God calls people. Whether it is the calling of Abraham to leave the land of Ur and go he knew not where, or the calling of Moses, confronted with the burning bush, or the calling of Isaiah who encountered the glory of God, or the calling of St. Paul to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, an awareness of call is both mysterious and powerful. A calling is always a demonstration of the love and initiative of God, but through vocation we also come to an appreciation that God takes us seriously.

It is helpful to understand the call of God in three distinct ways. First, there is the call to be a Christian. The God of creation invites us to respond to his love. This call comes through Jesus, who invites us to be his disciples and to know the Father through him. To be Christian is to respond to this call to know and love God, and to love and serve others. It becomes, then, the fundamental fact of our lives; everything about us is understood in light of this call. Every aspect of our lives flows out and finds meaning in light of the fact that we are a called people. And the church is made up of “called” ones. Nothing matters more to us than that we are called. It is sheer gift—an invitation offered to us in the mercy of God to become his people and walk in faith and
obedience to his Word. It is, essentially, a call to God's salvation.

Second, for each individual there is a specific call—a defining purpose or mission, a reason for being. Every individual is called of God to respond through service in the world. Each person has a unique calling in this second sense. We cannot understand this second meaning of call except in the light of the first. When we fulfill our specific vocation, we are living out the full implications of what it means to follow Jesus. Therefore, while we all have a general call to love God and neighbor, we each follow our Lord differently, for though he calls us all to follow him, once we accept his call we are each honored with a unique call that is integrally a part of what it means to follow him. The second experience of call is derived from the first.

Third, there is the call that we face each day in response to the multiple demands on our lives—our immediate duties and responsibilities: the call to be present to my sons when they are involved in an athletic competition, or to help out in my local church, or to respond to some specific and important need before me. These are my tasks—not in the sense of burdens but as those things that are placed before me today by God. It may be nothing more complicated than helping my son repair his car. But that is what God has for me today. It may be to teach a class or be present for a committee meeting. I would not speak of these as my vocation (which is closer to the second meaning of call), but they are nevertheless those duties and responsibilities God calls me to today.

All three distinct meanings of "call" need to be understood together.

Called of God: The Three Expressions of Vocation

- The general call—the invitation to follow Jesus, to be Christian
- The specific call—a vocation that is unique to a person; that individual's mission in the world
- The immediate responsibilities—those tasks or duties God calls us to today

This book will focus on the second of these three aspects of our calling, and this is the primary way I will be using the word calling or vocation—not as an occupation or "line of work," but something that nevertheless speaks of our engagement with the world in response to God. But we must consider this second sense of call in light of the other two dimensions noted. Our vocation is a critical means by which we fulfill the call to be a disciple of Jesus. Part of what it means to follow Christ is to accept his specific and unique call on our lives.

But we must consider the immediate duties and obligations we have as Christians, as members of families, as spouses and as friends. The daily demands on our lives are not necessarily threats to the fulfillment of our vocation—the second meaning of call. They are all part of what it means to be called of God.

Because vocation, in the second sense, is part of, but only part of, what it means to be a Christian, we must see our specific and unique vocations within the context of all that it means to be called to be Christian. This will require that we move away from compartmentalization of our lives. We are whole people, complex people, people who fulfill our callings within the whole setting of circumstances, problems and relationships that constitute what it means to be a Christian. I, for example, fulfill my vocation as husband to Joella, father to two sons, and grandfather to three grandsons and two granddaughters. This is an unavoidable and vital dimension of my life, and I cannot consider and think constructively about my work in the world apart from these realities.

What follows is a guide to thinking about calling—in the second meaning described earlier. But when thinking well about calling or vocation in this sense, we do so within the context of all three dimensions of what it means to be called by God.

NAVIGATING TRANSITIONS

Transition is one of the givens in our lives, and we only live well, we only manage our lives well, when we manage these transitions well.
Our world changes; the circumstances of our lives change. The economy changes and forces change in our lives. For those of us who work in the church, the dynamics around us change and we either adapt and respond or we lose our moorings.

If we are facing a transition, it is often due to one of three factors. First, inevitable transitions flow from the normal course of a human life. We grow up; we leave home; perhaps we marry. If we marry, we may have children; if we do, this brings us yet another transition. Indeed, many parents note that it is not merely the experience of a child; having a second or a third brings yet another transition that calls for a faithful and hopeful response.

The transition into early adulthood is but the first of a series of changes that will intersect our lives as we make the pilgrimage through life. We grow up and grow older, and move through midlife. As young adults there are many things that we might have taken for granted that in midlife we no longer view as a given or an assumption of our lives. The biggest assumptions that are challenged may include coming to terms with our limits. On the one hand, we know ourselves better; as we grow older we come to a deeper appreciation of what matters most to us.

The transitions through our early and midadult years are but the first rounds of what for many will be the biggest challenge of our lives: the transition into our senior years. Perhaps it could be said that we only truly live well, in the end, when we graciously manage this transition into the last season of our earthly lives. Speaking of vocation, work and career necessarily means that we consider how the diverse chapters of our lives reflect new challenges, opportunities and circumstances. And there is no other way to speak of calling but in a recognition that these inevitable transitions call for a mature and generous response.

Some will no doubt read this book hoping to find guidance and wisdom for the early adult years—the transitions out of their parents' home and into the marketplace; for others this book will be helpful as they navigate the changing circumstances of their middle years.

And yet guidance is just as needed for those moving into their senior years. These are surely some of the most important years of our lives, and one of the signs of strength for both our culture and for the church is that we are a community and society that effectively empower senior members of our society to embrace the calling of God on their lives. I will speak more to this in chapter four, "The Chapters of Our Lives."

Second, another kind of transition comes with the inevitable changes in our work world. Many will be unemployed or, better stated, unwaged at some point in their lives. Some will have been let go due to problems in the workplace. Others will be released from their employment because their employers could no longer afford to keep so many on the payroll. Some farmers can no longer afford to farm because the crop they have been cultivating is now available elsewhere at cheaper prices; thus they can no longer compete given their own labor costs or other circumstances. Others, in different sectors of the employment world, have not been able to keep up with the information and technology developments, and have been replaced by a computer or are being replaced by someone younger and seemingly quicker, or who has the technological savvy to make it in the new work environment.

We can no longer assume that we will have a single job throughout our adult years. Even if that was the case a number of years or a generation ago, it is certainly not the case now. No one, regardless of vocation or line of work, can live with that kind of assumption.

We can think about our context in this way: the economy is changing. Wendell Berry describes the economy as "our way of making a living," that which, "connects the human household with the good things that sustain life." And this economy—the "way we make a living"—is changing. The changes are permanent; this is not a temporary blip on the screen. These changes will affect all of us. Everyone, literally everyone, will have job changes and transitions as a matter of course. Whether we fulfill our vocation in the church or in the world will make little difference. The organizations we work for will
reflect the turbulence in our economy with downsizing, outsourcing, a "just in time" labor force and the growth of temporary agencies. But employment will be just that—temporary!

We will only thrive in this new economy when we accept this reality—turbulence and change—and then embrace what it means for us, that is, embrace it as an opportunity rather than a threat.

Third, some transitions come about as a result of changes in our own hearts. In many cases this transition reflects the simple fact that we are growing older and wiser, and so perhaps have a better read on ourselves and what really matters to us. This merits separate mention because for many this reflects a different dimension of their experience.

One of the things that causes my heart to ache is meeting people who simply hate their work. In some cases the workplace itself is toxic. Others may feel they are involved in an industry that cuts deep into their own personal sense of what is good and right and true. This may be because of something obvious: they simply cannot in good conscience continue to work for a casino, which they know erodes the lives of those who gamble as well as the local economy that depends on the taxes that come from the gambling. They recognize that it is no way to build a life or an economy.

Others may feel that the product they sell or the service they provide, while good in itself, no longer fits their own personal passion and commitment. They may have for many years been glad to have a job that paid the bills, but increasingly their heart is telling them they no longer feel a congruence with this company and its values.

Something very similar could emerge in the heart of those involved in religious work. They might realize that they can no longer in good conscience identify with the mission agency they work for. This could be for any number of legitimate reasons: perhaps they are concerned that there is a one-dimensional concern for personal religious experience and no concern for social justice, or perhaps they can no longer enthusiastically participate in the work of the agency because of theological concerns.

I realize that there are many people who simply have no choice; they are "slaves." For any number of reasons—economic, social, marital—they do not have control of the basic elements of their lives and their careers. They cannot resign; they cannot walk into the managers office and say "I quit!" How they would love to do it. But they are trapped in role and responsibility that violate their human worth and dignity. Whenever the products we use, the food we eat or the benefits we experience are the fruit of this kind of work situation—shoes made by forced labor, food served by underpaid wait staff—we need to have the courage to say "no more!" And we need to be advocates on the national and international levels for just forms of labor. In the meantime the following is written to those who do have the capacity to respond to what they know is right and true, which they increasingly recognize needs to be reflected in their work.

It is important to note that this transition of the heart often comes slowly. We look back and in retrospect see that something has grown gradually in our heart, perhaps a holy discontent, and we know that in good conscience we need to ask how best to navigate this transition with a faithful and hopeful response. It will require courage; making a move might disappoint a whole host of people and lead to greater financial insecurity. But increasingly we recognize that we have no choice; we need to initiate a change. In other words, some of the transitions we experience are the natural result of growing older; some are the result of external factors that force us to respond; and some are the kinds of transitions where we take the initiative, step out and courageously inform the corporation or the organization that we are moving on. I hope that this book can be a resource to you if you are in this position; may it give you the spiritual and emotional tools to navigate this transition with faithfulness and hope.

A CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE
When transition is so much a part of our lives, one of the inevitable features of our work will be a crisis of confidence. We change and enter into a new set of opportunities, or the world or the circumstances around us change; the familiar is gone and what we once felt
we might have been able to do well is no longer assumed to be part of the equation.

Robert Kegan has published a fine book that is well worth reading, but its title alone captures something that merits repeating: *In Over Our Heads*. The distinct impression we get in this new economy is that we are all in over our heads. Regardless of our line of work or responsibility, whether in business or in the task of raising children, whether it is pastoral ministry or the challenge of public education, the changing circumstances leave us with a lack of confidence that we can accomplish what we are called to do. In this new economy we could easily conclude no one can say she is the master of her field or that he is a leader in his discipline. Not anymore.

I serve as the executive director of a nonprofit agency. I enjoy my work and come to it with a sense that on the whole I do it well—that I have the experience, the expertise and the determination to be effective. But what regularly impresses me and others in this line of work is that we can never keep up with all that we need to know in order to do our jobs well. The complexities of managing nonprofit organizations are such that it almost seems like sheer presumption to suggest that anyone can do this job well.

The wonderful word *master* used to describe the person who is at the top of his or her craft, whatever the profession. It was a title that one could work toward and with some degree of confidence ascribe to the person who was very good at what he or she did—whether it was watch making, shipbuilding, teaching or business management. But in the new economy we are all “in over our heads.” Just when we think we might have mastered our craft, the circumstances and expectations have changed. The field I work in is developing so quickly that I always feel one step behind.

In some cases this has meant that individuals have experienced failure, setback and disappointment. They did their work to the best of their abilities but were not deemed to have done it well enough, and the change in their employment situation shattered their sense of competence and even their confidence in being able to do any job at all.

While perhaps still employed, others have faced criticism or a lack of affirmation and support, which has left them with little if any confidence to be able to press on in the midst of the changes in the economy and their work situation. In some of these circumstances the political pressures of their occupation have taken the wind out of their sails.

Still others have moved out of the waged workforce for a time, perhaps as mothers to raise a family, and now it may be as much as fifteen years later and things have changed so much that they lack the confidence to pick up their careers again or return to the roles or responsibilities they once had.

There are those who have gone into pastoral ministry, and in midlife come to a realization that congregations are changing so rapidly, especially in the way they are governed and what they are looking for in pastor, that they wonder if they really have what it takes to provide effective religious leadership.

Some have chosen a line of work or a career as young person, but now they have come to midlife, perhaps into their fifties, and have found that what they had envisioned is no longer there. The land they hoped to farm for life is no longer theirs. Or maybe an anticipated career is gone; they trained for a particular line of work only to discover that people in that field are no longer needed in the workplace.

Yet others face retirement and struggle deeply with what it means to let go of their careers; it is so easy to feel like they are being dismissed by the organization they have worked with for many years. There are few things so painful as the feeling that we have been pushed out, and that pain in many cases strikes at the heart of our self-confidence.

Finally, for some the crisis of confidence comes from the dashing of grandiose ideals—the young woman who was certain that by her mid-thirties she would have her own successful business and have made her first million, or the young pastor convinced that in no time at all he would master what it takes to have a congregation that is the envy of all other pastors, or the team of individuals who longed to do
great deeds for God in the inner city only to discover that the very ones they longed to serve actually rejected their help. These kinds of ideals often need to be set aside, and sometimes there is nothing to do but accept the disappointment and honestly see that our illusions about ourselves are just that, illusions. We were trying to be heroes, and the sooner we let that dream go, the better. But however much we needed to face up to our illusions, it still is painful, and we are still experiencing a crisis of confidence. Sometimes it hurts so much that we wonder if we can ever do anything well again.

STEWARDS OF OUR LIVES

Part of the reason why we feel these transitions so keenly is that we know that our lives matter. Yes, there is the obvious: we only have one life to live, and so we naturally want to live well. But we need to probe this more deeply.

Living well, surely, is a matter of taking seriously the life that has been given to us—the opportunities and challenges that are unique to us, to our lives, our circumstances. Taking our lives seriously means that we respond intentionally to these circumstances and the transitions of life. But we will only do so if and when we recognize three things. First, our lives are of inestimable value. Second, living our lives to the full is precisely what it means to be good stewards of our lives. Third, we live fully by living in a way that is deeply congruent with who we are.

The worth of human life. In the Scriptures there is a clear proclamation of what it means to have human identity—a person created by God, with worth and significance. But it is also the case that the field or discipline of psychology has enabled many to appreciate the full significance and weight of this scriptural insight. Erik Erikson helps us appreciate more fully what it means to become an adult—mature in one’s personal identity. Viktor Frankl effectively argues that deep within the psyche of each person is a longing for meaning that needs to be expressed in hopeful work and purposeful activity. Rollo May, recognizing the essential worth of each person, appreciates the power of crisis and stress to undermine personal identity. He helps us see that the resulting emptiness and anxiety can only be overcome through the power of love, which enables us to live with freedom and courage. And Abraham Maslow gave us the language of “self-actualization”—as the ideal or goal toward which each person strives, to realize our potential in our work and relationships, and to be able to do so even in environments and contexts that threaten our capacity for inner strength, authenticity and courage.

Yet what is so significant in all the profound insights of these writers is that so much of what they are saying lies within the ancient text of Holy Scripture. The Bible affirms the essential worth and significance of each person, created in the image of God, chosen and elect of God, and thus as having incomparable worth and significance in the eyes of God.

No lives are dispensable; of none can it be said that their lives or work do not matter. Each person brings beauty, creativity and significance to the table. And in this I am speaking specifically of the individual. Yes, we must speak of community. And yes, we need to always speak of the individual as only truly flourishing insofar as he or she is in community and an integral member of society. All true. And yet what must not be lost is the inherent value and potential of the individual person who is loved, called, and equipped or empowered by God to do good work.

Thus, when we speak of calling we do so with the appreciation of the extraordinary potential of each person to make a difference for good. By this I do not mean that everyone needs to be a hero, but rather, in the midst of the simple ordinariness of everyday life, the work we do has the capacity to be good work that has profound worth and significance.

Living our lives to the full. There is an oft-quoted line from the church father Irenaeus: “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.” The perspective captured in this simple declaration must be affirmed: the human person brings glory to God, not by self-abnegation but rather precisely through the affirmation of the human person. Yes,
we must speak of denial—the negation—of all that is not of God. In particular we need to affirm and actually insist that the human person is not God; as persons we live in radical dependence on God. But when God is seen as clearly and wholly God, humans are free to be precisely who they are called to be.

To put it differently, we are not the center of the universe! Children as often as not assume that the world revolves around them, but part of growing up includes the growing realization that they are but a thread in a tapestry, one member of the team, an integral part, no doubt, but still only a part of the whole. Thus it is sad to meet those adults who still assume they are the center of not just their parents' world but everyone else's too. The observation is often made that children in a one-child family struggle most with coming to appreciate this; they missed out on having siblings to keep them in their place! But we all need to learn this as an essential part of moving toward personal and spiritual maturity.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams observes that the biblical ideal is not so much that we need to deny the self as to decenter the self: To see the self in truth, as an integral member of a community and society in which the only indispensable one is God.

May God grant us the grace to not be overly taken with ourselves.

But then, with this as the essential context in which we view the human person, we rightly must ask: how then, in the economy of God, can this person flourish, thrive and succeed, and we ask this precisely because we long to see this life, this person, be a living witness to the glory of God. In other words, the flourishing of the human person is not a threat to the glory of God; to the contrary, God longs for us to be, precisely, all that we are called to be.

Further, the Scriptures unequivocally affirm the significance of the actions of each human person. Our work and our actions make a difference to God. God called Adam to name the animals and till the earth, and since then God has continued to take seriously the actions of each person. From beginning to end the Scriptures affirm the all-encompassing glory of God and his work. But this is never portrayed in such a way that it reduces human activity to meaningless or even to mere robotic actions that have no inherent value or significance.

For many Christians, the human person is nothing and Christ is everything. They speak of themselves as "channels only". They insist that they are only a means of grace, and the ideal is that the Christian should be but an "instrument" in the hands of God. The repeated emphasis is captured in the notion that as Christians we should become less and less, that we would "decrease" so that God can work. The less of us the better, so the work of God can be magnified. By implication, you and I are an obstacle to the glory of God.

But is this really what is reflected in the accounts found in Holy Scripture? When I watch Abraham and Jacob contending with God, wrestling with God, when I see the dynamic personal communion of David with God, when I watch the prophets and see their capacity to confront God, it is clear that we need to rethink this understanding of human persons. Contrary to the view that denies the significance of humans and of human actions, the Scriptures have a different message. They speak of the human person as a coworker, a partner with God—even an ambassador for God (2 Cor 5:20). Human actions matter greatly; our choices and decisions make a difference. St. Paul urges Timothy to fan into flame the gift of God, quite simply because if he does not do it, the gift will not flourish (2 Tim 1:6-7 NIV)! Timothy is urged to be proactive, to take responsibility for his life and his actions, and he is urged to see the significance of these actions. The patterns of his life would make a difference in the church and in the world.

Those who argue that the ideal is for the human person to "decrease" often do so on the basis of the text in John 3:30 where John the Baptist speaks of his own joy in the coming of Jesus and affirms that "[Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease." Unfortunately, to extrapolate from this that humans therefore have little significance misses the point. John was speaking vocationally. His work was that of a friend of the bridegroom, not that of the bridegroom, and so, natu-
rally, when the bridegroom appears, it is only appropriate that the friend of the bridegroom step aside, and this is his joy (and surely that of the bride as well). This principle is valid, though, in the affirmation that we are called to lose our lives if we are to gain them, that if we are to be great, then we must be servants of all. But do not fail to note that implicit in these affirmations is the recognition that we have a life to give, and that in giving our life we gain it, and that through this giving we achieve greatness. The assumption is that the individual human life, before God, has the potential for greatness. When the disciples wondered who would be great in the kingdom of God, Jesus’ response was not to scold them for desiring greatness but rather to point them to the way of service. And Jesus called his disciples into his service precisely because of his confidence that in his grace and in the fullness of his Spirit they would make a difference. Further, in John 15 Jesus makes the remarkable statement that his disciples are not merely servants; they are friends, for his work with them includes the extraordinary reality that he is making known to them what the Father is doing (Jn 15:15). We are not merely “channels” or “instruments in the hands of God.” We are, in the language of Paul in 2 Corinthians 5, coworkers with God in the work of God in the world, knowledgeable and informed participants in that which matters to the Creator.

In the chapters that follow I am making a basic assumption: that each person is responsible for the choices he or she makes, and that these choices are meaningful and significant. They make a difference. Without God, such a thought would only lead to despair—as it has for many twentieth-century existentialists. But with God and with faith in God, we are empowered by the thought that our actions are meaningful and that our lives can make a difference. We make our choices in response to God, and we make our choices knowing that God is Lord of the universe.

Our only hope for a genuine and full response to our current life circumstances is a theology of the Christian life that takes our full humanity seriously, which means that we have an intentional theology of human actions and human responsibility. I cannot help but wonder if the fear of Pelagianism—the doctrine which suggests that human beings are capable of obedience to God through their own strength and will power—while understandable, actually undercuts our capacity to embrace human responsibility. We must affirm the priority of divine action and grace, but we also need to do so in such a way that both calls and enables us to respond fully to God’s grace. As Gary Badcock aptly puts it, “a theology of response does not need to be Pelagian; it need only be a theology in which the reality of the human is taken seriously.”

To take humanness seriously is to recognize the power and destructive reality of sin, and thus the fact of what St. Paul calls the “old self,” which is corrupted and deluded (Eph 4:22). But it also embraces the new self, which has been “created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:24). We are called to deny the old self, but to live in congruence with the new self, which finds its origin in God’s creative act. This is the true self, created to respond to God: the self that is given generously in service and is found in community. It is estimated that over 80 percent of the books published in any given year are about the self. We could easily say that we are consumed with our “self.” And for some, what follows will merely be another book on the self. But there is a critical difference. We will be absorbed with ourself if we cannot, in response to God’s grace, find moral grounding, a clear sense of authentic identity and, in the end, clarity regarding our own vocation. Only then can we turn from self-absorption and self-centeredness, and know the grace of generous service to others. This book is designed to enable us to make that turn, that is, to become fully converted, to move from self-absorption to becoming selves that are centered in God and true to our own identity and call.

Intentional stewards of our lives. Notice then the sequence here: If each person is of inestimable worth, and, further, if we can ask how each person can flourish, it naturally follows that we recognize all of this requires intentionality; we need to ask, what can we do to be good stewards of our lives, of the gifts, talents and opportunities that God
What follows is a study for people who are prepared to think honestly about their lives—willing to acknowledge the gifts and abilities that they have from God, willing to be honest with themselves, willing to make some tough choices, and willing to do so in partnership with others. One of the temptations that will arise as you read will be to have regrets about the past. All of us can identify things that we would have done differently—mistakes we made, choices that were not wise decisions and so on. But we cannot confidently face the future if we are locked in regret. This book is for people—young and old, in college or in midcareer, or even facing retirement—who want to make an honest appraisal of their lives, but more, who want to look to the future and be all that they can be, to the glory of God and for the well-being of Christ’s kingdom. Without regret we will look to the present and the future conscious of the tremendous potential that we have because of the grace of God. This book is for people who, in hearing the parable of the talents, want to invest their talents—whether it is one or ten—for God, and to do so in a way that recognizes that our point of departure is not the ideal life but our actual life, with all its complications.

GOOD CONVERSATION
We talk about our work all the time. It is rare that a conversation with a person we have recently met does not at some point lead to the inevitable question, What do you do? by which we mean, how do you spend your life and days. What is the work that this person does, that, ideally, God has given him or her to do?

But this is only a point of departure in our conversations with others. When I meet with friends, we of course speak of family and the joys and sorrows of children, grandchildren, the well-being of our favorite sports teams and whether the coming national election will lead to a change of government. Sure. But then, as a rule, the bulk of our conversation is about our work. This is not inappropriate; indeed, in chapter two I will speak of the significance of our work. Consequently, it is no wonder that we talk about it. It matters.

gives to us? This book provides guidance for this kind of intentional stewardship. We can rightly ask, What does it mean to take responsibility for my life in response to the way God has made and called me? The response to this question is that we learn how to work with the hand that we have been dealt. The card-playing metaphor really captures the point: We are not being asked to take responsibility for anything other than the hand that has been dealt to us—including, well, everything! Our gifts, talents and potential, of course. But also the range of setbacks, disappointments and limitations that have been thrust on us. I like the way that golf handicaps a player so that in the end I am not actually playing against my sons (whom I would love to beat, though the chances of that diminish each year), but against myself. All I am being asked to do is to take responsibility for what I have the capacity to bring to this stroke, this hole, this round of eighteen.

By implication, then, I am not responsible for the lives of others. Yes, of course, we look out for others, we encourage others, we teach and equip others, and we live in a way that allows as many as possible to flourish. But in the end we are not God to them, and we cannot take final “adult” responsibility for the other. Indeed, the wise course of action is to stop trying to run or manage others’ lives. Rather, we must ask, In this situation and set of circumstances, what is my particular calling which, yes, might be for the sake of the other but is still only what I am being called to do.

This principle applies to my sons; I am there for them, but in the end they are responsible for their own lives. Of course, my work and responsibility also includes supporting, encouraging and equipping others in their lives and work. But in the end they will only flourish if they learn how to take personal responsibility for their lives. This is part of what it means to be an adult; we live in mutual interdependence in society and community.

When we speak of being the steward of our life, something else must be stressed. We are called to be the steward not of some ideal life or even the life we wish we had; rather we are called to be steward of the life that we have on our hands.
But it is crucial that in our conversation we learn how to speak well about our work, with new acquaintances, but more, with those who are closest to us—with our spouse if we are married, with our children and parents, with friends and associates, colleagues and neighbors. If we are speaking regularly about our work and the joys, sorrows, setbacks and successes of our work, then it only follows that we long to speak well about our work. We want to speak about our work in a way that is deeply informed by a biblical and thus Christian vision for doing good work.

We need this conversation. We need conversation that is marked by wisdom and hope. It is so easy to speak of work in a way that disparages it—thanking God that it is Friday—and thus speak of work through a posture of complaint. Yes, work is difficulty. Yes, there are significant points of stress, difficulty and setback. But what we urgently need is conversation partners who know how to speak of work in a way that is deeply and thoroughly informed by grace.

This book intends to foster this kind of good conversation. You will certainly find it helpful to read this book on your own; I am confident of this. But you might find it of greatest value if you read it in the company of another, so that together you cultivate a way of speaking of work in a manner that is informed by a biblical theology of work and is marked by grace and hopefulness.

I will speak of conversation more at the conclusion of this book (see chap. 12). But for now consider this: When it comes to our work we likely need at the very least three conversation partners. Two of these should ideally be peers—perhaps one who is in a similar line of work (e.g., a fellow nurse who knows the unique challenges of this profession), another who is from another line of work (e.g., the pastor who is strengthened and encouraged by regular conversation with a person in business). The third person, ideally, is someone a generation older, or, as we move into our senior years, someone who is at least ten years older than we are.

If you have these kinds of people in your life, you have a huge gift and extraordinary resource—a source of wisdom and encourage-
live. We need to be able to manage competing demands and in so doing manage our lives, our time and our priorities.

We also long to make sense of the organizations we work in—to know when to accept a position and when to resign, to know the grace of being engaged with our work in an organization without being married to the company.

We all want to grow in our capacity to work with others—with people of other cultural backgrounds and with the opposite gender, as well as with people who are both older and younger than we are.

Finally, we earnestly long to be able to manage the transitions of life as we move through the different chapters of our adult careers.

For each of these points of longing, the way forward is by a conscious reflection on what it means to have a vocation, based on a good theology of work, of vocation and of self. What follows is meant to encourage that reflection and conversation. The biblical foundation for this study is the assumption that we are called to be stewards of the gifts and abilities and opportunities that God gives us. In the language of the second epistle to Timothy: “Fan into flame the gift of God” (2 Tim 1:6 NIV). This study endeavors to do that by considering the question How can we, individually and in community, be all that we are called to be? How can we fan into flame that gift of God that enables us to respond with creativity and strength to the opportunities before us?
THE MEANING OF OUR WORK
A Theological Vision for Engaging Our World

We will be best able to discern and respond to our calling—our vocation—if we have a deeper appreciation for the meaning of work. If vocation is about responding to the call of God to be in the world and to do work that reflects this call, then we naturally need to ask about the meaning and purpose of work, and what constitutes good work, work that is congruent with God’s purposes in our lives.

We are living with a crisis of the “active” life. The life of engagement with the world is for many, if not most, marked by a hectic, busy and bewildering pace. We have a remarkable capacity to live overworked lives, caught up in hectic activity that “has to be done.” This is one of the sins of modernity and of life and work in urban, industrialized societies. In our disturbed passion to accomplish so much and to accomplish it as soon as possible, we have lost a sense of true leisure and also of what it means to be reflective and contemplative.

Yet this frenetic, unfocused approach to life and work is but one side of the greater crisis of our day: a loss of meaning—in our work, our relationships and of our own identity (but for our purposes here, it is especially about our work).
The identity of some is wrapped up in their work, and the loss of employment or a forced retirement has left them feeling hollow, with little sense of purpose, or perhaps they are still on the job but are just floating from one assignment to another without focus or direction. For others the problem is that they are trying to do so much—running around caught up in hectic activity. The busyness often makes us feel important, but we know that that is all it is, busyness. And we know we are mistaken to assume that if a person is busy he or she must be important or, to turn it around, that if an individual is important than he or she must be busy. Underlying all of this lies an inevitable awareness, if we are honest, that in our busyness we begin to lose a sense of what our actions mean and ultimately what our lives mean.

As a result, people of all religious persuasions are trying to find answers, solutions and meaning. Well-written books on work, career, career transitions and career development are best-sellers. There is a palpable sense within our communities that we need to be able to resolve this crisis and come to terms with both our identity and our work so that we can find meaning, joy and purpose in that work.

While various helpful resources are available, it is critical that we think deeply about a theological response to this crisis. Many may consider this idea either strange or perplexing because they have not given intentional theological thought to anything. But when a crisis looms in our lives, we often have to ask the most critical questions. And here is where careful theological reflection can provide us with a way forward.

A THEOLOGICAL VISION FOR GOOD WORK
The huge assumption of our social context is that work is bad and leisure is good. Our only hope for a transformed vision for vocation, work and career, and for navigating the transitions of life, is to engage our world with a theological vision for good work—to redeem the very idea of work.

The revolutionary message of the Bible is that work is precisely that: good. Central to the biblical description of the formation of the first man and woman is the mandate they received to till the earth and name the animals (Gen 2:15, 19-20). They were created to work, and their work was meaningful. God made them workers so that they could be co-creators with him—not in the sense that they are creators of the earth, but that their work was a part of God's continual re-creation, and as such it was important, significant and valued by God.

With the Fall and with sin, work becomes toil (Gen 3:17-19). And thus a crucial part of the Christian mission in the world is to seek and declare a recovery of meaningful and joyful work. Work is a central expression of what it means to be a Christian believer, a critical component of our spirituality. Indeed, in many respects our work is a central context for living out our Christian identity. In this, then, we can and must affirm that not all work is good. Work can be destructive, hurtful and a disservice to Christ and to others. We can violate the very meaning of work whenever, through the skills and energy God has given us, we exploit or injure others or merely gratify our misguided desires. Consequently, our longing for meaningful work must be framed in the context of that which is good, noble and excellent—that which enables us to bring pleasure to our Maker, that which we can with genuine passion say that we do “as unto the Lord” (Col 3:23 KJV).

Unfortunately, we have been deeply influenced by the notion that work is bad and to be avoided, and many people live with the longing to be released from work, looking forward to retirement, when they will no longer work. While retirement does mark an important transition, our ultimate joy is not to be released from work. Jesus promised his followers that if they were diligent and careful in small things, they would be rewarded with more work to do (Mt 25:21). The hope of the new kingdom is not that we will be released from work but rather that our work will be in perfect partnership with God, in the kingdom that is yet to come. The prophet Isaiah spoke of the new heavens and the new earth as a time when we would build houses, plant vineyards and enjoy the work of our hands (Is 65:21-22).

One of the most powerful depictions of good work in the Scrip-
tures is found at the conclusion of the book of Proverbs. Proverbs assumes and demonstrates that we are not wise unless and until we are wise in our work. This theme of good work as the sphere in which we live in wisdom is found in threads throughout this book of the Bible, but it is particularly instructive to consider the theological vision of work that is implied in Proverbs 31.

Many tend to think of Proverbs 31 as the celebration of a woman and a wife. And it is. But implicit in this celebration is another: the affirmation of her work and of thus of work as something we engage with energy, passion, joy and diligence. All of us, both women and men.

Could it be that one of the most helpful ways of reading Proverbs 31 is not to see it so much as an addendum or epilogue, as is so frequently done, but rather as a capstone to the collection of proverbial sayings found in this book of the Bible? What is instructive is that the woman described in this chapter is clearly an embodiment of the wisdom that emerges throughout the book of Proverbs, and further, this wisdom she embodies is most evident in the quality of her work. While there is surely more to wisdom than our work, this chapter celebrates a person who is wise in doing good work. And what is implicit in these verses of Scripture is the contours of a biblical theology of work that has profound relevance for us as we seek to make sense of our lives and recover a theological vision for work.

A capable wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.
The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.
She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.
She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.
She is like the ships of the merchant,
she brings her food from far away.
She rises while it is still night

and provides food for her household
and tasks for her servant girls.
She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard.
She girds herself with strength,
and makes her arms strong.
She perceives that her merchandise is profitable.
Her lamp does not go out at night.
She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.
She opens her hand to the poor,
and reaches out her hands to the needy.
She is not afraid for her household when it snows,
for all her household are clothed in crimson.
She makes herself coverings;
hers clothing is fine linen and purple.
Her husband is known in the city gates,
taking his seat among the elders of the land.
She makes linen garments and sells them;
she supplies the merchant with sashes.
Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.
She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.
She looks well to the ways of her household,
and does not eat the bread of idleness.
Her children rise up and call her happy;
her husband too, and he praises her:
"Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all."
Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.
Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the city gates.
Consider then the biblical vision or theology of work implicit throughout this text of sacred Scripture. And in passing I would note that perhaps in cultures that have a one-dimensional view of women, who are only judged by their physical appearance or sexuality, this chapter is a powerful corrective and a dramatically different articulation of what it means to be a woman. But for all men and women, we have a vision for good work.

**HOME VERSUS MARKETPLACE**

First, we note that this woman is celebrated as she moves between the domestic sphere (caring for the household) and the public sphere of the marketplace (buying and selling real estate). What strikes us is the ease with which she moves between these two worlds.

Contemporary society assumes that we make a choice: one member of a household will be the “homemaker” and the other the “breadwinner” (i.e., in the marketplace generating income to sustain the home). The assumption is that a person cannot be ably engaged in the world, perhaps in a career, if he or she is managing a house or raising children. We have to choose: Will I raise a family or develop a career?

While there certainly are challenges and tensions that come in the interface of each dimension of our lives and work, the woman of Proverbs 31 is clearly engaged on both fronts. And by implication it is important to observe that there is no inherent tension between them. Indeed, perhaps the two are essential to each other, authenticating or legitimizing the other, each a counterpart to the other.

Thus, there is a need to beware of a temptation to claim a higher calling to our work—perhaps our work in the world—and in attending to this dimension of our lives, neglect our basic, mundane, ordinary responsibilities in our home and in the needs of family, neighbors and community.

In 1 Timothy we find a list of qualities and capacities that are to mark those who serve as elders or overseers in the church. The point is made that a person cannot be expected to play a role of leadership in a congregation if the person cannot manage his or her home (1 Tim 3:5). I wonder if this speaks to the inevitable continuity between home and marketplace: our calling and our work inevitably call us to manage the affairs well on both fronts. The two are not then necessarily in tension. And the genius, at least in part, of discerning and living in a way that is consistent with our vocation is that we do not isolate the diverse spheres of our lives, personal and professional, home and office, but live out of the deep connections between these. Yes, there are boundaries; we do need to maintain the sanctity of home and beware of conflicts of interest in the professional world (e.g., the dangers of nepotism). But the main point here is to insist that we are called to live faithfully on each front, including both the domestic sphere and the public and professional spheres of our lives.

**RELIGIOUS VERSUS SECULAR**

Deep within the religious psyche of most Christians is the assumption that religious work is inherently more sacred than all other activities—whether at home, in the garden or in the marketplace—and that the very best work we do is religious in nature and, many would insist, is either focused on the life and ministry of the local church or can be described as a direct participation in church mission.

Consider how easy it is for most Christians to assume that teaching a Sunday school class has more weight and significance than repairing a broken chair, or that a short-term missions trip to Haiti carries more inherent value that the long days of getting a new business started. Or imagine the response of a church community when they hear that a young couple has decided that rather than managing the local bookstore, they are going to assume a pastoral appointment. We assume that the second has more kingdom value and therefore it merits higher affirmation.

Yet, what strikes us about the woman of Proverbs 31 is that she is celebrated—there is a doxological character to these verses—for the work of buying and selling fields, managing a home, working with fabric and with her hands.
I will speak to this more directly later in this chapter, but for now the following needs to be stressed: while the Christian spiritual and religious tradition has always struggled with this question and has consistently split sacred and secular, and generally assumed that religious work is more sacred, this faith tradition has consistently been at its best and has its greatest and most consistent impact for the glory of God and for the reign of Christ when it has affirmed that women and men are called into each sphere and sector of society. The underlying assumption of this book is that religious work or church-related activities, while very important, do not inherently have more weight or significance than the work of the gardener, the businessperson, the public school teacher or the pharmacist.

WITH OUR HANDS AND OUR HEADS
It is a typical assumption within every society I have lived in for any length of time (Latin America, Asia and North America) that manual work is mental work: that the ideal form of work is "professional" rather than manual, that there are two classes of work—white collar and blue collar, professional and labor—and that professional work is to be more highly valued and esteemed.

Even if parents have been active in the so-called trades as plumbers, electricians and carpenters, they often wish that their children would be doctors, lawyers and senior managers in corporations. And when they become doctors, lawyers and managers they hire other people to do the manual work, including everything from carrying their bags to repairing the broken window in their home.

The Christian religious tradition does not share this more negative view of manual work. Indeed, in 1 Thessalonians 4:11 the apostle Paul actually encourages his readers to work with their hands. This is why the text of Proverbs 31 is quite fascinating. Here is a woman of some financial means: she buys and sells fields, works with fine fabric, has servant girls, supports a husband who serves in the governing council of the land, and makes it a point to look out for the poor. She is a wealthy woman. And yet we cannot miss that she works with her hands.

- She works with willing hands (v. 13).
- She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle (v. 19).
- She reaches out her hands to the needy (v. 20).

In the space of very few verses, her hands are mentioned four times. We cannot help but wonder if this is intentional. It seems the biblical author is making a point that wise people work with their hands, that they are not above doing menial labor. Consequently, just as the Christian tradition at its best celebrates the potential sacredness of all work, even so this is a tradition that refuses to pit head and hand against one another in speaking of good work.

One of our urgent needs is to find ways to celebrate the work of those whose work takes them into nursing, carpentry, auto repair and farming. There is something profoundly un-Christian about the family that pushes their son or daughter into a so-called profession because it brings them more wealth or prestige. How sad and what a loss when young people cannot pursue the longing of their heart, especially when that longing is to work with their hands.

Thus I celebrate the publication of Matthew Crawford's book Shop Class as Soulcraft, which is an extraordinary reflection on the beauty and power of manual labor. Crawford, a trained philosopher, probes the deep meaning of working with our hands and writes from the vantage point of a motorcycle repair shop. He does not write as a Christian believer per se, yet his way of speaking of work, with our hands, is very Christian.

The woman of Proverbs 31 is praised as one who worked with her hands. Our Lord himself is traditionally viewed to have been a carpenter; St. Paul was a tentmaker. There is probably truth in the suggestion that only as we learn to work with our hands—and master a craft—whether as a means of employment or as a form of recreation, are we truly integrated with our bodies. When we live entirely in our heads we miss out on a major dimension of good work and thus of a good life.
WAGED WORK AND THE WORK OF THE VOLUNTEER

I write these words shortly after the conclusion of the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics. One of the things that marked these Games in the minds of participants and observers is the remarkable contribution of an army of volunteers. The event was tremendously successful, but that was only possible because women and men gave generously of their time to host the athletes and visitors from around the world, and to work with the organizers to assure that each event was managed well.

When we come to the text of Proverbs 31, it is clear that the woman described here is successful in business: she buys and sells fields, she manages the production of a vineyard and assures that her merchandise is profitable. She is not running a nonprofit. She is the wage earner or, as some put it, the breadwinner of her home.

So where is her husband? Many come to the end of the chapter and read that her husband "praises her," and with a chuckle they insist that he had better praise her! He did very well in marrying this woman. But what is he doing? Verse 23 speaks of the city gate—the place where the town council met to discuss civic affairs—and there he sat with the elders of the land. It is likely that he did not receive remuneration for this work. It is good and necessary work, but it is not likely waged work.

This indeed speaks of a major assumption: those who go into public service should not do so for financial benefit. The state of New Mexico, for example, provides no salary for its state legislators, and those who work in the world of the nonprofit as charities, mission agencies and religious ministry could all likely make a higher salary if they worked in business. But they go as volunteers—paid nothing or at more modest wages to do their work.

I make this point in order to make another. Some within our society do good work that has direct remuneration; they have, as we read in Proverbs 31, "profitable merchandise." But many are called into work where they will receive either no direct compensation or they receive a wage so they can do their "volunteer" work full time. And they can only do so if they are supported by those whose merchandise is "profitable"—whether it is those of us in the nonprofit work who depend on the financial support of those in business, or those within a family system who do volunteer work and depend on another member of the household to sustain the house financially. The point is that both are good; both are necessary and are worth celebrating. Therefore, we do not judge the value of anyone's work by the wage they are paid. We do not make a one-to-one correlation between good work and the amount of a person's salary. Indeed, perhaps we should all find a way to volunteer—to do work on a board or committee or local community center or orphanage—where all we do is give our time and expect nothing in return but the joy of having been able to serve. Indeed, during our senior years many of us will do good and necessary work with no remuneration. We will pour ourselves into our work without a thought for compensation or wages, but merely a joy and passion to do good work in service for others.

PUBLIC WORK AND PRIVATE WORK

There is something else that catches our attention in this description of the wise woman. She is clearly a public woman; she is in the marketplace buying and selling fields. But she is also just as clearly a private woman, private, that is, in her work. Indeed the text highlights this: while others are asleep, she is up early and attending to her responsibilities as the manager of the home.

This speaks to us something fundamental about the work we do: the quality of our work depends, in large measure, on the integrity of the work we do when others are not watching. This is true of all work, all vocations. Our work is marked by quality, integrity and beauty when we are faithful behind the scenes, when no one is overseeing or affirming or praising us. We either learn to work in obscurity or we do not learn how to work at all; many kinds of work—whether teaching, governing, performing as an athlete or entertainer, or sales—have a public character. But for each of these and many others, the quality and integrity of the work depends on the diligence
joy and a commitment to each child who came through her classroom. Her impact is felt not in a moment of greatness or in a brilliant response to a crisis, but rather in the wonder that for all those years she was a continuous learner, consistently present, not asking for or wanting a promotion (whatever that would be), but content, deeply so, to be present to each year's cohort of five-year-olds.

And I think of Chesley Burnett "Sully" Sullenberger III, who brilliantly maneuvered the US Airways flight that landed on the Hudson River west of Manhattan after hitting a flock of geese during takeoff from the La Guardia airport. Yes, it was a brilliant move, and, yes, he is to be praised for his heroic commitment to the passengers on that flight. But perhaps his real greatness is that he had been a consistent and excellent pilot year in and year out, carrying hundreds of passengers, some times two or three times a day, the vast majority of whom would never know his name or have opportunity to offer him thanks.

Good work requires of us an appreciation of the value of routine, ordinary, mundane rhythms of doing what needs to be done, each day and each week, thoroughly and with care. We cannot discount the significance of such work; rather, we need to appreciate that the impact of the woman of Proverbs 31, as it will be in our lives, comes precisely in the accumulation of work done in the quiet and daily practices that are inherent to the work given to us. Many people will find that their daily work is remarkable for its routine ordinariness, and, indeed, that work may have little direct meaning or fulfillment in and of itself. It just needs to be done; there is a family to feed and this is the job that has been provided. The meaning of the work is that it provides livelihood for a person or a family system. In this we never want to lose an appreciation that work in the end is a means of service, offered to God for the sake of others. And this is enough to make our work a religious act.

Much more could be said about the character of work from the reading of Proverbs 31. Many have noted, for example, that in her work the woman is attentive to both the poor and the arts, and they
have wondered if attentiveness to the needs of the poor and the commitment to attend to beauty are inherent in all good work. Old Testament scholar Bruce Waltke observes that “pride of place is given to her ministry to the afflicted and destitute in the community.”

Others have noted her diligence—she worked hard, up early before dawn to attend to the responsibilities of the day. This observation is a reminder that all vocations, all good work, requires diligence. There is no easy road for anyone; regardless of our calling and the line or character of work we are called to, diligence will necessarily be a mark of fulfilling this vocation with integrity.

Two more things. We read that her husband trusted her (v. 11). This is quite remarkable, for, as Waltke points out, the Scriptures consistently condemn trust in anyone other than God—and yet here, without apology, the Scriptures highlight this trust given to another. Indeed, this text celebrates that this person is trustworthy, dependable; her husband could trust her much like he would trust in God.

Finally, Waltke also points out that she is rejuvenated (vv. 17-18). She gains strength from her trading, or, more specifically, she finds spiritual vitality and renewal through her work. Many assume that work is inherently exhausting; the more we do the more it will drain us. But this is a reminder that as our work is redeemed, while there will be a side of our work that will draw down on our physical and emotional strength, the work we carry may well be a source of spiritual renewal and vigor for us. And consider this as a passing observation: people often assume they have done good work if they are exhausted, and that they deserve time off because they are completely spent. But perhaps this exhaustion is a sign of overwork, which indicates that it may not be good work or that it is not the right work for us, the work to which we are truly called. If there is truth to this, perhaps we should stop trying to justify time off by explaining to people we are exhausted from our work and need some time away. Take the time, I say! But in our culture, where overwork is so highly valued, we assume that we can only take time away from the office and can only justify this time if we can demonstrate that we are tired, overextended and exhausted, and therefore “deserve” a break. This is truly not a Christian perspective on either work or rest, notably where rest is viewed as something that is earned or merited.

A THEOLOGY OF VOCATION
Closely related to the matter of work is the question of vocation and what it means to have a biblical theology of vocation. My assumption here is twofold: first, our work is done in response to the calling of God. God calls us to the work we do, and thus our work becomes something that we do as an offering to God. This suggests that everyone is invited to do good work that they are not craving to avoid.

As I write this my bank is on a marketing spree urging clients toward good retirement planning. They are suggesting that good planning could potentially lead to an early retirement. Of course, the assumption of the ads is that one should be released from work as soon as possible and be able to participate in any number of “retirement” activities, including sailing, golfing and sleeping in or enjoying an extended morning coffee while the rest of the human race is off to work. It is taken for granted that the ideal life is the work-free life. And if money is no object, then one does not work.

But the witness of the Scriptures and of the Christian spiritual heritage suggest that responsible human life includes stewardship of our capacities and opportunities. Being wealthy does not for a moment free us from the calling to do good work. To the contrary, a biblical theology of vocation provides us with a critical and essential lens through which to view our lives and what it means to be stewards of our lives. So, we can ask not only What is good work? but What is the good work I am called to?

It is important to recognize that some things are obvious: if we are parents, we are called to care for the children God has given us. If the downspout around my house is loose and water is pouring into the foundation of my home, I do not go on a prayer retreat to determine if fixing this is my calling! Rather, I put on rain gear and head out into the stormy weather to do what needs to be done!
Yet, we are so regularly caught up in the routines and the immediate demands of life that we do not stand back and ask, But what, fundamentally, is the work I am called to? What is my vocation; what is my life purpose?

For starters it is important to stress that we cannot respond to this question unless and until we affirm the fundamental biblical principle that all vocations are inherently and potentially sacred. Whether we are called into service in the church or in the world, whether we are called to work with our hands, to religious work, to work in the arts or to work in education and the sciences, each call has the potential for sacredness.

If a vocation represents a call of God—to serve God in the world—that vocation is sacred for no more powerful reason than that it comes from God. It therefore makes no sense to speak of a secular vocation; such a phrase is a contradiction in terms. A vocation is sacred in that it comes from God.

The Christian community throughout its history has wrestled with this reality almost from the very beginning. For the early church, deeply influenced by Hellenistic thought, any work that was in the world or that engaged actively with society was viewed as not only secular but probably evil. Thus the spiritual ideal was to leave the world, be separate from it and live as much as possible a life of prayer and study. The belief became deeply embedded in the psyche of the church that if a person had a vocation, he or she was called to leave so-called secular employment and accept service in and through the church. For centuries it was assumed that a person with a vocation was called to the life of ministry in the church, either as a priest or as a nun. Protestant Christians have tended to use the language of "calling." If a person was called, it implicitly meant that he or she was called to the gospel ministry as a pastor or missionary. But this notion is not consistent with the biblical witness, and at different points in history the church has had prophets that called us back to a more inclusive notion of both work and vocation.

Noteworthy in this regard is the contribution of the Reformers, particularly Martin Luther, though John Calvin's contribution is also very significant. Both called for a spirituality in the world that took seriously the home and the marketplace. On the one hand this meant that they affirmed the common and the ordinary; as Calvin put it, "In following your proper calling, no work will be so mean and sordid as not to have splendor and value in the eye of God." He therefore insisted that each person should respect his or her own calling. Both Reformers refused to make the sharp distinction between sacred and secular that was so characteristic of the medieval world and still is evident in the language of contemporary Christians. But Calvin went further and affirmed that each person has been assigned a station or calling from the Lord; this vocation is not something accidental. Consequently, it is our sacred duty to accept and even embrace what God has called us to. The sacred is not distinct from the secular; rather the sacred is that which sanctifies the ordinary and thus makes it good and noble. For Luther, this was critical to his assumption that every Christian believer is a priest.

Luther and Calvin did not go far enough; they were still constrained by their social and cultural context, evident, in part, by Calvin's diatribe against ambition, and the assumption in both Reformers that we should accept our social station in life as itself of God. But when viewed through a wide-angle lens, we see that something revolutionary happened through their teaching that the homemaker, the shoemaker and the preacher all serve God, all respond to the call of God and thus all have a vocation.

Yet despite the power and influence of Luther and Calvin, the older, far-from-biblical notion that some vocations are more sacred than others is still locked in our psyches. As a young man I remember those occasions when it was suggested that if we really loved the Lord we would be missionaries, and if not missionaries, then pastors, and if not missionaries or pastors, then at least business people (in "secular work") who could support those with the "sacred" callings. Within my tradition this was captured in the words of A. B. Simpson, which would no doubt be typical of what many would have heard as young
people and perhaps still hear today: "Your only excuse for staying home and not going to the mission field is if by staying home you can do more to further the cause of missions than by going."

While the motive behind such a statement is noble, I dare think what it has meant for so many who because of such a perspective have failed to affirm and celebrate the sacredness of their work. Though we have made major progress, this narrow understanding of vocation does not die easily. We need to thunder from our pulpits and celebrate at every turn in the life of the church that God is calling people into education, the arts, public office, business, engineering, medicine, the service professions—quite literally into every area and sector of human life. We need to proclaim this truth and celebrate it often because the older, unbiblical notion is so deeply embedded in our corporate consciousness. Further, we need to affirm that only those explicitly called to religious leadership should become pastors. Otherwise they fail to fulfill what they are really being called to do.

Implicit in this recovery of a biblical theology of vocation is a renewed appreciation of the full extent of God's kingdom. All vocations are sacred because the kingdom is not merely spiritual. God is establishing his kingdom on the earth as all creation comes under his divine authority. To that end, God calls and enables his children to be his kingdom agents within every sphere of life and society. Each vocation reflects but one means by which God, through word and deed, is accomplishing this.

It is important to stress that in all of this we must sustain a distinction between vocation and career. A vocation comes from God, and though it will encompass work in every sector of society, from the home to the marketplace to the church, it remains a fundamentally religious principle. Many people still confuse "vocational" with technical, as though one might attend a vocational school and train for a trade or profession rather than attend liberal arts school or institution. The irony of this is the assumption that if someone chose the academic route and not the "vocational" alternative, he or she was then not "trained" to do something useful! But again, this notion of vocation comes no where near approximating what I will be speaking of in these chapters.

Some have suggested that because the notion of vocation has been so denuded of its original meaning and force there is no reason to keep using the word vocation. But to do so would be to cave in to a false notion of vocation and thus lose use of a wonderful word. We must recover the original meaning; we must restore to our communities and to our language an understanding of vocation as "calling"—as something we recognize as both fundamentally religious and sacred, and as something that enables us, in response to the call of God, to embrace whatever it is that God would have us be and do in the church and the world.

Sustaining the language of vocation helps on two other points as well. First, we must distinguish between vocation and career. We may be called to particular work that is reflected in a career, an occupation done over an extended period of time in which we express a mastery or capacity for this particular kind of work. But we must not allow a singular career or occupation to eclipse our personal identity and sense of vocation. The two must be kept distinct.

Finally, the language of vocation is a reminder that our work is given to us by another, by the God who is our Creator. Thus our work is not our god; it is given to us as gift, as something for which we are stewards. In the end it does not define us, however important it is to us and to God. And in this regard, nothing so signals this as the observance of sabbath. In other words, we are called to work, but we are not called only to work. And we resist the deification of our work; we keep our work from becoming idolatrous by consistently, one day in seven, ceasing from it. A biblical theology of work, then, also includes the explicit call for regular sabbath rest—when we set our work aside and take time for leisure, recreation, worship and fellowship. We are not workers; we are, rather, children of God who are called to work. Our work is never the primary expression of our
identity, and through regular sabbath rest we reestablish our identity in God and in his love, acceptance and grace toward us (Ex 31:13-17). We violate the meaning of work when all we do is work, when we lose a rhythm and routine of both work and play, work and prayer, work and sabbath rest.