack on both the liberal protestant abandonment of the whole concept of divine calling and the evangelical spiritualizing of a sense of calling into little more than a divine warrant for internal aspirations and desires.

For instance, readers may be somewhat taken aback by the author's strong insistence on calling being exercised within authority structures. According to Schuurman, a biblical sense of calling never can become a validation for individualistic self-assertion. Quite the contrary, calling occurs in community and can never be regarded as valid unless the called one carries out that calling within the parameters of the divinely established authority structures. And since the author submits that all tasks in life are part of our calling, that means that in whatever aspect of life I am engaged, from professor to mechanic to father to wife, I have the responsibility to live that calling within norms established by others – a concept with tremendous implications for everything from the organizational structure of institutions to the definition of social structures such as marriage.

Another significant quality of this tome is the author's careful "pastoral" sensitivity to potential abuses and distortions of the principles of calling. While affirming the principle that callings are exercised within what were always construed as hierarchical authority structures, Schuurman takes pains to ensure that this principle is never understood as an excuse for power domination. In fact, the genius of his very deliberate approach is that Schuurman manages to qualify and nuance the core of the matter in a way that does not vitiate its essential principle. Every aspect of calling both carries authority and is under authority. Yet at every stage of the hierarchy the exercise of that call remains under the normativity of the Lord who has issued the call in love.

In fact, perhaps it is exactly Schuurman's efforts to blend Luther and Calvin that results in this exceptionally balanced, yet confidently assertive resurrection of an old yet still critical concept. Calvinists have often been bold in their assertion of the principle of call. R.H. Tawney's treatment of the so-called Weber Hypothesis remains uncomfortably on target for those of us from that tradition. Admittedly, Calvinists historically have tended toward a triumphalistic aggressiveness in asserting their own call and authority. By contrast, Luther's personalistic sensitivity to the service of the Christ who is close at hand may have been overly deferential to those who wielded the other

sword of sometimes competing authority. There is a reason, after all, why Calvin's view of office and calling led to restructuring of governments while Luther's view led to the suppression of the Peasants Revolt. At the same time, it may just be that Schuurman's attempt to blend the two strands has resulted in a tour de force that will embolden both traditions to regain confidence in the primacy of "calling" that is their common heritage.

In the end, there really is little to criticize in Schuurman's presentation. One may disagree with his conclusions, but the author's careful biblical, theological study set in the context of contemporary confusion over "vocation" should be able to enlighten any reader who wants to struggle with the contemporary implications of this age old issue.

Personally, I am convinced that the outlines of this volume should be particularly helpful to contemporary Christian college and university educators. It's clear to me that one reason Christian youth continue to seek out Christ-centered higher education is because they really do want to discern not only "What Would Jesus Do" but, more specifically, "What does Jesus want me to do" in and through my life.

In the case of the college where I serve, we have organized our general-education curriculum largely around that theme. Both the mandatory first-year and

mandatory senior-year general-education courses revolve around the concept of calling. Yet while we have discerned a general need to tackle the issue, we haven't always been able to find good guides for understanding the concept of "calling" in a biblical context. This book should help fill that void.

In fact, perhaps the author—himself a bridge between the Calvinist and Lutheran traditions—could also serve as a catalyst for bringing together the insights of both of these venerable educational traditions. For as Schuurman makes clear, the greater need and crisis is not among those who have slightly faulty views of "calling" but among those whose lives are collapsing within the vacuum that results when the concept of vocation is lost altogether.

Overall, this book should serve admirably to stimulate and illumine the thoughts of anyone who believes, as did the Puritan Thomas Case, that "Reformation must be universal[;]. . . reform all places, all persons and callings; reform the benches of judgment, the inferior magistrates. . . .Reform the universities, reform the cities, reform the countries, reform inferior schools of learning, reform the Sabbath, reform the ordinances, the worship of God. . . you have more work to do than I can speak" (qtd. in *Vocation* 51).