

## VOCATION: A LIFE WORTHY OF THE LORD

*“...we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you might live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work ...”*<sup>1</sup>

Who are you? We are, of course, children of God, and after that daughters and sons, husbands and wives, parents, friends, and neighbors. Some of us also teach Sunday school, assist with youth ministry, serve on church boards or committees, and help direct worship services. When introducing ourselves, however, we are more likely to say where we work and what we do there than to describe our faith, church affiliations, or relationships. The way that we link our identity to work demonstrates how important work is to us. In the North American culture, we give the best hours of the day five or more days a week to work, and over the course of our lives may dedicate to work a larger portion of the time, talent, and even gifting given to us by God than to any other purpose or cause. It is no wonder that Christians sometimes use words like vocation to describe their work; thus seeking to imbue daily activities with eternal significance. This article explores how God’s call on our life both encompasses economic activity and frees us from bondage to the market.

### Hearing God

The word vocation is derived from *vocare*, which is Latin for “voice” or “to call”. Language about God’s divine call on our lives is common in the Bible. The Hebrew verb “to call” appears frequently in the Old Testament in reference to a personal or collective summons by God. He calls his people, the Israelites, to repent (Jeremiah 3:12); and individuals such as Isaiah (Isaiah 42:6) and Samuel (1 Samuel 3:4) to personal office. In the New Testament, the Greek verb “to call” is used by Jesus to call all persons to repentance and discipleship (Mark 2:17). Discipleship in the Gospels results exclusively from Jesus’ personal call (Mark 1:19-20); there is not a case of anyone successfully volunteering to become a disciple.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, vocation does not begin with human will; the true call on my life originates neither from my will to do as I please nor from the will of others who presume to know what I ought to do. Fundamentally, it is the call of Jesus to “follow me” and his instruction to love the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength; and the other instruction like it, to love my neighbor as myself. In the broadest sense, one’s vocation is to do the will of God.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Bible, New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), Colossians 1:9-10.

<sup>2</sup> Gary D. Badcock, The Way of Life (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), pp. 3-5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 14-16.

Prior to Martin Luther and the reformation, the concept of vocation was used exclusively to denote religious life, as exemplified by the monastic system. Luther argued that since God calls us to a particular way of life in and among the world, one's call must also be fulfilled in and among the world. He painted the monastic system as selfish and indulgent when compared to the lives of believers who served neighbors by working out their calling in the world. The concept of calling embraced an even more urgent meaning for the followers of John Calvin and his reformed doctrine of predestination. Individuals longing for assurance that they were among God's elect were urged to consider their worldly conduct. Trusting God to work in the lives of his elect to bring glory to himself, individuals sought conviction of their salvation according to their success in fulfilling their calling. Although in principle the early Calvinists understood that God's call encompassed all of life, success in the market place became especially significant to them as the most readily measured or quantified aspect of calling.<sup>4</sup> These origins of the protestant work ethic, then, are also the origins of today's narrow understanding of vocation as whatever a person does to earn a living. Today, "in the secular world one's 'vocation' or 'calling' has come to mean simply 'occupation', particularly in the professions."<sup>5</sup>

### Fruit that Lasts

The call of Jesus to "follow me" is neither strictly for religion's professionals, nor is it to be trivialized as merely one's career. His is a claim over all of our being, the whole person. Even so, it is the call of Christ to discipleship in our work that I wish to address here. I want to propose six potential sources of lasting significance to our work, a typology that I hope will enable us to think more deeply, pray more effectively, recognize with greater clarity, and act more joyfully in response to the Lordship of Christ over and throughout our work. These types are:

- 1) Sharing with God in the joy of creation.
- 2) Providing for the material needs of self and family.
- 3) Working for income to support oneself in ministry outside of the marketplace.
- 4) Supporting ministry to social, economic and spiritual outcasts by consuming less than one's earning potential.
- 5) Gaining access to individuals, communities and institutions to influence them as ambassadors for Christ.
- 6) Securing Kingdom value in the product of one's work.

We must begin by remembering that there is something even more important about work than its necessity or usefulness; work is valuable purely for the joy that it can bring to the worker. Receiving this

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<sup>4</sup> Rodney Clapp, *The Theology of Consumption and the Consumption of Theology*, in Border Crossings (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2000), pp. 129-130.

<sup>5</sup> Gary D. Badcock, The Way of Life, p. 8.

first blessing of work is to share in the same deep and boundless joy that God knew when he created the universe and every living thing, and declared everything good. It is to share in the eternal joy that is God's as he contemplates "towering clouds of gasses trillions of miles high, backlit by nuclear fires in newly forming stars, galaxies cart wheeling into collision and sending explosive shock waves boiling through millions of light-years of time and space."<sup>6</sup> "These things are all before him, along with numberless unfolding rosebuds, souls, and songs – and immeasurably more of which we know nothing."<sup>7</sup> Before sin came into the world, God called us to join our own intelligence and efforts to His work. He called us to be fruitful, increase in number, fill the earth, and subdue it (Genesis 1:26-28). At the dawn of creation, everything was good and pregnant with unimaginable riches and possibilities. God gave to Adam and Eve the task of bringing these treasures to fruition. Now, each new generation is also charged with helping all of creation come into its own. Building on the work of prior generations, we are to encourage ever more intricate features and increase beauty in the creation. As the scriptures explain, what began in a garden will end in a city, the new Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup>

The second meaning of work is perhaps the most obvious: sometimes the primary significance of work is to satisfy the basic needs of self and family for food, clothing and shelter. Indeed, this and the first meaning may be the only ones that many Christian brothers and sisters in the world will ever know. Career decisions are an unknown luxury to persons whose lives are governed by the questions "What will I eat today? and "Where shall I sleep tonight?" No one, however, is excluded from this second blessing of work. God knows and cares for our material needs; he deserves our thanksgiving for his provision. Those who do not receive their wages with a grateful heart and an attitude of thanksgiving, who believe that by their own hand or will they have earned a just reward in the marketplace, are indeed proud and in jeopardy of securing for themselves wealth that will not last.

The third and fourth meanings for work recognize the possibility that, in a prosperous society, one's individual market potential may well exceed the needs of self and family. Of course there is tremendous social pressure to optimize personal financial resources; and to grow one's "needs" to equal if not exceed those resources. Christian financial counselors exhaust their best efforts trying to merely keep some of us out of debt. We are so incredibly busy dealing with the problem of over consumption that little time or attention remains to nurture generosity. Today, living on what one earns minus a tithe, is thought to be particularly virtuous. The limits of generosity erode pretty quickly to what is called

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<sup>6</sup> Joan Beck, in the *Daily News* (Los Angeles), November 26, 1995, cited by Dallas Willard, [The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God](#) (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 63.

<sup>7</sup> Dallas Willard, [The Divine Conspiracy](#), p. 63-64.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen V. Monsma *et al.*, *Responsible Technology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), p. 39.

foolishness, both in our culture and in the church. Those individuals striving to live well below their means are as likely to be chided for “poor stewardship” by another believer as by anyone else. Even so, it is quite possible for many believers in North America and in others of the so-called “developed” countries to live comfortably and with greater joy on a fraction of their income; and there are many great works to which a brother or sister might be called in the Kingdom of God that have little or no market value, works that are by no means limited to missions and evangelism.

The world is filled with persons who are nearly invisible to market forces, but need the love of Jesus. These market non-entities are people with financial resources so meager that the forces of supply and demand are entirely unmotivated to respond to even their most basic needs. Christians, however, are free to respond: teachers might provide an education, leaders might foster good government, attorneys might seek justice, bankers might found credit unions, physicians might provide health care, and counselors might bring emotional and relational healing. We must also direct our attention to the many problems that belong to communities so poor or troubled they are not able to attract market resources or expertise. More of us need to be entrepreneurs in such places; and devote ourselves to creating economies that provide meaningful work, a healthy work environment, and fair compensation. More need to devise technologies to remove unexploded landmines from the fields of civilian farmers, and medicines to cure diseases like malaria. It would not be unreasonable in God’s economy for some of us to provide significant financial support to a brother, sister or organization on just such a mission with God. It is also entirely possible for some of us to follow the example of Paul the tent maker and do less work for pay, using the balance of our time and what we earn to pursue some other work or service that advances God’s Kingdom. The security and provision we have in the Lord frees us from both need and obligation to optimize our own market potential.

Other Christian disciples are called to a fifth kind of work: to gain access to individuals, communities, and institutions and influence them as ambassadors for Christ. Under the tutelage of God’s Spirit, the career path of this brother or sister is shaped by a desire to represent Christ to others, rather than the pursuit of status, power, or wealth. This person may on one occasion seek a promotion or career change to increase their potential for Godly influence; or decline such opportunities for the same reason. Jesus emptied himself of power, but spoke with great authority because the life he lived was so compelling. Persons of Godly influence might likewise know the joy of loving many into the Kingdom; the joy of righting injustices that have become worked deep into the fabric of culture; or the joy of upholding the cause of the persecuted and oppressed. Could yours be the high calling of Christian influence in government, the World Bank, the United Nations, education, or the corporation?

The sixth and final meaning of work is found in the product of the work itself. A few years ago, during a national meeting of the American Society for Engineering Education, I posted an invitation to a Christian Engineering Education Conference that was to be hosted by my department. A day later, I discovered that someone had penned into the margin of my flyer a question: “What is Christian engineering?” Beneath this in another hand was a response: “The engineer is Christian, not the engineering.” I disagree with that brother or sister. Both the object of our work and how we achieve it matter. Not every activity that can be done for pay should be done; not every product that can be sold should be sold. If we believe that the primary purpose of work is to pay one’s bills, then it is also convenient to believe that whether or not something should be done or purchased is other people’s business. It is your business! We Christians are each responsible to ask, does the fruit of my labor honor and cooperate with God’s work in the world? Is it an instrument of justice and mercy? Does my work build up joy, peace, and kindness, or does it serve our high paced culture of fractured relationships and endless consumption? The market is able to value only what can be assigned a dollar value and is therefore unable to value the joy and lasting reward of doing something worthy of the Lord. There are many great works that we know need to be done. Some of us are called to create great music, literature, or film; others will be called to lead in industry; and God will ask some of us to care first for the special needs that belong only to persons without material resources in the world. Let no one be deceived that the eternal worth of any of these tasks is merely equal to your salary. In fact, some of the most important works will not pay well at all.

### Why Don’t We?

Why does this vision of work sound patently unrealistic? One might similarly ask why faith seems to have such limited influence over the workplace objectives of many Christians? Historian and futurist Tom Sine has observed a dualistic approach to discipleship in the larger North American church. “In spite of all the talk about Christ’s lordship,” says Sine, “everyone knows that the expectations of modern culture come first. Everyone knows that getting ahead in the job comes first. Getting ahead in the suburbs comes first. Getting the kids off to their activities comes first. And we tend to make decisions in these areas pretty much like everyone else does, based on our income, our professions and our social status.” Western Christians allow modern culture to arrange the furniture of our lives, while following Christ is trivialized “to little more than a devotional lubricant to keep us from stripping our gears as we charge up the mountain.”<sup>9</sup> Desires for security, to belong to a healthy community, and for joy in our work are right and good. Aiming to secure them by means of our own industry and as captains

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<sup>9</sup> Tom Sine, Mustard Seed Versus McWorld: Reinventing Life and Faith for the Future (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), p. 155.

of our own life choices, rather than as daily bread from a loving and present God, is idolatry and a sure way to receive only the world's disappointing imitations. Material wealth and sometimes power takes the place of real security. Casual relationships with people we find useful takes the place of community. Happiness and entertainment take the place of joy and contentment. A reputation in the world takes the place of glory and eternal significance.

The career objectives of many graduates and employees of Christian colleges also mimic those of our culture. Too many of us have permitted the deceitfulness of wealth and worries of life to choke our lives, thus making them unfruitful<sup>10</sup>. Dreams shared confidently by first year students can be diminished, not enhanced, by four years of college if the realities of debt and the expectations of family, friends, and culture loom larger than God's call on our lives. We find it difficult to follow Christ before we have achieved for ourselves a certain feeling of security in the world by way of a market-competitive salary and benefits package; a home, furniture and a car similar to those we grew up with; a safe neighborhood for family life; entertaining area attractions; and if possible, work that is fun or at least amusing. Faced with the harsh realities of our world, what Jesus asks for seems unreasonable.

Systems of reason, however, are always constructed on an accepted set of basic irreducible truths upon which all other truth is built. Philosophers call these basic truths "axioms". In the Church, we might call them "faith assumptions". In a very real sense, then, all human beings live by their beliefs, and God's irreducible truths are not those of the world. The logic of popular culture is not Kingdom logic. The most fundamental faith assumption in the secular world is that God does not exist, leaving human beings to satisfy their own fundamental needs for security, acceptance and significance. When one begins from this premise, God's ways are indeed irrational, even ridiculous. If Christ was not raised from the dead, Paul argues, his followers are to be pitied above all humanity. But he did rise, and within his Kingdom system of truth, God is perfectly reasonable. We Christians would do well to remember that "there is no independently available 'real world' against which we must test our Christian convictions, because these convictions are the most final, and at the same time, the most basic, *seeing* of what the world is."<sup>11</sup>

Others of us might accept in our minds the reality of Kingdom logic, but we are embarrassed that it does not "work" very well in the world. We have difficulty getting past the practical need for success in the market place as a bulwark against the terrors of the world and an affirmation of our worth. Heaven

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 13:22, The Bible, Today's New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan). This is the parable of the sower.

<sup>11</sup> John Milbank, The World Made Strange (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 250 as cited by Rodney Clapp, *At the Intersection of Eucharist and Capital*, Boarder Crossings (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2000), p. 98.

is going to be great, but when it comes to getting along in the world Jesus seems nice but not very smart. This idea, Dallas Willard observes, is the death knell of discipleship. “It locates (Jesus) outside the company of those who have knowledge and therefore deprives us of the practical power of his teachings.” But can we seriously imagine that Jesus could be Lord if he were not smart? “If he were divine, would he be dumb? Or uninformed?” Yet rarely do we hear the words well informed, brilliant or smart used to describe Jesus. “‘Jesus is Lord’, however, can mean little in practice for anyone who has to hesitate before saying, ‘Jesus is smart.’”<sup>12</sup> If we are to be effective ambassadors for Christ and his Kingdom, God’s provisions of wisdom and knowledge about how the world actually works must be real and present to us now.

Embarrassment over the “impracticality” of the Kingdom may in the end mean only that we have failed to count the cost of discipleship. Living by Kingdom logic, we are promised, is both foolish and costly within the kingdom of this world. An appeal to the reason of the world is thus ‘helpful’ in that the cost of discipleship is circumvented merely by possessing two sets of beliefs: one called faith and the other called reason. Faith provides assurance that at some future time God will credit us with the righteousness of Christ, while reason becomes the trusted instrument of worldly wisdom for governing the messy business of everyday life. This approach to faith, however, leads us to nurture a persona of disinterest in wealth, fame and power even as we carry on in secret with them all. It is too bad that we are so shy about our desires for significance and security because God provides for these needs abundantly. What are called “worldly passions” and “desires” are only the misshapen reflections of our deep longing for what God has promised; satisfaction of those desires in the world only parodies God’s eternal provision. He promises and even encourages passion in his Kingdom for what looks a lot like wealth, fame and power. Apparently there is no problem with the human impulse to take care of our interests; the problem actually lies in where we decide our interests reside.

On the point of wealth and security, the Kingdom logic of Jesus is clear: we are to store up treasure in heaven, the only place where it can be secure. Those tempted to diversify their investments, to serve God and money, are warned about the likelihood of total loss<sup>13</sup>. These instructions by Jesus to secure real wealth for ourselves are followed immediately with assurances that God can be trusted to provide for our earthly needs. In another biblical passage, Jesus goes so far as to encourage the use of worldly wealth to make friends, the kind of friends who will welcome us into heaven. This Jesus offers

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<sup>12</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 93-94, 134.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 6:19-34 – “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” *The Bible*, Today’s New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan).

as an example of good stewardship<sup>14</sup>. In place of worldly fame or reputation, our desire for the approval of fellow creatures, God offers something called glory. C. S. Lewis argues in his essay *The Weight of Glory* that glory with Christ is something very much like fame and good repute with God.<sup>15</sup> What disciple does not long to hear Jesus say, “Well done thou good and faithful servant”<sup>16</sup>? In the end, reputation with God is all that matters. Being known by God holds infinitely greater importance than our knowing God<sup>17</sup>. Lewis helps us “to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations.”<sup>18</sup>

### Seek First

Frederick Buechner has called vocation that “place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”<sup>19</sup> The choice to follow God is never a choice between his will and what you need. Vocation originates neither with your own willfulness nor the will of others who would say what you ought to do. It comes from listening to the heart of your own identity in Christ.<sup>20</sup> A vocation that does not fit with who you are, no matter how externally valued, does violence to you and those given by God into your care. If a work is really yours, it will make you glad over the long haul, despite the difficult days.”<sup>21</sup>

In view of God’s promises, it is fair to say that our dreams are usually too small. Too many of us have become satisfied with working God in and around the edges of our economic and social lives. It is time to begin trusting in the real and present provisions of God over and above the work of our own

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<sup>14</sup> Luke 16:1-12, The Bible, Today’s New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan). This is the parable of the shrewd manager. The moral of the story is this: “For the people of the world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.”

<sup>15</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, in The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), pp. 35-36.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 25:21 – “His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’” The Bible, Today’s New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan).

<sup>17</sup> Consider Matthew 7:21-23: “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles? Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers.’” Also 1 Corinthians 8:2-3: “The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God.” The Bible, Today’s New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan)

<sup>18</sup> Lewis, p. 39.

<sup>19</sup> Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), p. 119, cited by Parker J. Palmer, The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> Parker J. Palmer, Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), pp. 4-5. Palmer urges his readers to listen to the voice of self as it seeks wholeness. For me, that true self is hidden in Christ and may be found only there.

<sup>21</sup> Parker J. Palmer, The Courage to Teach, p. 30.

hands, mind and will. This is not to deny that work is one means by which God meets our physical needs and provides material blessing; refusing to work can be refusing God's provision. The marketplace, however, teaches some things about work that cannot be reconciled to the teachings of Jesus. In the marketplace, material wealth is merely the just reward of one's labor. But markets undervalue a great many important tasks, perhaps beginning with parenting, while grossly overvaluing the contributions of fame, sales, and entire industries that increase profits only by cultivating self destructive behavior. To believe that I have earned and deserve my pay is to deny that God is my provider. This is idolatry, trusting in something or someone other than God for what only God can provide. It is not possible to possess sufficient wealth to buy freedom from fear or to realize our value as God made us to be valued. For many believers, it is not Paul's admonition to work<sup>22</sup> that we must heed, but Jesus' warnings about the deceitfulness of wealth and how it can make us unfruitful in God's Kingdom.<sup>23</sup> The worries of this world and the deceitfulness of wealth, Jesus says, are like thorns that choke God's work in our lives making us unfruitful.

God's desire to provide for and bless his children far exceeds the meager compensations of the marketplace. As we enter deeper into the security of relationship with him, we are freed from the need to optimize our market potential for earning and prestige, and freed to serve his eternal purposes. Those who sincerely desire to hear God will experience His call at different times and in different situations to various expressions of love and devotion made through their work. We need not be concerned that his call will separate us from people, situations, and needs in the world for which we care deeply. Jesus did not say to seek only the Kingdom of God, he said to seek it first, so that all other kingdoms might be contained and transformed by his Kingdom.<sup>24</sup> The decision to answer God's call on our lives must become a fundamental decision, one that binds our daily decisions for many days to come. The student who makes a fundamental decision to learn Shakespeare decides every day whether to read Shakespeare on that particular day. She enrolls in related college courses, clears her calendar for the appropriate times, buys the books, pays the tuition, and commits to participating in class and completing assignments.<sup>25</sup> In the same way, if following Christ is to reign over and above the task of merely making our lives work in the world, then we will listen for and commit to God's specific call on our life. Due to that larger

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<sup>22</sup> 2 Thessalonians 3:10 – For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.” The Bible, Today's New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan).

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 13:22 – “The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.” Matthew 22:2-3, 5 – “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, ... but they paid no attention and went off – one to his field, another to his business.” The Bible, Today's New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan).

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 6:33 – “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.” The Bible, Today's New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan).

<sup>25</sup> Albert Borgman, Crossing the Postmodern Divide (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 111.

purpose, we (with God) will govern the daily choices and patterns of our lives, especially in the realms of work and other economic activity.

As a footnote to this discussion, I want to point out that those readers who have not yet begun careers, those who are still in college, are indeed fortunate. Your future commitments are still relatively unshaped by past economic decisions. Not yet (and hopefully never) owned by the bank, you are perhaps more free than other readers to ponder to what great work God is calling you, and to permit that fundamental purpose to guide your daily decisions about when to purchase a home, car(s), and furniture; how much to spend on them, and how much debt to incur. Some of you may already feel that you are in bondage to student loans. However, persons who make a conscious decision to live simply and make the retirement of those debts a priority can pay off their loans in much less than the allotted time. For all of us, isn't it time to stop being governed by the minutia of life, the small daily decisions? Let us ponder again the larger purpose of our lives in Christ, and permit those larger commitments to govern what each one of us does with this day. Our future life in this world is hidden in the seemingly small decisions of today. We need to ask God for faith and courage to commit all of life to Christ (Romans 12:1-2).