

Reflection Paper 2: Vocation

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James W. Fowler wrote that the concept of vocation is “the response a person makes with his or her total self to the address of God and to the calling to partnership” (77). In this paper, I will examine the concept of vocation and explore the meanings of this definition, using concrete examples to explore how this concept of vocation might help people in ministering to others.

The context in which Fowler brings up the discussion and eventual description quoted above is in his search “to provide a mutually critical correlation between developmental theories as normative visions of human development and a Christian understanding of what it means to be a mature or full human being,” as the Course Book quotes the video for session four (22). I understand Fowler to be saying that he is searching for a relation between human developmental theories and the Christian understanding of what a mature human being consists. I believe the Christian idea of vocation has a great deal to do with maturity for two reasons. One, in order to hear God, one must be attuned to Him. This requires a certain amount of growth. Two, in order to respond to God with the total self in partnership, one must have matured since children have to be taught to give the total self and partnership is a mature concept. I believe it would bear fruit at this point to define the word vocation as Fowler is using it in his book.

Vocation has several shades of meaning in the dictionary:

Latin *vocation-*, *vocatio* summons, *vocare* to call, *vox* voice, Middle English *vocacioun* **1 a** : a summons or strong inclination to a particular state or course of action; *especially* : a divine call to the religious life **b** : an entry into the priesthood or a religious order **2 a** : the work in which a person is regularly employed : **OCCUPATION** **b** : the persons engaged in a particular occupation **3** : the special function of an individual or group (Merriam).

The definitions of vocation dealing with religious life, priesthood and even occupation are too narrow and that Fowler had in mind a summons to a particular state, course of action or special function of an individual or group. This is stated most clearly in the preface, “Vocation...is larger than one’s job or occupation, deeper than a profession or life’s work. It means *finding a purpose for one’s life that is part of the purposes of God.*” Fowler’s thought can be seen as formed by his reading, quoting of and almost parroting Walter Brueggemann who viewed humans as created for covenant living that “transposes all identity questions into vocational questions” and that vocation is finding “a purpose for being in the world that is related to the purposes of God” (vii, italics in original and 75). My conception of vocation as Fowler and Brueggemann enunciate is that there is not just one vocation, such as a state of life, but that vocation encompasses the many different callings we receive throughout life as we grow and change. The *summons* in this dictionary definition is important because in order to work with God in partnership as Fowler states, one must know what God requires. This is what Christians refer to as God’s call.

Summons, to call and *voice* from the dictionary entry above evoke images of a sender and receiver engaged in some sort of communication. The question I see in considering this is how does God address human beings? Reflecting on this question, I want to highlight several of the ways in which God addresses people: direct verbal communication, through an intermediary such as scripture or other people, and internally. I had an experience that seemed to be direct communication. I was asleep one night in my Protestant years when I awoke and was speaking in a language I had never heard or learned. When this stopped, for I was not consciously doing the speaking, I heard what

sounded like an audible voice seeming to come from the headboard that said, “Andy, I want you to go to Sheyma.” This used to be a distant Air Force site near the end of the Aleutians. My reply was a negative one because I knew where it was and I did not want to go there. Instead of arguing, it felt as if God picked me up and hugged me, reassuring me in a non audible way. Believing it was God calling me, I submitted the paperwork and two weeks later, I received orders to move to this location. Never had anyone I worked with or for heard of orders coming this quickly and so I ruled out the voice as my own imagination or some evil force. The scripture, “by their fruits ye shall know them,” come to mind because the events after the call confirmed for me that it was God who called (Mt 7:20 KJV). Direct verbal communication is revealed in scripture, for example, God’s call of Abram in Genesis. Abram’s positive response to this direct communication resulted in God renaming him Abraham. A name change in scripture indicates a change in identity so that while Abram means “the father is exalted”, Abraham is “father of a host of nations” (Gen 17:5 NAB & Notes 2). There are several more name changes in scripture, such as the names Israel, Paul and Peter given to replace the old names, but there is not enough room in this short paper to address all the instances. The point is, when we respond to God’s summons, call and voice, our identity changes and we become who He intends us to be.

Scripture functions as an intermediary of communication between God and the believer on several levels. As the word of God that can be read, scripture reflects both good and bad examples of behavior, attitude and relating with others. God’s Spirit within one confirms the interpretation and consequent action from the words of scripture. Interpretation can come from the individual or Church, but one should safeguard self

interpretation, confirming it by an authority such as the Catholic Church's revealed teaching or a pastor or other spiritual leader, implementing the proverbial wisdom "where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety (Pr 11:14 KJV)." This point is illustrated in the example of the child who is told to wax the floor. The child thinks this means to throw candles on the floor because it knows candles are made of wax. If the child asked the parent what was meant, there would have been explanation which enlightened the child into right action. Prayerful reflection on scripture yields God's direction for the believer. Scripture as intermediary of communication between God and the believer presupposes communion with God, since the scripture is not alive apart from God who inspires it. My discussion does not include the person who uses scripture without prayerful reflection for personal gain or proving a point, as I did in my Protestant years.

People can also be a means by which God communicates with His people. It can happen by the words, actions or inactions of a person one respects. For example, I do not curse in the office that I run. Several of my people have noticed this and have modified their own speech because of my example. While this arguably could be discounted by another as not the actions of God because it was something I did or did not do, I believe God holds all things in being and is always working, even when we are not aware of it, so that nothing can happen apart from God, even if He is not mentioned or considered by the human point of view. Another example can be seen in the passage when the woman at the well meets Jesus. Afterward she goes and tells her neighbors about her encounter and that she has found the prophesied one who was to come. Then they meet Jesus, they are recorded to tell her, "Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard him

ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the savior of the world” (Jn 4:42 KJV). While it is not discussed in the text, I would assume the people who had come to this realization were changed in some way as they responded to this revealing of God’s anointed one as seems implied in the text. A final example was a friend I knew many years ago who died after contracting AIDS before it was as widely known about as it is now. Bill was one of the gentlest people I have had the pleasure to know. Being exposed to his way of relating to other people softened the harder exterior I had built up over the years. Even recalling his gentle manner of dealing with others now modifies my way of relating to others, being such a profound example for me of an alternative to “squash or be squashed.” This vocation to gentleness is one of many vocations to which I believe I am called.

A final way to consider how God communicates with people is internally. By internal communication, I mean the thoughts and conclusions within a person without direct outside influence as we see in the other three means of communication and the related examples. This is a little more difficult to express because the communication occurs within the self, but the underlying belief that makes this possible is that God lives within us in a substantial way, as can be understood by the passage in Revelation, “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (3:20 KJV). For example, when I met my future wife, internally I knew she was the one for me. In this example, I had to balance what I believed in my own conscience with other sources, such as Church teaching about this issue. This is a similar line of thinking as is mentioned in scripture, “do not trust every spirit but put the spirits to a test to see if they belong to God, because

many false prophets have appeared in the world” (1 Jn 4:1 NAB). In the example above when I thought I heard God tell me to go to Sheyma, which could easily have been an internal and not external communication, the results of the orders in such a short period of time from a base that was very difficult to leave verified to my satisfaction at the time that this was a call from God, that this was another vocation, the purpose of which became clear in living out the call.

There are two ideas of vocation I have touched on in this paper. The one that a person might use has a real effect on how one would minister to others. One is very narrow and limited to a religious calling or occupation. The other is explained by Fowler as the response of a person to God, putting the whole self into that response and working as God’s partner. Those who minister to others understanding vocation as a profession or life’s work are sending the message of alienation. Failure of a person to discover their vocation in the narrow sense could lead the person to think he or she was born apart from God and there is no connection. This could possibly lead to a belief there is no God, that one can do what one wants without consequences from any alleged Divine Being, as they might call it. It could mean the person never comes in contact with his or her God given talents and gifts, since, if the person cannot apparently hear the call, maybe that person is a failure who will follow what others tell him or her instead of maturing as a person in which God has given gifts to be shared with others. I believe what is implied by this very narrow and limited understanding of vocation has done much damage and has blinded many to the reality of what God does and continues to do, not just in the world at large, but also in them particularly. Conversely, ministering to people with a concept of vocation as a response to God with the whole self as God’s partner implies that God is

constantly calling us to hear and follow Him. This approach opens a never ending source of grace and direction to those who are ministered to in this way. The minister can free the people to incorporate their entire life in their God's call, which helps them to discover their gifts and talents and enables them to develop and use these gifts to accomplish the work of God. Vocation in this open sense allows people to become priests and nuns, teachers and astronauts, kind and gentle, honest and forthright. Ministers who use this approach facilitate a person's maturing and growing into the person God is calling them to be, all according to their response to God. There was once a young Jewish teenager, Mary the daughter of Anna, whose response to God changed history. She is called in theology and throughout history Theotkos, Mother of God, the Blessed Mother. What makes the difference is the response to life, come what may, in living a life of sanctity or sinfulness. Having a correct understanding of vocation is one of the primary keys in being a minister who enables the people to whom he or she ministers to be whom God is calling them to be.

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