Finding Your Path

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Abstract
Each of us has a desire to do good, fulfilling work. How do we find this work? Do we discover it or is it something we create for ourselves? If we believe there is a particular area in which we should work, then work decisions can become even more burdensome. Since there are so many areas in which we could work, and many more we may not even know about, how do we know if we have chosen the right path? These questions are particularly acute for college students. From first-year students through seniors, some aspect of their journey toward the working world looms.

Keywords
work, college students, occupations, Martin Luther, John Calvin

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Finding Your Path
Michael Foster¹ and Justin Vander Werff²

Introduction

Each of us has a desire to do good, fulfilling work. How do we find this work? Do we discover it
or is it something we create for ourselves? If we believe there is a particular area in which we
should work, then work decisions can become even more burdensome. Since there are so many
areas in which we could work, and many more we may not even know about, how do we know if
we have chosen the right path?

These questions are particularly acute for college students. From first-year students through
seniors, some aspect of their journey toward the working world looms.

- First-year students: Which major should I pursue? If I fail a class, what do I do (or not
do) next? What if I find I don’t like the classes I’m taking, but I’m already a couple
semesters in?
- Sophomores and Juniors: What aspect of engineering should I focus on? What should my
concentration be? Where should I get an internship? Can I get an internship?
- Seniors: What do I want to do? Should I take a job near college/home/friends/etc.? How
choosy can I afford to be about which job I pursue? What if I’m burnt out and do not
want to do this any more? If I do something different now/later, will these past few years
have been a waste?

Students are not the only ones asking these questions; engineers in the academy and industry
may ask similar questions about what their work should look like in the future.

- Faculty members: Should I maintain a full schedule of teaching/research or should I
move partially or completely to administration? Should/Can I move to a new research
area? Should I consider accepting a new class prep? In which university or non-university
service activities should I participate? Should I consider working at another institution?
- Industry professionals: Should I continue pursuing this work or should I look to move
into something else? If I want to make a move, should I do it within the same company or
look at other opportunities elsewhere? What is the value of my work? Should I pursue
something with higher value?

These questions typically arise when people lack clarity about the meaning for their lives. If our
mission, our focus, is known, then the opportunities and challenges that come before us can more
easily (though maybe not simply) be put into perspective. The purpose of wading through
difficult challenges is for a greater end.

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The question that therefore arises is how do we achieve this clarity---can we determine what work we are to do, and if so, how? We propose that primary principles related to the search for our work include striving for biblical obedience; seeking to discern how our passion, calling, and skill development mesh; and finding an avenue of service that meets a legitimate need. In this paper we seek to review the main tenets of “how should I choose what to do” or “what should I do” advice to determine if they work in concert with each other, or if they can only be followed exclusively. As we conclude, we will provide some mentoring guidelines for helping others (and yourself!) find good and fulfilling work.

**Approaches to Work**

*Modernity: Approaches to Finding Work*

When looking for ways to approach thinking about the choice of a career path, two options quickly come to mind: passion and calling. A third, the craftsman approach, has more recently been highlighted by Cal Newport in the book *So Good They Can’t Ignore You*. In this section we seek to briefly summarize each approach.

The passion approach was most likely popularized by the book *What Color is Your Parachute?*, which came out in 1970 and has over six million copies in print. It prompted people to “Follow your passion.” It reasoned that if you are going to do something for the next several years (more than 40 years for college graduates), then you should pursue something that you will enjoy doing. Once you figure out what you enjoy doing, you can focus your job search to areas that will provide you the greatest happiness.

While the passion approach is much more inward oriented (what do I like?), the calling approach is more outward focused (what does God want me to do?). The calling approach presupposes that each person has a unique calling from God. For some this could mean a specific job. For others, understanding God’s calling means they recognize their design and then can look for jobs that they will fit. While there are different ways of finding and interpreting your calling, the result is expected to be the same---fulfillment will come once I am doing what God wants me to do.

For the craftsman approach, the core idea is that “Working right trumps finding the right work.” Newport describes how workers can look at existing needs in society and then pursue the skills necessary to meet one of those needs. In addition, to create a fulfilling work experience, the skills chosen should be rare and valuable. These “special” skills allow the worker to build career capital, which can then be exchanged to craft a fulfilling work experience. An example of a key exchange would be for opportunities to pursue a compelling mission in the field you have chosen. Since you have spent significant obtaining rare and valuable skills in a field, you are able
to see what lies at the edges of knowledge in that field, the “adjacent possible,” which Newport claims is where compelling missions come from.

Antiquity: The Value of Work and Approaches to Finding Work

We have touched briefly on the idea of work as calling. This idea is certainly not new, and often the term “vocation” is used to refer to work in this regard. Two of the most prominent figures in the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther and John Calvin, taught strongly vocational views of work. Both Luther and Calvin formulated their concepts of vocation largely in response to the dualistic mindset that came from the Greeks. The Greek belief system clearly devalued physical aspects of the creation such as body and materials as opposed to spiritual aspects such as soul and the afterlife. Consequently, daily work that deals with physical realities was viewed as much lower and more menial than religious contemplation and meditation. The Christian manifestation of this belief system was that pietistic pastimes such as priesthood and monasticism were far more valuable than occupations such as farming or artisanship. Many in our current society, including many Christians, still view work through a lens clouded by this worldview.

However, both Luther and Calvin articulated viewpoints of work that contrasted starkly with such a dualistic framework. Luther reportedly “declared that a father washing diapers pleases God,”2 clearly offering an illustration of the meaning of physical labor. Luther viewed our particular vocation as “the specific call to love one’s neighbor which comes to us through the duties which attach to our social place or ‘station.’”3 While he drew a distinction between the kingdom of heaven (loving God) and the kingdom of earth (loving neighbor), he felt strongly that work in the earthly kingdom is a divine vocation. In fact, Luther wrote that “all the duties of Christians, such as loving one’s wife, rearing one’s children, governing one’s family, obeying the magistrate, etc., … are fruits of the Spirit.”4

Calvin strongly articulated the value of work, wholeheartedly agreeing with the worth Luther gave to our daily activities. In his Institutes of the Christian Religion, Calvin claims, “no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God’s sight.”5 In his commentary on the Gospels, taking particular aim at those who he felt severely distorted Jesus’ criticism of Martha in Luke 10:38-42, Calvin writes, “[W]e know that men were created for the express purpose of being employed in labour of various kinds, and that no sacrifice is more pleasing to God than when every man applies diligently to his own calling, and endeavors to live in such a manner as to contribute to the general advantage.”6

Puritan thinkers such as John Cotton, Thomas Gataker, and William Perkins followed closely in Calvin’s footsteps by continuing to articulate the inherent value of work. In fact, in Perkins’ “A Treatise of the Vocations,” a discourse based on 1 Cor. 7:20, we find ideas that in many ways are parallel to the contemporary approaches of passion, craftsman, and calling that we have
highlighted above. Perkins, a Puritan minister in England around the turn of the 17th century, taught that as Christians we have a general calling to be a child of God and to be a witness for Christ, but we also have a personal calling which is “the execution of some particular office arising from that distinction which God makes between man and man in every society.”

Perkins strongly articulated the calling of the layperson to do work, not simply to survive and provide means but to serve a purpose and make a difference. He writes, “It is a miserable and damnable estate for those who, being enriched with great livings and revenues, spend their days in eating and drinking, in sports and pastimes, not employing themselves in service for Church or Commonwealth.”

(To clarify, what Perkins means by “in service to the Commonwealth” is what we would consider normal vocations that advance society and provide goods and services to the general public.) Isn’t it remarkable that already in the 1600s, in a time when subsistence living was much more the norm than in our current society, Perkins so clearly recognized the biblical mandate of calling in work and the inherent value of work?

Perkins even provided insight on how to choose a particular calling. He taught that an appropriate calling will be one that touches the person’s affection (the passion approach) and one that matches the person’s gifts (the craftsman approach). Focusing on these two aspects will help us find God’s calling for us personally. Perkins pointed out many biblical examples of how God calls us to particular vocational tasks, including Adam’s task of tending the Garden (Gen 2:15), Moses’ call to lead Israel, Philip’s call to be an evangelist (Acts 8:26), and the apostles’ call by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28). He taught that carefully examining one’s affections and gifts will lead us to discern God’s particular calling for us.

*Integrating the Approaches*

As Christians, there may be an assumption that we must default to the calling approach. Unfortunately, many people have been stumped trying to figure out what God wants them to do. To remedy this, they find moving to the passion approach helpful after considering Psalm 37:4, "Delight yourself in The Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." Assuming the passion or excitement we have toward something to be arising from the "desires of [our] heart" we may find ourselves moving into our area of calling. Finally, if the other two approaches cause frustration, the craftsman approach can seem like a last ditch effort as you craft your own career, building up career capital to eventually exchange for a fulfilling work experience. In this approach, if we can develop rare and valuable skills, we may be able to develop (or find) a mission at the "adjacent possible."

Digging deeper, we seek to find if these approaches are somehow parts of a whole, which seems to be in line with Perkins’ ideas from a few hundred years ago. Can each of the approaches described above actually come together to create a better whole than the parts?
Of the three approaches, only Calling has an aspect of looking at the past. (Passion looks at what I like right now and Craftsman purports that I can craft a career of my choosing.) In his book *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer admonishes the reader to consider what things have grabbed his or her attention in the past.⁹ What activities have you been involved with or what events have occurred that have shaped who you are? However, be careful to not let any aspect of your life dominate in isolation of the other parts. Be sure to consider vocations that would integrate the different highlights that you have noted. Let these answers help direct you in making decisions about the opportunities being offered to you right now.

Next, you must commit to starting your chosen work. It does not have to be a "right" path, which we will discuss more below. But, be aware that a desire to get it right the first time may creep in. Boldly and courageously move forward in your decision. Once you have made that crucial decision to start, commit to the work of deliberate practice that will make you "so good you can't be ignored." Acknowledge and keep a record of the career capital that you are gaining as you grow in your work. Be sure to also acknowledge the value you are providing to your work. As you continue on this journey, remember that you have only started, you are not committed indefinitely to this specific path. You can always move to something else, but you will probably need to build up career capital before you can expect valuable returns.

Now that you have looked to the past to see where you can start, committed to an initial path, and built some career capital, you may expect to begin feeling a passion for your work. Because of the initial work you did in reviewing significant aspects of your past, your work may already have some meaning to you. Spending the time in deliberate practice, you have become more of an expert and may be able to see more of the nuances of your work and are able to adjust the focus of your pursuits to better achieve a meaningful mission, which just might turn out to be the calling that God has for you after all.

**A Biblical Approach to Finding Work**

We propose that a balanced biblical approach to finding work will recognize that passion, skills, and calling are all involved in discerning God’s direction for our vocation. If we eliminate passion from the equation, we neglect biblical principles such as delight (Ps. 37:4) and contentment (1 Tim. 6:6). If we downplay skills, we neglect the biblical principles of God-given talents and abilities (Matt. 25:14-21, 1 Cor. 12). If we ignore work as a calling from God, we completely miss the holistic nature of our Christian walk and the all-encompassing effect that Christ’s salvation and the Spirit’s work should have on our daily walk.

It is interesting to note that, after considering modern approaches to choosing a career and looking back at approaches from antiquity, what we have surmised as a biblical approach, holistically integrating these ideas, looks very similar to what Perkins wrote in 1605.⁷ Perkins began with the biblical foundation of work as a calling from God, and then he applied the
biblical principles of delight and talent to conclude that these two personal facets should both be used to discern God’s particular calling for our lives. But perhaps this similarity to our three-fold approach of integrating passion, skills, and calling should not be surprising. Although our 21st-century culture (and work within our culture) is considerably different than in Perkins’ time, God’s call to glorify him and love our neighbor by diligently stewarding his creation remains unchanged. Faithfulness to his mandate, and the biblical principles that guide us in what this obedience looks like, should look similar as well.

*Guidelines for Mentoring Students*

We now propose some guidelines in mentoring others in a biblical approach to choosing a vocation. For those of us who regularly mentor college students, it seems that students just beginning college in particular should be encouraged to recognize work as calling, given that this understanding of work seems to be quite counter-cultural. If a student’s primary motive in choosing a particular field of study is that it is a route to a “cushy job” and “easy money,” we want to redirect this student as soon as possible! This student needs a more holistic understanding of work to make a wise decision. Recognizing the tendency of our students to not have a holistic vocational perspective, it seems appropriate during the first year or two of college to require readings and reflections on a biblical understanding of vocation to help nurture students in this direction. In addition, employing the resources of the campus career center can help students process their personality, values, skills, and interests they have demonstrated in the past and how those might direct where their calling may lie.

As students develop an understanding of biblical vocation and continue to progress in a curriculum, then it will be helpful to guide their focus towards how their passions and skills align with the path they are pursuing. They will be developing a deeper understanding of engineering, and they will begin to determine if they really see it as a possible source of “delight” and also if it is something that they have the ability to do. This process of discovery will not be easy, so as mentors it may be helpful for us to remind the students that they will continue to see more application and likely more “delight” later in the curriculum. It is also helpful to remind students that every career has its “weeds” on this side of eternity as a result of the fall. However, recognizing that passion, skills, and commitment should play a role in their career decisions may provide helpful guidance.

*Guidelines for Faculty and Professionals*

If we find ourselves as faculty members in the university setting, the particular circumstances and decisions might be different than those of students. The decisions might also be different for practicing engineers in a professional setting. However, we feel that the three-fold framework of calling, passion, and skills can be readily applied to these circumstances as well. While incorporating this framework provides no promise of an easy answer, it does introduce a fuller
set of questions to be pondered when making possibly career-altering decisions. For example, if one feels their passion leading them strongly in a certain direction, but they are not able to point to anything from their background or experience that provides them with “skill-set capital,” considering both passion and skills may indeed prevent them from making a poor decision. Similarly, if an opportunity comes up that seems to be a natural progression from a current position given one’s experience and background, but they feel very little desire for this particular opportunity, a holistic consideration of passion along with skills and calling will again be helpful in making a decision.

Words of Caution

As was briefly mentioned above, the worry about perfection can easily creep into this process: what if I don't pick the right work for me to do? In trying to discern the path forward from the (potentially) disconnected parts of our past, the sway of false passions and misguided advice can steer us in many an errant way. But take heart! Our God is a god of grace, love, and forgiveness, but for grace, love, and forgiveness to be relevant, sin has to exist. For people to experience the blessed feeling and healing that comes from offered grace, love, and forgiveness, they need to have blown it. They need to have sinned.

In Eric Metaxas’ bibliography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he recounts a conversation Bonhoeffer had with a colleague about his involvement in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. The following is Metaxas’ assessment of this conversation:

Bonhoeffer knew that to live in fear of incurring “guilt” was itself sinful. God wanted his beloved children to operate out of freedom and joy to do what was right and good, not out of fear of making a mistake. To live in fear and guilt was to be “religious” in the pejorative sense that Bonhoeffer so often talked and preached about. He knew that to act freely could mean inadvertently doing wrong and incurring guilt. In fact, he felt that living this way meant that it was impossible to avoid incurring guilt, but if one wished to live responsibly and fully, one would be willing to do so.

Applying Bonhoeffer’s wisdom to choosing a career, we could say that to live in fear of choosing the wrong career and potentially disappointing God is, in itself, sinful, especially if that fear prevents us from making a decision. We do not need to, and should not, dread the consequences of our career decisions. We can make the necessary corrections as we pursue the direction God has for us and he more fully reveals his will for our lives.

A brief reminder of God’s grace in the sanctification process can provide reassurance as well. In Extravagant Grace, Barbara Duguid relies heavily on the writings of John Newton to point out how our continual growth as Christians is totally in God’s hands. Although from our perspective it feels like we need to make the right decisions in order to grow in obedience and
serve God effectively, in actuality God uses our poor decisions as well as our good decisions to accomplish his purposes. Can our gratitude to Christ for his saving work in our lives drive us to strive for obedience and strive to make wise decisions that further his kingdom? Absolutely! But we need not have a crippling fear that making the wrong decision will bring God’s plan to a screeching halt. God uses us, warts and all, to accomplish his purposes in our lives and to use us for his kingdom purposes.

**Conclusion**

We recognize that determining the direction that God would have for us can be a confusing and potentially scary task. For people that find this to be true we hope that some of the above discussion helps them move to a place of better clarity.

Ultimately, we showed a remarkable tie between the current popular approaches to finding work and what was advocated centuries ago. Reviewing what Calvin, Luther, and others said about the value of work, we then noted how the integrated version of the modern approaches, as well as the approach advocated by Perkins, have a strong tie to a biblical approach.

We then provided some guidelines for readers and mentors of people who are at this juncture in their career. Throughout this process, we know that God will love us and offer us the grace and forgiveness we need to boldly pursue a God-directed career.

**References**