VOCATION AND CALLING
A TALK TO THE FELLOWS OF THE CHICAGO CHAPTER OF THE C. S. LEWIS INSTITUTE
3 MARCH 2018

It is noteworthy—although not unexpected, given the word's etymology—that the first several senses for *vocation* in the online Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary all refer explicitly to God or his purposes. Here is the very first one:

> **1 a :** a summons from God to an individual or group to undertake the obligations and perform the duties of a particular task or function in life **:** a divine call to a place of service to others in accordance with the divine plan.

This sense doesn't restrict the concept to religious vocations, although it is immediately qualified in a way that does:

> *specifically* **:** a divine call to a religious career (as the priesthood or monastic life) as shown by one's fitness, natural inclinations, and often a conviction of divine summons.

Avoiding the restriction of *vocation* to explicitly Christian or religious careers is Jerram Barr's main point in the piece that you read. It opens like this:

> Whatever job you do, it is a holy calling, a sacred calling, a responsibility given to you by God to serve Him there. Too often we think of our work, if we are not working specifically for the church, as being secular, second-class, having nothing to do with true spirituality, and little to do with being a

> faithful Christian. You can think of all the incorrect expressions we use to mark this division between the sacred and the secular: We speak of people who are in "full-time ministry" as if only they are "full-time Christians."[1]

I will restate Barrs' point in my section on "Our Callings."

The second and third definitions in Merriam-Webster make the connotations of *vocation* clearer:

> **2 a** (1) **:** a task or function to which one is called by God

> **2 a** (2) **:** the responsibility of an individual or group to serve the divine purposes in every condition, work, or relationship of life **:** one's obligations and responsibilities (as to others) under God

The second of these two senses of *vocation* has two helpful quotations of its use attached to it:

> <*vocation* involves the *total* orientation of a man's life and work in terms of his *ultimate* sense of mission — R. F. West[2]>

> <domination of physical nature is part of the *vocation* of man>

I'll comment on this claim about domination—or, better, dominion—later.

Then we get yet another sense:

---

[1] Jerram Barrs, "Work: A Holy Calling," *Knowing and Doing*, Fall 2008.
[2] My emphases.

> **3** *archaic* **:** the position in life in which God has placed a person **:** estate, station[3]

The first two chapters of Genesis explain the estate or station in which God has placed every human being.

When we look up the word *calling*, the second, third, and fourth senses are relevant to this morning's discussion:

> **2 :** a strong inner impulse toward a particular course of action or duty *specifically* **:** such an impulse accompanied by conviction of divine influence

> **3** *obsolete* **:** station or position in life **:** rank

Here the apostle Paul's use is quoted:

> <let every man abide in the same *calling* wherein he was called — 1 Corinthians 7:20 (Authorized Version)>

And then we get the fourth sense:

> **4 :** the activity in which one customarily engages as a vocation or profession[4]

---

[3] Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged, s.v. "vocation," accessed February 28, 2018, http://unabridged.merriam-webster.com.

[4] Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged, s.v. "calling," accessed February 28, 2018, http://unabridged.merriam-webster.com.

I will use *vocation* in Merriam-Webster's **2 a** (2) sense: "*the responsibility* of an individual or group *to serve the divine purposes in every condition, work, or relationship of life* **:** one's obligations and responsibilities (as to others) *under God*" (my emphases) and *calling* in all three of the quoted senses. The first of them—"a strong inner impulse toward a particular course of action or duty . . . *specifically* **:** such an impulse accompanied by conviction of divine influence"—seems to capture what Nehemiah felt as recorded in the book of Nehemiah. The third—one's "station or position in life **:** rank" and fourth—"the activity in which one customarily engages as a vocation or profession"—are both part of Paul's use of calling in 1 Corinthians.

I am going to concentrate on the biblical view of vocation because the biblical view of calling falls out of it. The callings are subordinate to the vocation we all have simply by creation.

Our Divine Vocation

The word *vocation* obviously has more than a whiff of the religious to it, but insofar as the whiff suggests "a divine call to a [specifically] religious career"—that is, to something like full-time Christian ministry, as that phrase is usually meant—it steers us the wrong way.

What Were We Made For?

We can see this by examining the first of the Scripture passages that you were asked to meditate on for this session: Genesis 1:26-28. Here is one translation of it:

> Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the

> heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."
>
> So God created man in his own image,
> in the image of God he created him;
> male and female he created them.
>
> And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

This is the English Standard Version. The New Living Translation reads similarly concerning the point I'm about to make. I want you to see that serious Bible students need to be reading more than one translation for, as the old saw goes, *Every translator is a traitor*.[5] Translation always requires choices and sometimes those choices leave out some important nuance of the original text. In fact, serious Bible students need to be reading the best commentaries on Scripture because otherwise they will inevitably miss important details in God's word. To see what the ESV has missed here, listen to the 2011 NIV translation of verse 26. Can you spot what it brings out that the ESV does not?

> Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the live-

[5] This is a way of understanding the Italian statement, "*Traduttore, traditore*," which means *every translation is a betrayal*. It falls out of God's confusion of languages in Genesis 11.

> stock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

This clarifies why God made humankind. How does it do so? By rendering an important nuance of Hebrew grammar with the words *so that.*[6] Those words tell us that when God declared he would make humankind, he specified their task: "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, *so that* they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." In other words, *we were created to do the work of ruling*. This is *the* human vocation, the *universal* human vocation, the vocation of each and every human being—that is, "the responsibility of an individual or group"—more explicitly, of *every* individual and group—"to serve the divine purposes in every condition, work, or relationship of life **:** one's obligations and responsibilities (as to others) under God."

Genesis 2:5 reiterates this when it says: "Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no [man] to work the ground" (NIV). This verse's word *for* indicates that we are being given the reason why there were not yet any shrubs or plants. It is because "the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth *and there was no [man] to work the ground*." The shrubs and plants had not yet appeared *because* the man, who was to work the ground, was not yet created. Hans Walter Wolff comments that "labour appears as the only definition of man's proper significance"

---

[6] The nuance involves the Hebrew word *radah.* It is the word for *rule* here. It's in the third person plural imperfect, which when it is "preceded by simple waw as here expresses purpose (GKC, 109f; Lambdin, 119)" (Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary,* Volume 1, Genesis 1-15 [Waco, TX: Word, 1987], 4, note on v. 26b).

The 1984 NIV doesn't capture this nuance. Capturing Scripture's nuances is a work that should progress over time.

in this verse.[7] Henri Blocher notes that when God made the first man, he "did not cast [him] into the desert or into the jungle, but showed kindness to him by taking care of him and by adding to the gift of being and life an abundance of good things for his happiness." Yet he adds that when the LORD "bestows gifts on those he wishes to love as his sons, he takes good care not to turn them into spoilt children" by giving them responsibilities. So Eden was "'no fairyland, no Utopia'; *the man [received] a charge to fulfil in that place*." As soon as he made him, God "took the man and put him in the garden of Eden *to work it and keep it*" (Gen. 2:15).

Work is thus essential to human life. Indeed, a human life without work "could not be a complete life; it would be an existence quite unworthy" of human beings.[8] God "put [the] man into a garden," Claus Westermann remarks; "the garden and the land there [needed] to be worked; the land [was] entrusted to [the] man, who [was] both capable and industrious." God's task gave Adam's life meaning—meaning supplied not by Adam but by God. *Human life is not intrinsically meaningful*. *Its meaning*—no matter whether someone acknowledges this or not—*comes from God*.[9] Work "is part of human existence because the living space

---

[7] Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 128. The remaining quotations in this paragraph are all from Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1984), 120; my emphasis.

[8] Claus Westermann, *Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 81. The quotation in the next sentence is found on page 82. My paragraph's remaining quotations are from Westermann's *Genesis 1-11: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 222, 220; my emphasis. I am indebted to Westermann throughout this section.

[9] In commenting on Job 28, Wolff points out that vv. 1-10 describe our "domination of the world . . . with . . . much artistry" and asks why. His answer:

> To make it all the clearer that for all his searchings and investigations man cannot discover wisdom itself, 'the meaning implanted in creation'. 'Only God understands the way to it' (v. 23). Thus belief in creation secures the factual nature of man's worldly rule, which . . . leads clearly to the fear of God (Job 28.28).
>
> Psalm 8 celebrates man's destiny to rule over extra-human creation in a quite different way. It leads to the final, decisive and all-embracing recognition by emphasizing that *the crowning of man to be steward over the world is* (in view of his minuteness in

which [God] has assigned to his people demands [their] work." And thus "God-given human existence follows a pattern of duty. *Human existence cannot have meaning or fulfillment without such obligation*." *The world requires our labor to complete it.* And so the work of ruling that God assigned to Adam and Eve fundamentally shapes who God has created us to be.[10]

Even now, after the Fall, work well done gives meaning and brings pleasure (see Eccl. 2:24; 3:13). This is especially true when the work is important—and the work God has assigned to us as his images, as those who find our day-to-day meaning in working as God worked (see Gen. 2:2-3, 15),[11] is as important as can be. God named nothing in creation after he named the earth and the seas (see Gen. 1:10), leaving us the task of naming the animals as well as making other crucial classifications and distinctions (see Gen. 2:19-20; 1 Kings 3:16-28). Solomon continued this work (see 1 Kings 4:29-34). There is also the work of building and planting (see Eccl. 2:4-5; Prov. 24:30-34), the work of nurturing and educating (see, e.g., Deut. 6:4-7; Ps. 78:1-8; Prov. 31:26), the work of making and arranging proverbs (see 1 Kings 4:32; Eccl. 12:9), the work of writing and performing music

---

> relation to the universe and his pitiable need of providing care) *anything but a matter of course, and certainly does not have its ground in man himself* (vv. 3f.). (227; my emphases)

[10] As Wolff notes:

> Immediately after man's creation and the planting of the paradisal garden, Yahweh leads him into that garden, so that he may cultivate it and protect it. When at this point the [text] mentions both the serving of the earth through labour . . . and the protective watching over it . . . , [it is indicating] the two aspects of all man's activity in his various callings. The context of the passage brings out the divine working and giving as the premise of all human activity; when the gifts of creation are made over to man, the care and protection of these gifts is also given him as the task of his life

—a task that he and the soon-to-be created woman would find very rewarding (Wolff, 128-29).

[11] Although the work of creation is finished, God has continued working for his people (see, e.g., Exod. 14:13-14; 34:10; Deut. 11:7; Josh. 24.31), and we, like our Lord, are to work as God works (see John 4:34; 5:17, 36; 17:4).

(see Deut. 31:19-22; I Kings 4:32; 2 Chron. 5:13), the work of worshiping and celebrating (see Ps. 100:1; 95:1-2, 6-7; 149:2), works of mercy (Job 29:11-17; Prov. 31:20; Matt. 25:31-46) as well as, in New Testament times, the work of evangelizing (Matt 28:19-20; 2 Tim. 4:1-5) and preaching and teaching (see 1 Tim. 5:17-18). Indeed, there are as many kinds of work as there are tasks to be worked at, including shopkeeping, practicing medicine, consulting, working in the money markets, serving food—and even being professors of philosophy![12]

At the end of a day's work in the garden our first parents were probably weary. As C. S. Lewis observes, very minor aches can actually be pleasant. They only become painful when increased.[13] Only spoiled children expect everything to be effortless.[14]

Now, east of Eden, our work is often unpleasant, sometimes painful, and at times frustrating or futile. Now we must pray that the Lord will look on our work with favor and thus "establish the work of our hands" (Ps. 90:17). This is in fact

---

[12] Wolff writes: "Since man is called to work, he should take up his Creator's offer" (131). Commenting on Proverbs 6:6-11, he says, "The reasonable man should go promptly to work, without anyone to goad him on, and should not let himself be put to shame by an animal (cf. Jer. 8.7 [NLT])" (131). The lazy man allows himself "to be driven by the pleasure of the moment, . . . [and thus] misses the proper hour and the opportunities that are granted to him" (131).

[13] Lewis writes:

> the evil of pain depends on degree, and *pains below a certain level of intensity are not feared or resented at all.* No one minds the process 'warm—beautifully hot—too hot—it stings' which warns him to withdraw his hand from exposure to the fire: and, if I may trust my own feeling, a slight aching in the legs as we climb into bed after a good day's walking is, in fact, pleasurable. (*The Problem of Pain* [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001], 23; my emphasis)

Something similar is true with intellectual work. Mental weariness at the end of a decent day's thinking can be pleasurable.

[14] Victor P. Hamilton notes that "if man had not sinned he still would be working. Eden certainly is not a paradise in which man passes his time in idyllic and uninterrupted bliss with absolutely no demands on his daily schedule" (*The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 171; my emphasis).

part of what the LORD'S having cursed the ground in Genesis 3:17-19 is meant to encourage. The travails now accompanying our daily tasks should not dissuade us from fulfilling our God-given vocation. They should keep us mindful of him.

What Are We Made to Be?

We won't really understand or be able to embrace our God-given vocation if we don't understand what he has made us to be. This drives us back to Genesis 1:26. Genesis is the backstory on the rest of the Pentateuch and, indeed, of the whole Bible. You can't really understand the gospel if you don't understand Genesis.[15] And that means that, unless you understand Genesis, you can't be what God means you to be.

A thoughtful reading of Genesis 1:1-25 makes it clear that everything God created before us was preparing a place for us. He "formed [the earth] to be inhabited" (Isa. 45:18). From the earth's formlessness in 1:2, he was fashioning an ordered cosmos where we can fulfill our divine vocation.[16]

---

[15] The Good News proclaims that "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:19 NIV). The final goal of God's work in Christ is the restoration of all things to a state like (but indeed even better than) their original state (see, e.g., Rom. 8:18-24; Acts 3:21). Scripture puts bookends around the story of sin and redemption by means of the first two chapters of Genesis when everything was "very good" (Gen. 1:31) and the last two chapters of Revelation when God will come to dwell with his people, wiping every tear from their eyes, "and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:4). Understanding our first parents' initial state is essential to understanding what the Good News claims about our final state.

[16] "For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!): 'I am the LORD, and there is no other. I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, "Seek me in chaos." I the LORD speak the truth, I declare what is right'" (Isa. 45:18-19 RSV).

At 1:21, Wenham comments that the phrase "across the firmament" referring to the flight of birds, "is one of the indications in the narrative that it is written from the perspective of a human observer" because "[f]rom the ground, birds appear to fly against the background of the sky" (24).

Into this ordered, inhabitable world God prepared to introduce human beings. The progression from plants through the water and winged creatures to the land animals involved creating a hierarchy to which we were now to be added as the highest living beings. As Paul Beauchamp observes, "The living creatures converge towards the man."[17] But creating us involved another difference: For the first time, God paused to announce what he was about to do, making an unusual first-person plural statement: "Let *us* make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness" (Gen. 1:26).[18] As Gerhard von Rad has written, "Nothing [in this account] is here by chance; everything must be considered carefully, deliberately, and precisely. . . . What is said here is intended to hold true entirely and exactly as it stands."[19] *Us* and *our* are here for good reason.

They alert us that something momentous was about to happen, something of a different order than all that had happened before. God would make us in his own image and after his own likeness. His "Let us *make*" emphasized that we are only creatures, while his "in our *image*, after our *likeness*" stressed our godlikeness. As his first word concerning human being,[20] we must understand ourselves primarily in its terms. As Blocher says, "An image *is only an image.* It exists only by deriva-

---

[17] Paul Beauchamp, *Création et séparation : étude exégétique du premier chapître de la Genèse* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, Cerf, Delachaux & Niestlé, Desclée de Brouwer, 1969), 45. Quoted in Blocher, 75.

[18] Wenham says Genesis 1

> discloses man's true nature. He is the apex of the created order: the whole narrative moves toward the creation of man. Everything is made for man's benefit . . . . While man shares with plants and animals the ability to reproduce himself, he alone is made in the divine image and is instructed to subdue the earth. The image of God means that in some sense men and women resemble God and the angels, though where the resemblance lies is left undefined in this chapter. *The divine image does enable man to be addressed directly by his creator and makes him in a real sense God's representative on earth*, who should rule over the other creatures as a benevolent king" (38, my emphasis).

[19] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadephia: Westminster, 1972), 47.

[20] Here *being* is the present participle of the verb *to be* and not a noun, thus emphasizing that we exist only as images. Blocher is making the same point in the quotation that follows in my text.

tion. It is not the original, *nor is it anything without the original*. *Mankind's being an image stresses the radical nature of his dependence.*"[21] Ultimately, we must understand who we are in terms of the relationship that defines us. We will never adequately understand ourselves if we think of ourselves primarily as the most highly developed animal species or if we calibrate our worth against the vastness of the stars. We must think of ourselves primarily as God's earthly images.

David understood this. In Psalm 8, he glanced up towards the starry heavens and felt "the staggering contrast between a human and the great bodies, processes, and powers in the world and the cosmos," which, "when noticed, [can bring] with it an overwhelming sense of insignificance and displacement."[22] This led him to ask, "[W]hat are mere mortals that you"—that is, God—"should think about them, human beings that you should care for them?" (Ps. 8:4 NLT). But then with the ears of faith he heard God say he has situated us just a little below himself and thus crowned us with glory and honor. David cured the vertigo induced by staring at the heavens by acknowledging a truth he could know only by faith (see Heb. 11:3). As one wise commentator has put it, Psalm 8's main point is that "we can say 'human being' only after we have learned to say 'God.' . . . Humankind recognizes itself fully only in the recognition of the Being from whom all reality arises."

At this point in the Creation story, we are told very little about our nature as images, very little about the ways in which we are godlike. That comes out, as we shall see, in Genesis 2:4-25.

Yet our relation to the rest of creation is already clear. For, as we have seen, immediately after declaring he would make us in his image, God said why he has

---

[21] Blocher, 82. I have emphasized the last 18 words.
[22] James L. Mays, "What Is A Human Being? Reflections on Psalm 8," *Theology Today* 50 (1993-94), 513. The final quotation in this paragraph also comes from page 519 of this superb exposition of Psalm 8.

made us so: "*so that* they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." As the sovereign Creator's images, we are creation's sovereigns, meant to reign over the rest of creation.

David reiterated this. For right after he declared that God made us only a little lower than himself, crowning us with glory and honor, he went on to say:

> You gave them charge of everything you made,
>
> putting all things under their authority—
>
> the flocks and the herds
>
> and all the wild animals,
>
> the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea,
>
> and everything that swims the ocean currents. (Ps. 8:5-8 NLT)

David glanced downwards after he glanced upwards, surveying the rest of creation and perhaps wondering whether we are just another animal species.[23] Yet by hear-

---

[23] The writer of Ecclesiastes seems to have done this:

> I also said to myself, "As for humans, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the human spirit rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?" (3:18-21 NIV)

Kidner comments:

> But does something within us survive death? From its chosen standpoint, Ecclesiastes can only reply, *Who knows? Breath*, or *spirit*, in these verses is the life God gives to animals and men alike, whose withdrawal means their death . . . . Clearly we have at least that much in common with the beasts; but whether 'spirit' implies anything eternal for us, *no-one can decide by observation*. (Derek Kidner, *A Time To Mourn, and A Time To Dance:*

ing God's word he steadied himself, coming to understand that our being made in God's image makes us unique.[24] He then understood our situation for what it actually is: As God's images, we stand between him and the rest of the creation, where, according to this word in Genesis 1:26, we are to fulfill the office of ruling all the rest of it wisely and benevolently.[25]

Then God did what he had declared he was about to do:

> So God created man in his own image,
> in the image of God he created him;
> male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:27)

The Hebrew construction for the ESV's word *man* in this verse suggests it would be better to translate it as *mankind* or, even better, *humanity*, since "clearly," as Wenham writes, "mankind in general, 'male and female,' not an individual, is meant."[26] This emphasizes the third set of relationships we must acknowledge to understand

---

> *Ecclesiastes & the way of the world* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1976], 43. I have emphasized the final claim.)

Humankind can only know what we are and what we are destined for by revelation.

[24] Beauchamp writes that we are "the unique one above the many," as quoted by Blocher, 92.

[25] Wenham comments on Genesis 1:28 that

> Because man is created in God's image, he is king over nature. He rules the world on God's behalf. This is of course no license for the unbridled exploitation and subjugation of nature. *Ancient oriental kings were expected to be devoted to the welfare of their subjects, especially the poorest and weakest members of society (Ps 72:12-14). . . . Similarly, mankind is here commissioned to rule nature as a benevolent king, acting as God's representative over them and therefore treating them in the same way as God who created them*. Thus animals, though subject to man, are viewed as his companions in 2:18-20. Noah, portrayed as uniquely righteous in 6:9, is also the arch-conservationist who built an ark to preserve all kinds of life from being destroyed in the flood (6:20; 7:3). (33, my emphasis)

[26] Wenham, 32.

ourselves. We are related in one way to God and in another to the rest of creation, but we are also inevitably and necessarily related in yet a third way to each other, to other human beings. So we exist within three kinds of relationships, each in its own way creating, shaping, and sustaining us: our primary relationship is with God, then there is our relationship to other human beings, and finally our relationship to the rest of creation. Living within the 'space' created by these three kinds of relationships constitutes specifically human being.[27]

In declaring what he was about to do regarding human beings, God used the word *make—ʿasah* in Hebrew—which is also found in verses 7, 16, 25, 31, and in chapter 2, verses 2 and 3 (where it is translated as *done* in the ESV). Here in verse 27 the Hebrew word for *created* is *bara'*, as it is in verses 1, 21, and at 2:4. Since nothing in this account is accidental, the threefold repetition of *bara'* in our verse is significant. It confirms how momentous our creation is. Alternating *created* and *image* in the first two lines stresses that we must understand ourselves in terms of God. As Blocher said, who we are depends radically on who he is.

God's image is not limited to a part of us. Everything about us images him. As Kidner says,

> The Bible makes man a unity: acting, thinking and feeling with his whole

---

[27] See Hamilton:

> what does *imago Dei* mean? Does it refer to posture, to imagination/creativity, or, as is so often assumed, to the ability to reason? This latter one is the one that has dominated Western Christianity. Its weakness is that in focusing exclusively on intellectual capacities of humanity, it correspondingly devalues other aspects of human existence, such as emotion. A fourth suggestion is to understand *imago Dei* relationally. Gen 1 and 2 seem to support this. *To bear the image of God is to be capable of living in proper relationship with God, with others, with the rest of creation, and with oneself. The tarnishing of that image is occasioned by the soiling of those relationships*. (*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997], Vol. 4, 671, Victor P. Hamilton, **Genesis: Theology**; my emphasis)

> being. This living creature, then, and not some distillation from him, is an expression or transcription of the eternal, incorporeal creator in terms of temporal, bodily, creaturely existence – as one might attempt a transcription of, say, an epic into a sculpture, or a symphony into a sonnet.[28]

Understanding ourselves as God's image, Kidner continues, "excludes the idea that our Maker is the 'wholly Other'" and "requires us to take all human beings infinitely seriously (*cf.* Gn. 9:6; Jas. 3:9). And our Lord implies, further, that God's stamp on us constitutes a declaration of ownership (Mt. 22:20, 21)."

But what does it mean to be made, as it is usually translated, *in God's image*? Ordinarily, we take *Y is made in the image of X* to mean that *X has a visible image* and *Y's being made in the image of X* means that *Y is made to copy X's visible image*. Yet Moses reminded the Israelites that when God made covenant with them, they heard him speak but saw no form: "there was only a voice" (Deut. 4:12; see vv. 9-20). So our being made in God's image is not primarily a matter of our possessing some visible form but, rather, our imaging the sovereign Creator God in some other way.

In the ancient Near East kings erected images of themselves throughout their realms to assert their sovereignty where they weren't physically present.[29] The incorporeal Creator has made us his earthly image so that we may assert his sovereignty, which we do by acting as kings and queens reigning for him over the rest of

---

[28] Kidner, 51. The remaining quotations in this paragraph are from the same page.

[29] "In the ancient East the setting up of the king's statue was the equivalent to the proclamation of his domination over the sphere in which the statue was erected (cf. Dan. 3.1, 5f.). When in the thirteenth century BC the Pharaoh Ramesses II had his image hewn out of rock at the mouth of the *nahr el-kelb*, on the Mediterranean north of Beirut, the image meant that he was the ruler of this area. *Accordingly man is set in the midst of creation as God's statue. He is evidence that God is the Lord of creation*" (Wolff, 160; my emphasis).

the creation.[30] In other words, God created us to *be* his image. He created us *as*—and not (as most translations have it) *in*—his earthly image. This is, in fact, how Paul understood our being God's image when he said that "a man . . . *is* the image and glory of God" (1 Cor. 11:7).

Our role as God's images is a *structural* feature of our place in creation and thus something we cannot lose, although we can obscure, mar, tarnish, or diminish it.[31]

How Are We Able to Fulfill Our Vocation?

Genesis 2:5, 7-8, 15 tell us how we became able to fulfill our vocation. "When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up . . . then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed . . . to work it and keep it."

Here we are told that the LORD God breathed into the first human being's

---

[30] See C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 24:

> If there was a controlling power outside the universe, it could not show itself to us as one of the facts inside the universe — no more than the architect of a house could actually be a wall or a staircase or a fireplace in that house. The only way we could expect it to show itself would be inside ourselves as an influence or a command trying to get us to behave in a certain way. And that is just what we do find inside ourselves.

Part of the great good news of Christianity is that we aren't left needing simply to root around inside ourselves to discover if the world had a Creator, for God has acted in history, at Sinai, and in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of his Son, and told us what he requires of us, with his Holy Spirit witnessing to its truth. And part of our responsibility as his images is for us to witness to his presence and power and authority by acknowledging our appointment as his earthly vicegerents.

[31] "[T]he Scriptures do not teach the disappearance of the creational privilege. All the indisputable references to the declaration of Genesis 1:26f. appear to suppose the permanence of the-being-as-image-of-God (Gn. 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; Jas. 3:9)" (Blocher, 94).

nostrils the breath—the Hebrew word is *neshamah*—of life, something he didn't do with any other creature. This made us earthly *persons*, with capacities that distinguish us from all other living beings. Blocher writes that *neshamah* "is used rarely for God . . . . It is used for mankind and not for animals, and designates the spirit of mankind created to correspond to the Spirit of God."[32] In other words, it was by the LORD God breathing this breath into Adam that he became God's earthly image.

When we read that the Spirit of the LORD will rest upon the future Messiah, and that this is "the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD" (Isa. 11:2), we begin to understand what the LORD's breathing the breath of life into the first man implies. It means God has formed us with the created equivalents of those aspects of himself that account for his being the Only-Wise Creator, Ruler, and Disposer of all things. So when the LORD filled Bezalel with his Spirit, "with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills," he and the others to whom God gave these skills knew "how to carry out all the work of constructing the sanctuary," enabling them to do it "just as the LORD has commanded" (Exod. 31:3 and 36:1 NIV). He also inspired them to teach others what they knew (see Exod. 35:34). To be made as God's image, to have him breathe into us the breath of life, means we possess the supernaturally bestowed gift of personhood that enables us to think, learn, speak, teach, and make free decisions.

In putting Adam into the garden "to work it and keep it," God gave him and all of us as his descendants our common human vocation, which is to reign over the rest of the creation, to exercise dominion by being the thinking, planning, and acting part of creation, the part responsible for ordering, preserving, and enhancing all the rest of it. We image him by acting as creation's kings and queens who reign

[32] Blocher, 77.

for him over the rest of the creation.[33] We are "expected," Wenham writes, "to imitate God is [our] daily [lives]."[34] But "the reign of the created image," Blocher adds,

> could only be that of a deputy. *Mankind is a vassal prince who will follow the directives of the Sovereign and will give an account to him.* . . . It is not by brute force that mankind will assure his mastery, precisely because that mastery distinguishes him from the brute beasts. *As the imitator of God in the six days of the week, the viceroy of creation will deploy the power of the word and of the spirit.*[35]

Yet we can't follow our Maker's directives if we don't know them. The world and our lives have meaning—everything has a direction and a direction that can be understood, a direction that was implanted in it by God at creation. Yet we cannot discover its meaning on our own, in spite of all of our scientific and technological prowess.

Job 28 detailed the remarkable feats of mining that the ancients achieved. They found gold, silver, copper, iron, and precious stones by digging into places no animal had ever seen, wresting what they prized from the flinty rock. Yet where is wisdom to be found? Job asked, "And where is the place of understanding?" It "is not found in the land of the living," he answered. "It is hidden from the eyes of all living and concealed from the birds of the air." Only "God understands the way to it," only "he knows its place." For only he "gave to the wind its weight and apportioned the waters by measure." He alone "made a decree for the rain and a way for

---

[33] See footnote 25.
[34] Wenham, 39.
[35] Blocher, 90; my emphasis.

the lightning of the thunder." He alone fully knows the meaning he has implanted in creation. Only the Creator knows what we must learn if we are to act as creation's kings and queens who are carrying out his intentions for the rest of the creation.

But no one "knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him" and "no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Cor. 2:11). So God must tell us what he intends for creation. We can fulfill our divine vocation only by hearing the words of the God whose form we do not see. These are the words of Scripture. Scripture is God's primary way of communicating with fallen human beings. He inspired his prophets and apostles to speak what he was speaking through them (see 2 Pet. 1:20-21; 2 Tim. 3:16). To know the words of Scripture—to have them resound through every aspect of our lives, to have them shape all that we are and do—is biblical wisdom and understanding. We are to seek this, Scripture declares, above all else: "The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. *Though it cost all you have, get understanding*" (Prov. 4:7 NIV).

And so we arrive at the point I most want you to take home today: In order to fulfill our God-given vocation, we must—we *all* must—become better students of God's word and of *all* of his word, hearing and obeying his voice as it resounds through them day after day.[36]

---

[36] Wolff writes:

> Taken by itself the phrase ['the image of God'] points first and fundamentally to a correspondence between [humanity] and God. . . . But how are we to understand this relation of correspondence between God and [humanity] more precisely? . . .
>
> According to [God's statement at Genesis 1:26, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness"], [humanity] proceeds from God's *address.* We must not view this in the purely formal sense, especially since the address in which God blesses [humanity] in 1.28 is similar to the words spoken to the fish and the birds in 1.22. *What is unique is the continuation of the words addressed to [the human beings]. This confers on [them] the*

Our Callings

As Merriam-Webster clarifies, the English *vocation* comes from the Latin *vocatio*, meaning "summons, bidding, invitation, from *vocatus* (past participle of *vocare* to call)," and *calling* from the Middle English *callen*, to call. So *vocation* and *calling* mean the same thing. I have divided them because Christians need to emphasize our common vocation over what each of us as individuals is specifically called to do.

We must do this for several reasons. First, we need to remember that God declared he would make humankind so that *they* would multiply and have dominion over all the earth (see Gen. 1:26-28). We are created to live and act socially (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 12:12-19).[37] God has chosen us to be his *people* (1 Pet. 2:4-5, 9-10), the body of Christ (see Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:27). The LORD promised to make Abraham a great nation through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed (see Gen. 18:18; 22:18). Now he is working through Christ to redeem an obedient people who serve him and thus fulfill his promise to Abraham (see 1 Pet. 2:16; Gal. 3:8). Redeemed humanity is to exercise dominion over creation and thus bring him glory.[38] This is our common Christian vocation that we are to pursue together. All individual callings are subordinate to this.

> *office that distinguishes [them]*. . . . [W]hen the Creator gave created beings over to [humanity], he also gave [them] responsible tasks (2.15-17) and powers of decision (2:18-23). . . . The different features of the [Genesis 2:5-25] narrative make the implications of Gen. 1.26-28 graphically evident. According to this *the relation of correspondence to which the phrase 'the image of God' points is to be seen first of all in that [humanity], in hearing and then also in obeying and in answering, corresponds to the word of God's address*. (159-160, my emphasis of all but the first use of *address*)

As Wolff put it earlier, "the Creator of all things . . . enters into dialogue with man and with his wife as with none other of his creatures" (94-95). This dialogue comes to us primarily through God's speech acts in Scripture. Hearing and reading it puts us in dialogue with God.

[37] See above, 14-15.

[38] Exercising dominion is not now the central aspect of Christian vocation, which is to go into the

Second, if we initially ask, What am *I* to do?, instead of, What are *we* to do?, the full social and vocational context of all of our activities tends to be eclipsed. From our redemption onwards we are to spend our lives no longer "chasing [our] own desires" but eager to do God's will (1 Pet. 4:2 NLT; *cf.* 1 Cor. 6:19-20). We are to view our individual callings as gifts that enable us as God's people to fulfill our common vocation of glorifying him and serving each other (see 1 Cor. 10:31; 1 Pet. 4:10-12; Rom. 12:4-8).

Third, to view our individual callings within the context of the fulfillment of our common human vocation dignifies even the most mundane tasks. As societies develop, the tasks to which their members may be called proliferate. Our society requires not only doctors and lawyers but also trash collectors, caregivers, and cashiers. Individual Christians may be called to help fulfill our common vocation by means of fulfilling any of these tasks. Secular society considers the professions to represent life's higher estates or stations. But Christians should not (see 1 Cor. 12:12-20). *Any* calling that cares for God's creation can be appropriate for a Christian. A believer could be called to any of them depending on the person's circumstances, gifts, and time of life (see 1 Cor. 7:17). We need sanitation workers, personal care aides, and farm laborers as much as we need educators and airline pilots. No matter what our estate or station, if we do God's will from our hearts, always working "with a good will as to the Lord and not to man," then we can know "that whatever good [we do], this [we] will receive back from the Lord" (Eph. 6:6-8).

---

world and make disciples of all nations and teach those disciples to observe all that Jesus has commanded (see Matt. 28:19-20). In our fallen world, evangelism and obedience to our Lord's commands—few of which imply much about exercising dominion—take precedence. Yet our first parents' task has not been rescinded (see footnote 31) and, e.g., Christian care for the environment can serve as an important witness to the truth of the gospel. I think dominion will again become central when God renews all things.

We could spend some time exploring the biblical view of calling, but that topic was covered pretty well in the pieces you were asked to read, including the biblical passages. The biblical idea of an individual calling is modeled magnificently in both Nehemiah 1-2 and Daniel 1-6. So I want to go on to help you think about how you can begin to fulfill your biblical vocation by spending enough time each day in God's written word.

The Five Parts of Life

All of us are called to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:17). We must learn the truth that leads to godliness (see Tit. 1:1). And so we are all, in light of the mercies God has shown us in Christ, to give him our bodies as living sacrifices and acts of intelligent worship, "consecrated to him and acceptable by him." We mustn't let the world around us squeeze us into its own mold, but we must let God remold our minds, so that we "may prove in practice that the plan of God for [us] is good, meets all his demands and moves [us] towards the goal of true maturity" (Rom. 12:1-2).[39]

Paul's exhortation that we present *our bodies* to God as acts of intelligent worship is crucial here, for embodied persons cannot consecrate themselves to anything without some significant investment of their time. To be embodied persons means that our personhood resides in our bodily being—and so what we do with our bodies is what we do as persons. We cannot consecrate ourselves to God as

[39] The quotations are from J. B. Phillips translation, *The New Testament in Modern English* (London: MacMillan, 1960, 1972). Here is the whole passage:

> With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him. Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity.

persons without consecrating our bodies to him as we live and move in space and time. Indeed, "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, *so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad*" (2 Cor. 5:10 NIV). Proverbs 4:7 makes a similar point when it exhorts, "The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. *Though it cost all you have, get understanding*" (Prov. 4:7 NIV). "Though it cost [us] all we have"—we must get biblical wisdom and understanding even if it were to cost us all that we possess in time, in money, in the radical transformation of the multifarious ways we live out our everyday lives.[40] Getting biblical wisdom and understanding must be our first priority. We must be willing to pay for it by outlays of our time and energy.

What does this mean, practically? How can we get a grasp on our use of our time and then spend it appropriately? Mortimer Adler's analysis of what he called "the five parts of life" revolutionized the way I looked at my life when I first encountered it sometime back in the '70s. He introduced the idea in his book, *The Time of Our Lives: The Ethics of Common Sense*.[41]

Adler started from the question, "How can I make a good life for myself?" He suggested that in order for us to make good lives for ourselves we must consider how we spend our time. In order to do that, he analyzed the various ways we can spend our time into five parts. First, there is what he called *sleep*, which he used as "the symbol for the whole set of activities that are biologically necessary" for us. It includes not only sleeping, but also eating, cleansing, etc. Second, there is what he called *play*, using it "to cover not only playing games but also participating in sports, indulging in amusements of one sort or another, and even engaging in

---

[40] Cf. our Lord's disciples dropping everything in order to follow him (see Mark 1:16-20 & 2:13-14 with John 8:12).

[41] New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970. The following quotations from Adler come from pp. 30-34.

such things as sleeping, eating, and exercising when we engage in them, beyond biological needs, for the pleasures that are intrinsic to these activities themselves." Third, there is *subsistence-work*—whatever work we may have to do to keep a roof over our heads, clothes on our bodies, and food on our tables. Fourth, there is *idling*, which is "a way of consuming time by doing nothing or as little as possible beyond the involuntary or autonomic actions of the body itself"—what one generation called "vegging out."

Finally, there is what Adler called *leisure.* This is a use of our time which "is not absolutely compulsory or biologically useful," which "does not contribute to health," and which doesn't "in its pure form . . . contribute to the production of consumable wealth," yet which, unlike play and idling, "is a useful activity, serving an end beyond itself, producing an extrinsic result that is desirable." Learning, he writes, "in all its forms is the most obvious example of it." In fact, "[a]nything that contributes to the growth of the individual as a person, not just as a biological organism, belongs in this category, as does anything the individual does that contributes to the improvement of his society—its component institutions and the elements of its culture, its arts and sciences."

Adler wasn't writing as a Christian, yet we can be grateful to him for this analysis of the ways we can spend our time. For if these are the five parts of life, I think it is obvious where the study of God's word, prayer, worship, fellowship, and so on fits in. The activities we must engage in so that God may remold our minds are leisure-time activities.

And so I leave you with an observation and a challenge. There are 168 hours in a week. Let's assume that about 68 of them are spent in the biologically necessary activities Adler calls *sleep*. The remaining 100 hours can be divided among the other four kinds of activities. We all need to spend some time doing each. For example, idling and play are important, for not to rest and refresh ourselves is to

take ourselves to be something we were not made to be. God intends us to follow a rhythm of work and rest (see Exod. 20:8-11; Luke 9:10). But how much of that 100 hours should be dedicated to leisure—and, more specifically, to spending our time growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? Of course, life must be lived in chapters, and sometimes we must trim how we spend our time to life's exigencies. Yet mightn't it be appropriate over our whole lives for us to tithe a tenth of those 100 hours to studying the Scriptures and great biblical and systematic theology based on God's word and prayer? That's about an hour-and-a-half a day. Isn't that fitting as our acts of intelligent worship to the one who has made and redeemed us? Our minds cannot be remolded by reading a verse or two of Scripture and a paragraph commenting on those verses each day. We are to live on *every* word that comes from the mouth of God (see Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4).[42] We cannot flourish on *Our Daily Bread.*

I began to tithe my time to Scripture and prayer some decades ago, and any biblical wisdom and understanding that I have been able to pass on to you today

---

[42] Thomas Watson wrote:

> The Word is our *Magna Charta* [*sic*] for heaven; shall we be ignorant of our charter? Col iii 16. 'Let the word of God dwell in you richly.' The memory must be a tablebook where the Word is written. . . .
>
> *Read the Bible with reverence*. Think in every line you read that God is speaking to you. . . . *Read with seriousness*. It is a matter of life and death; by this Word you must be tried; conscience and Scripture are the jury God will proceed by, in judging you. *Read the Word with affection*. Get your hearts quickened with the Word; go to it to fetch fire. . . . Labour that the Word may not only be a lamp to direct, but a fire to warm. *Read the Scripture*, not only as a history, but *as a love letter sent to you from God*, which may affect your hearts. Pray that the same Spirit that wrote the Word may assist you in reading it; that God's Spirit would show you the wonderful things of his law. (Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1958; originally published in 1692], 34-35; my emphases in the second paragraph)

Thanks to Mark Schulenburg for reminding me of this passage.

has come out of that. Mightn't the same be appropriate for you?[43]

—Mark R. Talbot
Associate Professor of Philosophy
Wheaton College

[43] Much of this piece is excerpted from Chapters Five and Six of my forthcoming book, *When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering.* I am grateful to the Christian Scholars' Fund for their support of my research and writing.