



THE REFORMATION IDEA OF CALLING

*Exemplified in the Writings of John Calvin, C.H. Spurgeon, C.S. Lewis, and
the Poetry of George Herbert*

JOHN CALVIN

Finally, this point is to be noted: the Lord bids each one of us in all life's actions to look to his calling. . . . [H]e has appointed duties for every man in his particular way of life. . . . [and] has named these various kinds of livings "callings." . . . [T]he Lord's calling is in everything the beginning and foundation of well-doing. And if there is anyone who will not direct himself to it, he will never hold to the straight path in his duties. . . . [T]here will be no harmony among the several parts of his life. Accordingly, your life will then be best ordered when it is directed to this goal. . . . [I]t will be no slight relief from cares, labors, troubles, and other burdens for a man to know that God is his guide in all these things. The magistrate will discharge his functions more willingly; the head of the household will confine himself to his duty; each man will bear and swallow the discomforts, vexations, weariness, and anxieties in his way of life, when he has been persuaded that the burden was laid upon him by God. From this will arise also a singular consolation: that no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight.¹

We know that men were created to busy themselves with labour and that no sacrifice is more pleasing to God than when each one attends to his calling and studies to live well for the common good.²

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CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON

"Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called."—1 Corinthians vii. 20.

Some persons have the foolish notion that the only way in which they can live for God is by becoming ministers, missionaries, or Bible women.³ Alas! How many would be shut out from any opportunity of magnifying the Most High if this were the case. Beloved, it is not office, it is earnestness; it is not position, it is grace which will enable us to glorify God. God is most

¹ From *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill, translated and indexed by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), III.X.6, pp. 724-25.

² From Commentary on Luke 10:38ff.

³ Women engaged in the evangelism of "fishergirls," (i.e., female workers in British fishing communities), a mission movement that developed in the latter part of the 19th Century.

surely glorified in that cobbler's stall, where the godly worker, as he plies the awl, sings of the Savior's love, ay, glorified far more than in many a prebendal stall⁴ where official *religiousness* performs its scanty duties. The name of Jesus is glorified by the poor unlearned carter⁵ as he drives his horse, and blesses his God, or speaks to his fellow labourer by the roadside, as much as by the popular divine who, throughout the country, like Boanerges,⁶ is thundering out the gospel. God is glorified by our serving Him in our proper vocations.

Take care, dear reader, that you do not forsake the path of duty by leaving your occupation, and take care you do not dishonour your profession [of Christ] while in it. Think little of yourselves, but do not think too little of your callings. Every lawful trade may be sanctified by the gospel to noblest ends. Turn to the Bible, and you will find the most menial forms of labour connected either with most daring deeds of faith, or with persons whose lives have been illustrious for holiness. Therefore be not discontented with your calling. Whatever God has made your position, or your work, abide in that, unless you are *quite sure* that He calls you to something else. Let your first care be to glorify God to the utmost of your power where you are. Fill your present sphere to His praise, and if He needs you in another He will show it you. This evening lay aside vexatious ambition, and embrace peaceful content.

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C.S. LEWIS

I believe that any Christian who is qualified to write a good popular book on any science may do much more by that than by any direct apologetic work. The difficulty we are up against is this. We can make people (often) attend to the Christian point of view for half an hour or so; but the moment they have gone away from our lecture or laid down our article, they are plunged back into a world where the opposite position is taken for granted. As long as that situation exists, widespread success is simply impossible. We must attack the enemy's line of communication. What we want is not more little books about Christianity, but more little books by Christians on other subjects—with their Christianity *latent*. You can see this most easily if you look at it the other way around. Our Faith is not very likely to be shaken by any book on Hinduism. But if whenever we read an elementary book on Geology, Botany, Politics, or Astronomy, we found that its implications were Hindu, that would shake us. It is not the books written in direct defense of Materialism that make the modern man a materialist; it is the materialistic assumptions in all the other books. In the same way, it is not books on Christianity that will really trouble him. But he would be troubled if, whenever he wanted a cheap popular introduction to some science, the best work on the market was always by a Christian. The first step to the re-conversion of this country is a series, produced by Christians, which can beat the *Penguin* and the *Thinkers Library* on their own ground. Its Christianity would have to be latent, not explicit: and *of course* its science perfectly honest. Science *twisted* in the interests of apologetics would be sin and folly.⁷

⁴ A prebendal stall is a seat, usually in the back row of the choir stalls, where a prebendary sits. The title "Prebendary" was given to clergy who held a prebend, i.e., an endowment of land, or a pension of money, given in return for staff duties at a cathedral or collegiate church.

⁵ One who uses a cart to transport goods.

⁶ Mark 3:17.

⁷ From "Christian Apologetics," in *God in the Dock. Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 93.

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GEORGE HERBERT

The Elixir⁸

TEACH me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in any thing,
To do it as for thee:

Not rudely,⁹ as a beast,
To runne into an action;
But still to make thee prepossest,¹⁰
And give it his perfection.

A man that looks on glasse,
On it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it passe,
And then the heav'n espie.

All may of thee partake:
Nothing can be so mean,¹¹
Which with his¹² tincture¹³ (for thy sake)
Will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgerie divine:
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
Makes that and th' action fine.¹⁴

This is the famous stone¹⁵
That turneth all to gold:
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for lesse be told.¹⁶

⁸ From *The Temple* (1633). An "elixir" was a substance or medicine what was supposed to have the power to cure all ills.

⁹ Unlearned.

¹⁰ An influence beforehand.

¹¹ Low in quality or grade.

¹² In the seventh edition of Herbert's works this word is printed "this," not "his," which may provide a more intelligible reading. However, since in Herbert's time alchemy had come to be used as a metaphor for Christ (see note 8 *infra*), the correct interpretation may be "which with *Christ's* tincture, 'for thy sake'.

¹³ Lit., a coloring or dyeing substance; here, to infuse, as with a quality.

¹⁴ "fine," in the sense of "pure," as in an unalloyed metal.

¹⁵ Reference to "philosophers' stone," a substance that was believed to have the power of transmuting base metal into gold. Herbert used alchemy as a metaphor for spiritual processes in several of his poems.

¹⁶ "told," in the sense of "reckoned."