

**A Theology of Work for the Underemployed:
Rethinking Vocation Narratives**

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Abstract

Does the way Christian scholars talk about vocation apply only to the privileged? For the majority of people in the world, fulfilling work is far from attainable. Instead work means dealing with disappointments—expecting a job and finding none or working in a job with fewer hours, longer hours, less certainty, less skill use, or less status than hoped for. Even in the United States in this period of unprecedented high employment, college graduates are becoming more likely to work in jobs that are low-paying, part-time, or not requiring a college degree. Meanwhile much scholarly and popular discourse on vocation assumes that each individual can exercise sufficient agency to craft a personal vocational journey that serves outward to a needy world. That picture of work simply does not match many people’s lived experiences. In this paper I recommend three shifts in discourse about theology of work and vocation to better address disappointments in work: from “voyage of self-discovery” to “no one is an island”; from “adjust your attitude” to “acknowledge oppression;” and from “fix the world” to “create communities of mutual transformation.”

For many years of my life, when I thought about how to find and choose good work, the advice that came to mind was a phrase I've heard quoted often in Christian circles: Frederick Buechner's poetic definition of the word "vocation."¹ Vocation, he writes, is the place where "your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."² When I was in college, that definition seemed to make a lot of sense. Like many other white, middle class people raised in Christian homes, I saw vocation as a journey of understanding the skilled individual I was made to be, what uniquely made me glad, and how I could meet needs in the world around me. I expected to have many options at every turn of my life journey, and I saw serving others as the primary purpose to my work.

Much Christian writing about work and vocation makes similar assumptions: work, if chosen well, will bring gladness, and the direction of influence will be outward from the individual "you" with resources to the "world" that "hungers." Christian work, it would seem, happens when fulfilled individuals exercise agency to give something to needy others.

The problem is, that picture of work simply does not match many people's lived experiences. For the majority of people in the world, fulfilling, satisfying, dignifying, consistent work, chosen from a range of options, marked by hope of future promotion, and making a clear contribution to a better world is far from attainable. Instead work means dealing with disappointments—hoping for a job and finding none, or working in a job with fewer hours, longer hours, less certainty, less skill use, less status than hoped for. While working too many hours or having no work at all may seem like very different situations, in this paper I refer to such experiences collectively with the term underemployment because they share the theme of disappointment, being "under"—or less than—expected.

In this paper I expand the theological discourse on work by asking specifically what Christian teaching says about underemployment. In addition to biblical analysis and the writings

¹For all the books written on vocation, it is odd that this little quote from a book not specifically about vocation has become so famous. Buechner himself insists that the definitions in his book "make no claim of being even close to definitive. At their best they may serve to raise an unsettling question or two," which, appropriately, happened in this paper (p. xi).

² *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 95.

of other scholars, I draw upon my own qualitative research interviewing and living among unemployed and low-wage laborers in South Africa.³

South Africa offers an extreme picture of what happens when the societal conditions for work go wrong. In 2015, only 43 percent of the working-age population was employed; among those under 34, only 31 per cent.⁴ The extreme shortage of jobs combines with a long history of work experiences that do not bring dignity. Under the apartheid political system that ended in 1994, people's work opportunities, as well as their educational opportunities and living locations, were determined according to racial category. Since 1994, many policies have changed, but attitudes, living locations, educational stratification, and discrimination in hiring remain largely unchanged in many settings. For over twenty years, South Africa's unemployment rate (the percentage of adults actively seeking work) has hovered at 20%—on par with the highest level ever recorded in the United States during the Great Depression.⁵ Unemployment rates among youth are consistently 20-25 percentage points higher. Furthermore, the number of those counted as not actively seeking work has swelled. Black South Africans face a double challenge of both job scarcity and demeaning work experiences. Those who find any formal employment at all are likely to experience discrimination, intercultural miscommunication, limited promotion opportunities, and scarce training for higher skilled positions. While a fortunate few in the area I researched had jobs that they found economically and emotionally satisfying, the majority of black South African adults had never had such an experience. South Africa offers a case study where Christians across multiple cultural backgrounds have grappled with extreme unemployment, discrimination, and unequal opportunities.

³I lived for a total of about five years in South Africa, one year of which was devoted to formal research about unemployment. Like most ethnographic researchers, I learned by sharing experiences and relationships. I conducted over 130 interviews with underemployed people, low-wage employees, employers, pastors, and trainers in employment-readiness programs. I spent hundreds of hours observing and participating in ten businesses as well as in homes, churches, music gatherings, street conversations, employment trainings, and other community activities.

⁴ Statistics South Africa, "National and Provincial Labour Market: Youth," June 29, 2015.

⁵ Daniela Casale, Colette Muller, and Dorrit Posel, "'Two Million Net New Jobs': A Reconsideration of the Rise in Employment in South Africa, 1995–2003," *South African Journal of Economics* 72, no. 5 (2004): 978–1002.

It might seem obvious that underemployment matters in a country like South Africa. In the United States, though, with unemployment at an all-time low since 2009,⁶ why prepare people for disappointments at work? Low unemployment disguises the ways that people in higher-income countries also experience disappointments at work. The number of United States college graduates who work in jobs that are low-paying, part-time, or not requiring a college degree dramatically increased from 34 percent to 44 percent of college graduates in ten years.⁷ Discrimination in hiring continues to disproportionately affect certain groups. Studies continually find that white job candidates even with lower credentials or criminal records are more likely to get hired or called for an interview than African American candidates.⁸ Good jobs, it seems, are often hard to find, even for many American college graduates.

And yet the vast majority of theological discourse on work and vocation treats work as if it will be good, available, fulfilling, and productive. In a book about discerning the will of God, pastor Jerry Sittser writes, “We might have ten important decisions to make and a hundred possible pathways we could follow... We can, in good conscience, choose from any number of reasonable alternatives and continue to do the will of God.”⁹ This privileged situation simply does not describe the work opportunities most people face. Or consider a pamphlet designed to equip pastors to share Christian economic wisdom, in which Jay Slocum writes, “Biblical perspective on calling and stewardship leads us to see ‘ordinary’ work and adult responsibility as the primary place where most of our young people will find the identity, meaning, and purpose they’re looking for.”¹⁰ Many Christians seem to equate purpose, identity, and meaning with work, despite scarce biblical evidence that these are equivalent. Recently a woman with a Masters’ degree from a Christian college told me that her year of unemployment after

⁶ United States Department of Labor, “Unemployment Rate 2.5 Percent for College Grads, 7.7 Percent for High School Dropouts, January 2017,” : The Economics Daily: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, February 7, 2017, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2017/unemployment-rate-2-point-5-percent-for-college-grads-7-point-7-percent-for-high-school-dropouts-january-2017.htm>.

⁷ Jaison R. Abel, Richard Deitz, and Yaqin Su, “Are Recent College Graduates Finding Good Jobs?,” *Current Issues in Economics and Finance* 20, no. 1 (2014): 1–8.

⁸ Devah Pager, *Marked: Race, Crime, and Finding Work in an Era of Mass Incarceration* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁹ *The Will of God as a Way of Life* (Zondervan, 2009), 31.

¹⁰ “A Christian Vision for Flourishing Communities,” in *A Christian Vision for Flourishing Communities: An Initiative of the Oikonomia Network* (Economic Wisdom Project, n.d.), 25.

graduating was “the hardest year of my life,” adding that her theological training left her utterly unprepared for unemployment. Another recent Bachelor’s Degree graduate who had spent six of nine months unemployed told me she had learned to believe that her “purpose” and “real life” were on hold until she found a good job. A student who read a draft of this paper commented further, “Yes, and not even just a *good* job, but the one *right* job.” As if living with a demeaning job or no paid work at all weren’t financially, emotionally, and socially challenging enough, Christian discourse often communicates that the underemployed are a rarity, or are personally to blame, or are valueless human beings.

People with fewer opportunities—especially in communities that have been marginalized for generations—often take on a skepticism that work will ever bring fulfillment or dignity. In these situations, Christian vocation narratives founded upon optimism ring hollow. If Christian conversations about work are built on assumptions that opportunities abound, work brings dignity, and hard work is all it takes to achieve a dream job, what happens when life feels nothing like that? Whether among black South Africans and others who rarely find good jobs, or among United States college graduates with expectations of perfect jobs, theology of work falls short if it fails to acknowledge the real challenges surrounding work.

In this paper I examine three assumptions that underlie a common Christian narrative of vocation. First, individuals embark on a voyage of individual discovery to find their unique innate passions and skills. Secondly, by setting their attitude toward hard work and determination, they can overcome drudgery or any temporary career hiccups. Finally, their ultimate purpose is to give ever outward, serving and fixing the exterior world. For each of these three narrative elements, I suggest an alternative. Rather than the “voyage of self-discovery” message, I point to the social and cultural production of subjectivities that shape work possibilities, summed up in poet John Donne’s famous phrase, “no one is an island.” Instead of the promise that individuals can overcome any challenge, I point to the importance of acknowledging oppression where it occurs. And shifting from the narrow emphasis on “fixing the world” as vocational purpose, I advocate a vision of vocation based on communities of mutual transformation.

From “Voyage of Self-Discovery” to “No One is an Island”

I once overheard two college seniors laughing about their commitment to immediately delete any emails that came from the college’s Center for Vocation and Career. When I asked why, they said thinking about vocation made them feel guilty and anxious. To many college students, “vocational discernment” means making complicated, stress-inducing decisions that seem to determine every aspect of their lives. Even when vocational programming emphasizes the frequency with which graduates change careers, students feel pressure to find their perfect path. In an analysis of the outcomes of vocational training at Christian institutions, Tim Clydesdale writes that “because cultural scripts place career choice at the center of life satisfaction, and college as the locus of career preparation ... [a]ll too often, students approach college as a maze with multiple exits, with their life satisfaction determined by finding the right exit and doing so quickly.”¹¹ This picture of vocation as a journey of discovering and using personal passions and strengths is not necessarily the message that colleges intend to communicate, but the narrative is so deeply infiltrated into cultural messages that colleges find it hard to counter.

Part of the stress students at Christian colleges feel in thinking about careers grows from a subtle and pervasive message that employment is where Christians live out their God-given purpose. This risk is exemplified in the Christian pamphlet quoted above that took for granted that “people will find the identity, meaning, and purpose they’re looking for” at work. Work decisions become laden with moral significance: one can choose employment virtuously or poorly, with results that seem to determine an entire lifetime of purposeful service—or disobedience—to God. In a chapter titled “Actually, You Can’t Be Anything You Want (And It’s a Good Thing, Too),” William Cavanaugh argues that young people have been so “marinated” in false cultural messages insisting they can and must choose their own “best life” that they become overwhelmed by what Barry Schwartz calls the “tyranny of choice.”¹²

¹¹ *The Purposeful Graduate: Why Colleges Must Talk to Students about Vocation* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2015), 109.

¹² William T. Cavanaugh, “Actually, You Can’t Be Anything You Want (And It’s a Good Thing, Too),” in *At This Time and In This Place: Vocation and Higher Education*, ed. David S. Cunningham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 26, 34; Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice* (New York: Ecco, 2004), 15.

The message that “good” individuals scrutinize and actualize their best selves to find career success is not only a product of dubious Christian theology. The narrative gained strength in the United States and elsewhere through the rise of neoliberal ideology, which gained political and cultural influence globally especially from the 1980s to early 2000s.¹³ Neoliberalism, a set of economic policies as well as ideas about how to define and achieve the good life, places individual freedom at the center of life achievement. In neoliberal thinking, whether people succeed or fail in their pursuits of the good life, from education to employment to macroeconomic growth, depends upon individuals exercising freedoms to make choices to market themselves in a free market (Harvey, 2005). Many scholars have documented the experiences of low-wage and unemployed workers surrounded by neoliberal policies and beliefs. In settings as diverse as Silicon Valley, New York City fast food restaurants, and Turkish and East German factories, to give just a few examples, underemployed people experienced shame or anxiety as they dealt with competitive labor markets by attempting to redefine themselves rather than address systemic causes of unemployment.¹⁴

One central problem with the voyage of self-discovery paradigm is this: fulfilling work is never accomplished by an individual alone. Responsibility for creating vocational success involves communities and societies. No individual is a purely free agent in a wide open space of possibilities, and the cause and effect reactions that shape a person’s life are never as simple as merely one individual’s choices, no matter how prayerfully discerned those choices may be. Discourse that places responsibility for finding a fulfilling career solely on an individual has at least two dangerous outcomes: it causes stress and mistaken understanding of self among job-seekers, and it distracts from crucial measures that could more effectively address systemic causes of underemployment. As anthropologists and sociologists often argue, social structures matter.

¹³ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Ergul Ergun, “Bargaining with the Devil: Neoliberalism, Informal Work and Workers’ Resistance in the Clothing Industry of Turkey,” in *Social Justice and Neoliberalism: Global Perspectives*, ed. Adrian Smith, Alison Stenning, and Katie Willis (London: Zed Books, 2008); Kathrin Horschelmann, “Transitions to Work and the Making of Neo-Liberal Selves: Growing Up in (Former) East Germany,” in *Social Justice and Neoliberalism: Global Perspectives*, ed. Adrian Smith, Alison Stenning, and Katie Willis (London: Zed Books, 2008); Carrie M. Lane, *A Company of One: Insecurity, Independence, and the New World of White-Collar Unemployment* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2011); Katherine S. Newman, *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City* (New York: Vintage books, 2000).

Social science theorists have for over a century attempted to understand the processes whereby individuals' own agency together with their external environment—in some combination—shape their life path. One helpful set of language for describing the interplay between seemingly “free” decisions of individuals and the social setting of those individuals comes from scholarship often referred to as practice theory. Practice theorists have argued that individual agency and societal and cultural settings simultaneously produce human behavior, in a kind of “regulated improvisation.”¹⁵ Humans do exercise the agency of having capacities to act on their intentions and pursue their aims, but at the same time individuals “can never act outside of the multiplicity of social relations in which they are enmeshed.”¹⁶ Social structures offer certain individuals and groups generous freedom and pleasing possibilities; for others, the options are limited and destructive. As sociologist Anthony Giddens writes, it is a mistake to “conceive of the structures of domination built into social institutions as in some way grinding out ‘docile bodies’ who behave like... automata,” but it is also a mistake to leave unacknowledged the many processes by which individuals both make and are made by society.¹⁷

This picture of the constant circularity between individuals and society is useful for thinking about a theology of underemployment because it lifts the blame of underemployment from the shoulders of an individual alone, while also calling to account every individual to be involved in producing societal structures conducive to better work experiences for all. As David Cunningham writes in an edited volume on vocation, “We need to remain aware that, both for ourselves and for others in our lives, the lifelong process of accumulating privileges and disadvantages will mean that our relationships will continue to evolve and reconfigure themselves over time. In sum, the lives of others play a key role in giving our vocations a particular shape and texture.”¹⁸ To make sense theologically, however, this picture is missing

¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology 16 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 57.

¹⁶ Sherry B. Ortner, *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 139, 130.

¹⁷ *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity, 1984), 16.

¹⁸ “Epilogue: Vocabularies of Vocation,” in *Vocation across the Academy: A New Vocabulary for Higher Education*, ed. David S. Cunningham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 322.

one crucial component: the role of God. Here Miroslav Volf offers a vision of how God, society, and individuals relate in determining work experiences. Volf writes that the Spirit's equipping and calling "do not occur in a social and natural vacuum ... to the isolated human soul," but are "mediated through each person's social interrelations and psychosomatic constitution," which "themselves result from the interaction of human beings with the Spirit of God."¹⁹ Work at its best is that which the Spirit inspires, working through both individual and social structure.

If we see agency as a socially constructed circularity of individual choices and societal structures, vocation becomes not just a responsibility of a choice-laden individual, but also a reflection of societal setting, and a setting for potential societal change. David Cunningham writes about the positive side of this news: "When other human beings enter the picture, the process of discernment becomes more complicated, in that one must attend to multiple voices; but it also becomes easier, because one need not bear the weight of every decision alone."²⁰ Seeing the social constructedness of careers also implies responsibility. By recognizing that humans produce our own social structures, we broaden our conception of the ethics surrounding work. African theologian Xavier Massingue, after reviewing a wide theological literature of work, likewise argues that Christians will not be effective in transforming individuals unless they reject individualistic misreadings of scripture and "deal with the systems and structures of evil."²¹ Recognizing that no one is an island means Christian work ethics is not just about doing one's job well; it demands that everyone in society create settings conducive to human flourishing and virtuous character. I consider this implication further in the next two sections.

From "Adjust your Attitude" to "Acknowledge Oppression"

In a poem titled "The Elixir," George Herbert writes that when one has a "sense that one is called to the work by God," one has "the elixir that turns the base metal of drudgery into the

¹⁹ *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 115.

²⁰ Cunningham, "Epilogue: Vocabularies of Vocation," 321–22.

²¹ *Theology of Work and Poverty Alleviation in Mozambique* (Carlisle, UK: Langham, 2013), 37.

gold of something divine.”²² In this picture of work, an individual attitude alone is enough to turn drudgery to gold. While having a sense of God’s purpose in one’s work does change the experience, when work situations are marked by oppression, the Bible asks far more of society than merely a change of heart for those within those situations.

For many people, the terms “Protestant” and “work” bring to mind Max Weber’s classic book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.²³ In popular usage, the phrase “Protestant ethic” (often called the “Protestant work ethic”) is often used as if it accurately describes a set of beliefs and behaviors with strong biblical backing in Protestant theology. Weber actually never argues that the Bible itself teaches that working harder makes someone more moral or rational. Instead, Weber traces the historical development of ideas about work from Luther to his present era, arguing that these beliefs arose in a particular historical and cultural setting, more as a response to lay believers’ uncertainty about their salvation than as a carefully supported reading of scripture.²⁴ He argues that Protestants, especially in America, in their efforts to prove to themselves and others that they were saved while not appearing ostentatiously wealthy, stumbled upon the paired behaviors of long work hours and reinvesting savings. According to Weber, these behaviors appeased the uncertain consciences of certain Calvinist believers while also becoming the driver of an uncomplaining work force and the investments that capitalism required for take-off. Weber further argues that beliefs about the moral imperative of hard work spread beyond Protestantism to become the dominant culturally reproduced “spirit of capitalism” that undergirds the socio-economic system of capitalism in Western nations.

²² Gilbert C. Meilaender, ed., *Working: Its Meaning and Its Limits* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 11.

²³ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism: And Other Writings*, ed. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin Classics, 2002 [1905]).

²⁴The idea that hard work is good for the soul did not originate with Protestantism, either. Some monastic traditions, for example, called laziness “the enemy of the soul” and used work as a penitential practice. Volf makes an extensive argument that the roots of capitalism are traceable to Catholicism before Protestantism. See *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*, 73.; Amintore Fanfani *Catholicism, Protestantism, and Capitalism* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935).

The historical accuracy of Weber's account has been questioned,²⁵ and yet the title phrase of his book has taken on a force of its own in popular culture. Many Christians operate under the assumption that dedication to work will improve the character of a person, and thus any difficult work is justifiable. Notably, this idea was used by Christians and non-Christians alike to justify slavery across the Americas and forced labor in Africa. A narrative that equates the willingness to work hard with morality and just rewards can lead people to assume that underemployment is always caused by unwillingness to work hard. A white South African founder of a Christian development organization exemplified these assumptions when he told me in an interview, "The whole Bible is about hard work." In place of the many words that might accurately end that sentence (the whole Bible is about grace or Christ, for example), Christians are choosing "hard work."

In the United States today, Protestants who are racially white are especially likely to place a moral emphasis on dedication to hard work, believing that motivation is the main determinant of economic success. Sociologists Jason Shelton and Michael Emerson compared how white and black Protestant Christians in the United States responded to a survey asking why, "on the average, African Americans have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people"?²⁶ Given four choices, 55.1% of white Protestant Americans answered, "because most African Americans just don't have the motivation or will power to pull themselves up out of poverty." Only 26.5% choose the option, "mainly due to discrimination." African Americans chose these two answers in nearly the exact opposite percentages. Shelton found that white Protestants are even more likely than the overall white population to blame poverty on motivation. In a separate study conducted at the University of Chicago, 35% of baby boomers and 31% of millennials believed that blacks are lazier or less hard working than whites.²⁷ In

²⁵For example, Gilbert Meilaender points out that sixteenth century Puritans such as William Perkins, author of "A Treatise of the Vocations or Callings of men," would have been "astonished" that their writings have been used in the modern era to reinforce the idea that "work is integral to human identity and fulfillment" or that work is "the sphere in which one fulfills oneself." See Meilaender, *Working: Its Meaning and Its Limits*, 13.

²⁶ Jason E. Shelton and Michael Emerson, *Blacks and Whites in Christian America How Racial Discrimination Shapes Religious Convictions* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 232.

²⁷ Data from the General Social Survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, available at <http://gss.norc.org>, cited by Raj Patel and Jason Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 41.

other words, the hegemonic narrative that blames underemployment on lack of individual motivation is strong in America, especially among white Protestants. As I argue elsewhere,²⁸ an insidiously racist narrative that associates blackness with laziness and ignores societal causes of unemployment is even more pervasive in South Africa.

The blame-laziness narrative does damage in many ways. First, it often asks the impossible of workers. In research on workplace satisfaction, psychologist Barry Schwartz emphasizes that managers must intervene to change work responsibilities because “there are limits to what an individual can do psychologically to interpret a soulless job as a meaningful one.”²⁹ Secondly, the narrative of “change your attitude” directs attention away from significant social causes of unemployment, and may even exacerbate those by discouraging employers from training supposedly “untrainable” or “lazy” workers. The narrative disguises the impossible alternatives many low-skilled workers face between physically, emotionally, or relationally destructive work or no work at all. As social scientists have argued, even if a person manages to develop a positive attitude amidst discouraging work prospects, their attitude alone will not solve racial prejudice or unjust situations.³⁰

Christians must insist that even any slim possibility that some workers might grow closer to God during harsh labor is never an excuse for unjust treatment of workers. Theologian Gilbert Meilaender also warns Christians that “by undergirding the dignity of irksome work in powerful religious language, we may too easily be invited to overlook just how hard and unsatisfying much toil is. ... [W]e should be careful lest this religious language lead us to ignore the empirical realities of the work many people must do.”³¹ Likewise, Volf points out that Christians must discern “which forms of work are incompatible with the dignity of human

²⁸ Christine Jeske, “Are Cars the New Cows? Changing Wealth Goods and Moral Economies in South Africa,” *American Anthropologist* 118, no. 3 (September 2016): 483–94; Christine Jeske, “Why Work? Do We Understand What Motivates Work-Related Decisions in South Africa?,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 44, no. 1 (2018).

²⁹ *Why We Work* (New York: Simon & Schuster/ TED, 2015), 26.

³⁰ Philippe Bourgois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Newman, *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City*.

³¹ *The Freedom of a Christian: Grace, Vocation, and the Meaning of Our Humanity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 12–13.

beings as God's free and responsible creatures, and which forms of work develop their personality and which stifle it."³²

Ultimately when Christians focus only on improving workers' attitudes, they overlook a call to intervene in injustice. In South Africa I heard stories of workplaces where people broke limbs and received no compensation, worked with sawing machinery without protective gear, stood guard beside valuable equipment without self-protection, were required to work overtime without prior notice, worked seven days a week, washed cars for nothing more than tips, and dug hard soil more than eight hours a day. Many experienced discrimination. In order to find work, many parents saw their children once a month or less. At a higher level, international tariffs, powerful giant companies, and the race to the bottom of low wages to lower income countries all squeezed small company profits, pushing local managers to hire fewer workers with shorter-term contracts and less dignifying relational arrangements. These examples were not unusual in South Africa, and much more could be named across the world—refugees and migrants denied work permits, human trafficking, child slavery, and the list goes on. Such causes of underemployment are often so diffuse that people write off situations as inevitable. When problems are incomprehensibly complex, it is easier to ignore them in favor of a simpler story that individuals just need to work harder to improve their lives.

One of the clearest illustrations of why vocational theology needs to acknowledge oppression rather than just advise people to adjust their attitudes appears in the biblical narrative in the book of Exodus. When Moses requests that Pharaoh allow the Israelites to leave their slavery in Egypt, Pharaoh responds, "They are lazy; that is why they are crying out, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God.' Make the work harder for the people so that they keep working and pay no attention to lies."³³ A few verses later Pharaoh repeats, "'Lazy, that's what you are—lazy! That is why you keep saying, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.' Now get to work."³⁴ His words echo in the justifications that have been made for slavery and oppressive work through the millennia.

³² *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*, 74.

³³ Exodus 5:8-9. All references from NIV.

³⁴ Exodus 5:17-18a.

In contrast to Pharaoh, the biblical author calls the situation what it is: oppression. And God does not ignore oppression: “God heard their groaning... and was concerned about them.”³⁵ Imagine how differently the verse would read as, “God saw that Moses had ingenuity, determination, and good work ethics to rise above his tough upbringing, so he called Moses to a career path of deep gladness using all his gifts.” God shows a direct concern for oppressive working conditions and insists that his followers join him in rectifying those conditions. As God saves Israel from oppressive underemployment, he demonstrates that ending oppression takes more than the effort of the oppressed; it requires God’s intervention and his complete redesign of society—spelled out from Levitical law to the formation of the New Testament church.

Notably, freedom from present oppression often involves waiting, even for generations. The phrase, “How long?”—spoken by Moses in Egypt and again and again in the Psalms of lament—voices a longing for the “already but not yet” reality of God’s redemption on earth.³⁶ The hundreds of years Israelites spent in Egypt are easy to brush past in excitement for the story of redemption to come. But for those who spend decades, lifetimes, or generations in oppressive work situations, promises of ever-upward careers ring hollow.

This is not to say that employment itself is necessarily oppressive, as Marxist theorists have at times suggested. Acknowledging oppression means learning to recognize where it does or does not exist in work settings. The author of Ecclesiastes reflects at length on the sometimes-oppressive, sometimes-good nature of work. He sees laborers for whom “all their days their work is grief and pain.”³⁷ He is well aware of oppression so terrible that “the dead... are happier than the living.”³⁸ And yet, he resolves that at least in some situations, people receive from God the opportunity to “find satisfaction in their toilsome labor” and “to accept their lot and be happy in their toil.”³⁹ Whether done by believer or unbeliever, work has the potential to cooperate with God in the transformative process of the new creation, or to ruin God’s good creation.⁴⁰

³⁵ Exodus 1:12, 14; Exodus 2:23b-25.

³⁶ See Exodus 10:3 and Psalms 4, 6, 13, 35, 62, 74, 79, 80, and 82.

³⁷ Ecclesiastes 2:23.

³⁸ 4:2.

³⁹ 5:18-19.

⁴⁰ See Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 120.

When theology of work acknowledges that oppression can and does happen in work settings, the narrative shifts in an important way: God and society—not just an individual job-seeker—become responsible for creating settings where work can bring human flourishing. As I explore in the next section, this means that vocation no longer involves just a “hungry world” and an individual serving that world, but also “hungry” individual job-seekers who need transformation of themselves and their social settings. For those in positions of privilege, their role in the vocational narrative shifts from a self-congratulatory place of having personally achieved a good and influential working situation, to a position of gratitude, lament, and responsibility for others. As George Orwell reflects after a detailed description of the harsh working conditions of coal miners:

Most of the time, of course, we should prefer to forget that they were doing it. It is so with all types of manual work; it keeps us alive, and we are oblivious of its existence... [W]e are capable of forgetting it as we forget the blood in our veins. In a way it is even humiliating to watch coal-miners working. It raises in you a momentary doubt about your own status as an “intellectual” and a superior person generally. For it is brought home to you, at least while you are watching, that it is only because miners sweat their guts out that superior persons can remain superior.⁴¹

In contrast to the narrative that urges individual workers in such oppressive settings to merely “focus on the positive” or “minister to the people around you,” this narrative urges entire communities to identify and rectify injustices that are woven through employment settings and systems.

From “Fix the World” to Communities of Mutual Transformation

Theology of work and vocation often emphasizes the need to choose work based on the needs of “those whom the work serves.”⁴² In the common narrative of individuals discovering

⁴¹ “The Road to Wigan Pier (Excerpt),” in *Working: Its Meaning and Its Limits*, ed. Gilbert C. Meilaender (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2000), 98.

⁴² Margaret E. Mohrmann, “‘Vocation Is Responsibility’: Broader Scope, Deeper Discernment,” in *Vocation across the Academy: A New Vocabulary for Higher Education*, ed. David S. Cunningham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 28.

and living out a calling in the world, the flow of influence is unidirectional, from the individual to society. As discussed above, vocation in this picture treats skills and abilities as something inherent in individuals, not shaped and produced by social interactions over a lifetime. This narrative also treats the individual as having responsibility *to* all others, never as the recipient of any responsibility *from* others. There is no element of receiving in this picture of vocation, only giving. For people who need the financial support of others or who cannot find work that uses the skills they hope to share, this raises the question, is outward service an integral element of vocation? Or can one be called to be a net receiver of others' serving? Taken a step further, is it wrong not to work? Often the implied answers to these questions is that vocation happens only when one has a job to do to serve others. Waiting, receiving, and trudging on without evidence of results, it would seem, occur in a realm outside of vocation. Times of sickness, job-searching, disability, retirement, even education do not neatly fit in that definition of vocation. If output and solving needs equal vocation, we are left with a picture of God's calling that misses worship, receiving, or being in need. Ultimately we miss grace.

A theology of work must treat righteousness not just as serving others, but as being a person who gives and receives in a community that together is being transformed to honor God. The many New Testament admonitions that end in "one another" testify that Christians were never intended to only give. In order to love one another, honor one another, live in harmony with one another, encourage one another, serve one another, be kind and compassionate to one another, sing songs to one another, and teach one another, people must be receivers as well as givers.⁴³ Their job is not to be perfect givers, but to be a church together.

At a conference on vocational teaching for colleges, presenter Shirley Hershey Showalter⁴⁴ used the Mary Oliver poem "Wild Geese" to convey what it means to live out vocation in a transformative community rather than an individual-fixes-the-world mindset. The poem begins, "You do not have to be good," and continues, "Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine." The final lines draw together the theme of needing and being needed by a community, saying that the world is "over and over announcing your place/ in the family of

⁴³ Romans 13:8, 12:10, 12:16; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Galatians 5:13; Ephesians 4:32, 5:19; Colossians 3:16.

⁴⁴ "Called to Tell Our Stories" (Vocation across the Academy: Storytelling, Mapmaking, and a Sense of Direction, Berry College, February 23, 2018).

things.”⁴⁵ That phrase, “in the family of things,” a place where we have our own despair and respond to others, describes well a mutually transformative church body. In that kind of community there is space for people with any employment status.

When Christians overemphasize the need for vocation to involve outward service, there is potential to misguide both the underemployed, who experience what I would call “frustrated service,” as well as those who tend toward “over service.” For those who find themselves unable do what society recognizes as work, like the graduate who felt her life could only begin when she found a job, the “fix the world through your work” narrative implies that the underemployed are purposeless, valueless, or even sinful. Indeed, one employment training instructor in South Africa stated that by getting people jobs she was “giving them value.” In the logic of capitalism, one’s value equals their profit-generating ability. One deserves to receive only in exchange for something, whether labor or goods. That capitalist notion combined with the Christian “better to give than to receive” mantra leaves many underemployed people with a combination of guilt and frustration at their seeming lack of value. It is all too easy for Christians to be complicit in a society systematically denies that value is inherent to being human, rather than determined by accomplishments.

In contrast to the underemployed who experience frustrated service, there are many whose work is characterized by over service. Both frustrated service and over service result from the same assumption that Christian vocation means giving, not receiving. For those who see themselves as living out the always-serving, always-giving vocation of the savior complex, workaholic tendencies and self-idolatry are sin tendencies. The assumption that Christians can always give and never receive presents a mathematical impossibility—if everyone always gave more than they received, who would receive the extra? The unspoken solution to the math problem is that anyone who is a net receiver must be someone who is not living in a Christian vocation. Such a view directly contradicts the foundational doctrine that Christians are defined by their very position as net receivers—of God’s grace. This creates a perceived divide between those *other* people out there who receive the kindness of the Christians, and the Christians themselves. In this mindset, Christians can come to see themselves as saviors, taking on a “god-

⁴⁵ Mary Oliver, *Wild Geese: Selected Poems* (Hexham, UK: Bloodaxe, 2004).

complex”⁴⁶ that ultimately denies both the need for Christ and the human dignity of those receiving.

A remedy for this individual-fixes-the-world narrative is a recovery of the biblical picture of transformative community, demonstrated in the Old Testament vision of communities of shalom, Jesus’ New Testament vision of the Kingdom of God, and the New Testament church.

After God led Israel out of oppression through a massive systemic change that no individual could have orchestrated alone, he gave them guidelines for how to create a new kind of community, one that repels oppression. Included in those laws were many admonitions to treat workers fairly: “Do not defraud;” “Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight;” “Do not do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ... Leave them for the poor and the foreigner;” do not “rule over” slaves “ruthlessly;” and “Do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy.”⁴⁷ Even in the command to “observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” in Deuteronomy includes an admonition for managers: their servants and children should not work either. As in many of the laws pertaining to worker justice, the commandment concludes with a reminder that God himself will defend mistreated laborers from oppressive Israelites, just as he did when the Israelites were oppressed in Egypt.⁴⁸

As the narrative of the Old Testament unfolds, sometimes the Israelites exemplify concern for workers, as when Solomon offers to pay foreign Lebanese foresters working on the temple “whatever wages you [the Lebanese king] set.”⁴⁹ The Bible also makes clear that communities have potential to cause rampant underemployment. In the time leading up to Israel’s destruction by Assyria and Babylon, prophets explained that as communities neglect God’s laws, changes occur in politics, the natural environment, and economic systems that result in suffering among workers.⁵⁰ To the extent that the Israelites created a community of shalom, workers thrived, and importantly, so did those who could not work. In a community of

⁴⁶ Jayakumar Christian, *God of the Empty-Handed: Poverty, Power & the Kingdom of God* (Monrovia, Calif: World Vision Intl, 1999).

⁴⁷ Leviticus 19:13a, 19:13b, 19:9-10, 29:43; Deuteronomy 24:14.

⁴⁸ Deuteronomy 5:12-15.

⁴⁹ 1 Kings 5:6.

⁵⁰ e.g. Isaiah 19:4-10, Zechariah 8:10.

shalom, widows, orphans, children, those without land, and those with diseases all have a place in society. Their protection and value is affirmed, regardless of whether they serve others or receive from others.

In the New Testament, Christ uses the word “kingdom” to describe the transformed and still transforming community that God brings about on earth. Jesus’ interactions with believers offer a picture of vocation in which any chance to serve others is rooted first of all in the human need to receive. He sends out his followers saying, “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.”⁵¹ As for treatment of workers, Jesus commends a Roman centurion who cared enough about the suffering of his servant to humble himself to ask Jesus for help and told stories commending generous masters and condemning ungracious masters.⁵² The letters to the early church include even more direct warnings to masters and consumers.⁵³

The task of the church is not only to train individuals to work hard, have good attitudes about work, or serve others. The church’s wider task is to create the settings in which work can be good, and everyone can thrive. In a treatise on work, Dorothy Sayers notes that if Christians truly believed that humans are made in God’s image, then they would care not only about their own work, but about processes of economic production more broadly. “There would be processes and strikes—not only about pay and conditions, but about the quality of the work demanded and the honesty, beauty, and usefulness of the goods produced.”⁵⁴ She writes that “the Church must concern herself not only with such questions as the just price and proper working conditions: she must concern herself with seeing that the work itself is such as a human being can perform without degradation—that no one is required by economic or any other considerations to devote himself to work that is contemptible, soul-destroying, or harmful.”⁵⁵

⁵¹ Matthew 10:8

⁵² Matthew 8:6-13; Matthew 20:15, 18:13.

⁵³ e.g. Ephesians 6:5-9, James 5:4.

⁵⁴ “Dorothy Sayers (Excerpt),” in *Working: Its Meaning and Its Limits*, ed. Gilbert C. Meilaender (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2000), 45.

⁵⁵ 45.

Concluding Thoughts

By both omission and commission, the Christian discourse on work and vocation has often done harm, especially to those who are or will be underemployed. This paper offers three ways to check the narratives of work that we believe and promote. Are we treating vocation as a journey in which a lone individual must choose an ideal path, or are we acknowledging the interplay between both individuals and a social setting that shapes vocational possibilities? Are we presuming that a positive attitude can make any drudgery divine, or are we recognizing and changing oppressive working conditions? And are we treating Christian vocation as only a task of helping others, or as a call to mutually give and receive in communities that God transforms?

Our answers to these questions can call us to respond in various ways, depending on our context. Those whose professions include directly counseling people about vocation, such as faculty members, career counselors, pastors, mentors, and scholars of work and vocation, are at the forefront transforming our narratives of vocation. But fostering transformative communities where people thrive vocationally cannot happen through counseling individuals alone. Advocacy in government, professional associations, and within workplaces is also necessary to craft policies that steer toward better treatment of workers in ways that the market alone will not. Using influence at workplaces, we can create policies that promote adequate rest, purposeful tasks, good relationships, and equal opportunities for training and promotion. We can listen well to others' stories about underemployment, seeking to identify causes of oppression and becoming involved in seeking change. Especially when interacting with those whose age, physical abilities, skills, family responsibilities, or lack of opportunities have put them in seasons of unpaid work, we can combat the shame and self-depreciation that often accompany underemployment by emphasizing the inherent value of all humans and the need for everyone to receive. As consumers, we can frequent businesses that treat employees justly. And as church members, we can model just working relationships in our own church communities. By examining our narratives of vocation, ultimately we seek ways to speak and live out a narrative that is good news for everyone, including the underemployed.