

Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation

Study Guide
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Introduction

I admit that I was a bit surprised to find myself reading church history as a “page-turner.” However, the readings assembled by Bill Placher in *Callings* quickly came alive for me as heroic personal stories of spiritual struggle and questing. These were stories to which I could relate personally, people about whom I wanted to know more—indeed, people with whom I wished I could talk!

And right away I wanted to begin sharing these stories and insights with others. Yet, as you will soon discover, this is not a book for casual skimming and superficial conversation. It is a richly endowed text that deserves intentional study to mine its wisdom. This study guide is intended to give focus to that intention. Fortunately there is a unity of purpose in the book that allows for coherence in study: Placher’s goal of bringing ideas about Christian calling from the past into dialogue with the question of Christian calling in the present.

Callings was written for a varied audience of readers: students, teachers, clergy and laity.

At its essence, vocation is simply another way of describing discipleship.

With that extremely diverse and somewhat academically oriented audience in mind, I composed an extensive study guide, published by Programs for Theological Exploration of Vocation (www.ptev.org), which offers teachers and leaders a large array of supplementary lesson materials from which to choose. You may want to use that study guide as an additional reference.

The present study guide, however, was written with a more particular audience in mind: congregations seeking to rediscover and reclaim God’s vocational pushes and promises for both individuals and for the church, as revealed in Scripture and tradition.

Though it originated in an initiative that raises vocational questions with college students, *Callings* addresses fundamental

themes of faithfulness in life and work that resonate well beyond young adulthood. If you glance at the lesson titles on Page 4 of this guide, you will see that the conversation that *Callings* evokes goes well beyond choosing a major or selecting a profession. Engaging the texts that Dr. Placher has chosen will challenge readers with the ideas and ideals that are the heart of any Christian life. For, at its essence, vocation is simply another way of describing discipleship, our humble efforts to embody the essential Christian prayer—“Thy kingdom come, they will be done”—in the particulars of our individual and common lives.

For that reason, I hope this study will serve not only a range of age groups but also a range of possibilities for study and conversation in your congregation. From Sunday School curriculum to book clubs to ordination committees, *Callings* is a wonderful resource for any who are seeking inspiration for living, in the words of the apostle Paul, “lives worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”

This congregation-oriented study guide also seeks to serve as a resource for the church as it endeavors to nurture the next generation of pastors and leaders. While the meaning of vocation has been expanded in the history of the Christian church to encompass discipleship in multiple contexts, including occupational and familial roles, the special call to church ministry remains a vocational choice of crucial and sacred necessity. Yet many of us sense that the voices of contemporary opportunism call ever more loudly, charming young people away from the sacrificial challenges of ministry; indeed, away from intentional Christian discipleship in general.

It appears that for too long we, the church, may have been complacent about Christian vocation, assuming either that “God will provide” or that youth will find their own way there and we will applaud them when they do. Benign negligence, however, may look to our young people a lot like devaluation.

Perhaps it is time for the church to make clear its valuing of Christian vocation and the various forms of intentional discipleship within the community of faith!

With this aim in mind, I would like to propose two additional uses for this study guide. The first is simply to make use of *Callings* and the guide wherever there are opportunities for substantive engagement with young men and women who are sincerely listening for the call of God in their lives and, furthermore, to use that opportunity to pose the question: have you ever considered the possibility that God is calling you to ordained ministry in the church?

But I also encourage you to see this study guide as a means for equipping leaders to ask that question of young people. The call to ministry might be heard more frequently if more of us felt both the responsibility and the necessity of articulating it. There is no doubt that our call, whether to faith or to ministry, comes ultimately from God. But in how many call stories has the divine Voice spoken through human lips? And so I challenge you to convene a group of leaders in your congregation that is willing to risk knowing themselves better vocationally in order to mentor those next in line for Christian discipleship, ministry and leadership.

A friend, recently reflecting on his altar call experiences at church camp as a teenager, mused that there are really three kinds of calling within the church. First is simply the call to faith, to *become* a disciple of Christ. Next is the call to *renew* faith regularly in the midst of everyday life. Third is the call to *lead* the people who desire to be faithful. *Callings* and this study guide offer fresh ideas from our tradition to enliven our personal and congregational responses to all of these callings.

Indeed, I would challenge congregational leaders and groups embarking on this serious and sustained journey into the exploration of calling to find ways to incorporate what they learn directly into the life of the church. The vitality of congregations literally depends on this—on members finding their own sense of place and purpose within the body of Christ—as disciples and as leaders. Moreover, the often tentative and uncertain seeds of calling to pastoral ministry may be nourished and

cultivated within the family of faith where they originate.

It is not the job of the church to create calling where none exists; however, perhaps it is the vocation of the church to create an environment in which the fainter and more countercultural voice of God's calling, especially to pastoral ministry, can be heard against the louder noises of

secular ambitions. Perhaps, as disciples within the church engage their individual and communal callings through images provided in the present

resources, there can be amplification of the church's voice and need, as well as clarification of God's voice and will.

So, I urge those of you who will be leading congregations in this important task to take your role very seriously. You are the change agents for the coming generations of the church—its ministers, its leaders, its disciples and its identity. I am considerably more hopeful about the future of the Christian church as I imagine you beginning to dig into these compelling models—both historical and contemporary—to reflect on the meaning of Christian calling.

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Using the Study Guide

Callings is divided into four large chapters based on historical epochs in Christian religious thought. This study guide follows the same chronology but clusters the readings into eight lessons based on selected readings from the text. The lessons are paired such that the teacher may choose to use either one or both lessons from each chapter. It is possible, then, to create either a four- or eight-lesson program of study. I recommend the latter if there is sufficient time.

It is essential that leaders read and understand the introduction to the book, as well as the introductions to each section. I also would encourage leaders to read the entire *Callings* book and/or use the PTEV Study Guide's "Highlights" sections in order to have a complete picture.

Each lesson in the study guide contains the following sections:

- To The Teacher/Leader
- Selected Readings for Students
- Key Points
- Questions for Discussion
- Action Projects
- Personal Reflection/Journaling
- Additional Resources

The four pairs of lessons, organized around the four major sections of the book, are as follows:

- Called to a Christian Life: Vocations in the Early Church, 100-500
 - o Lesson 1: Christian Calling as Heroic Commitment
 - o Lesson 2: Giving Up Worldly Things
- Called to Religious Life: Vocations in the Middle Ages, 500-1500
 - o Lesson 3: The Vocation of Daily Discipline
 - o Lesson 4: Contemplation, Charity and Obedience
- Every Work a Calling: Vocations after the Reformation, 1500-1800
 - o Lesson 5: Acquiring a Christian Character
 - o Lesson 6: Personal and Social Awakenings
- Christian Callings in a Post-Christian World, 1800-present
 - o Lesson 7: Faith and Work in a Modern World
 - o Lesson 8: Costs, Courage and Commitment

Planning

Leaders and readers alike are encouraged to set aside adequate time for this project. Participation and immersion in these ideas are vital to the learning process as well as to the goal of Christian discernment. Serious commitment has the potential to be life-transforming.

- Esprit de corps

In the initial session, or perhaps in a separate introductory gathering, it is important to generate group trust because the frank sharing of questions, ideas and personal experiences is a critical clarifying feature of this project. Icebreakers that open the way to the dialogues and discussions ahead are helpful even for groups who already know each other. Such “openers” also provide a good opportunity for introductions and the integration of new members.

Here are a couple of openers that I have used successfully: Have each member state their current “calling” without using any term that describes what they do per se, but rather using a broader term for what they bring to the community. For example, a professional teacher would not be allowed to say “teacher,” but would have to find another way of describing what they bring to the world, like, “nurturer” or “clarifier.” A student could not simply say “student” but would need to say something like “encourager” or “explorer.” In this way, members are discouraged from the limiting view that their occupation is the sum total of their vocation.

Alternatively, I have asked individuals to draw or paste a picture on a card of an everyday object that makes a good metaphor or symbol for the way they see their calling; for example, a bridge for someone who helps make connections or a Swiss army knife for a person with multiple talents. This activity can encourage active creativity and imagination, as well as build a positive and open sense of community, especially if fun materials (colored markers, crayons, magazines, blank index cards) are provided.

A third creative activity I have used in groups who are together for longer (e.g., during a weekend retreat) is journal-making. Using scrap cardboard (cereal boxes), wallpaper and other types of interesting scrap paper, participants can create their own unique journals for reflection exercises. Journals are made by joining two wallpaped or decorated cardboard covers holding eight to 10 pages for writing. The covers are secured with the pages between by threading yarn or string through three holes punched in the covers and paper. An introductory exercise can be to compose or enter a short quote on the first page—a sort of personal foreword on calling.

- Ground Rules/ Group Covenant

Whether structured or relatively unstructured, achieving consensus on the group’s purpose and process is an important next step. More informal and voluntary groups (e.g., church groups, campus ministries) may wish to create a covenant of commitment to the project. The group can be guided to give voice to its particular vision and hopes for the project. Then parameters of mutual commitment may be considered and adopted by the group members; e.g., frequency and timing of meetings; expectations concerning regular preparation (reading, writing/journaling); expectations about attendance, participation and/or leadership. Finally, the ethos or atmosphere of the group’s time together (e.g., confidentiality and respect for diversity of beliefs or opinions) may also become part of the covenant.

- Assignments

For the most enriching level of participation, it seems essential that group members independently read the designated selections for students, and hopefully, the optional selections as well. This does not entail a vast amount of reading and is important to give full flavor to the narrative perspectives offered. A variety of additional homework assignments can be made to extend individual and group commitment and involvement. In particular, group members can be given copies of the next week's discussion questions and encouraged to reflect on them, perhaps jotting down notes to bring to the group. Journaling can be likewise encouraged for the purpose of private and personal reflection, and inexpensive journals can be made by or purchased for participants to facilitate this activity. Optional sharing of thoughts from these reflections can occasionally be solicited to enhance conversation in a group where some trust has been established. Finally, one or more of the action projects (described in the guide) can enhance the group experience tremendously; however, these projects can be made more or less formal according to the discretion of the instructor.

- Using a Web Study Guide Effectively

A web-based study guide offers teachers, leaders, and students certain freedoms. The material can be downloaded and printed—in entirety or in portions. I find that it is useful for the teacher/leader to have a printed copy of the entire guide in a three-ring binder for quick reference. Some sections can be printed and distributed to the class. Enjoy the many options afforded by this approach and add your own!

- A Disclaimer

At the end of each lesson, I have provided a short list of suggested books and movies that allow for further exploration of the topics. Some selections are literary and scholarly; others are from popular culture. The list is far from exhaustive; and I have not personally read or previewed every entry, but I have perused descriptions and reviews or consulted with colleagues until I am reasonably convinced of the exploratory worth of the listings. A longer list is available in the PTEV Study Guide mentioned in the Introduction.

Christian Calling as Heroic Commitment

To The Teacher/Leader

In preparation for this lesson and the next, it will be very helpful to study the introduction to the entire text as well as the introduction to the first chapter. From these readings, you can offer the group background information to help place their reading in context.

- Introduction pp. 1 - 12
- Section 1 Introduction pp. 23 - 32

Selected Readings for Students

- Prologue: Some Biblical Texts on Calling pp. 13 - 20
- Ignatius of Antioch pp. 33 - 35

Optional

- *The Martyrdom of Perpetua* pp. 39 - 47

Key Points

- Christian tradition holds that *God calls* human beings to lives of meaning and purpose.
- Calling has been described (Buechner) as the best fit between our particular God-given gifts and interests, and the needs of the world.
- The Bible uses the idea of God's calling to mean both a summons to *faithfulness in general*, and/or a summons to *special service*. There are examples of both in the stories of the Old and New Testaments.
- Christian interpretation of the meaning of vocation or calling has been radically affected by historical context:
 - o In the early church (100-500), God's call into a life of faith was understood as a countercultural commitment with significant risks and personal sacrifices.
 - o During the Middle Ages (500-1500), God's call into a life of faith was understood as a special call into the priesthood or monastic life.
 - o During the Reformation (1500-1800), God's call into a life of faith was understood as a general religious approach to and valuing of whatever job or life role one held.

- o In the Post-Christian Age (1800-present), God's call into a life of faith is understood as attempting to live fully the values and teachings of Christ within a world not so inclined.
- There were relatively few deaths by persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, but those that occurred were highly visible, serving as both a terrifying threat and a strong symbol of Christian commitment.
- Ignatius, a first-century Christian Bishop of Antioch, Syria, was captured, imprisoned and eventually killed in Rome. His letters express eagerness for that morbid fate, based on his belief that death was the only true way to freedom in God and union with Christ.
- Third-century martyr Perpetua, a young North African mother preparing for her Christian baptism, testifies powerfully to the intensity of commitment and emotional fervor associated with the heroes and heroines of the early church. Ignoring the pleas of her family, Perpetua courageously faced public torture at the hands of the Romans.

Questions for Discussion

- What important questions or controversies arise in *current* discussions of Christian vocation? Include in this discussion *your own* questions about the meaning of vocation. What does vocation mean to you?
- How do people typically try to discern their vocation today, if at all? What role does the Church and/or the Christian tradition play?
- How does the Bible typically describe “work”? Use a Bible concordance and examine the various perspectives on work.
 - o Is work generally valued or devalued in the Scripture?
 - o Is one's work or job equivalent to one's calling, according to the Bible?
 - o Later in the history of the church, one's work or job *was* considered a calling. Can you think how that connection could be justified biblically?
- Why did Bishop Ignatius of Antioch, someone who could have avoided persecution based on his status, choose not to? Do we ever use power or status to avoid significant sacrifices related to our faith? Think of contemporaries who have put faithful action ahead of personal security. Was their response effective or simply rash?
- How did you feel about Perpetua's choice to leave family, including an infant, for the sake of her faith? Is there any Biblical basis for this action? Were (are) there alternative routes of faithful response?
- Are there Christian martyrs today? If so, give examples and describe what martyrdom looks like in our world. When is it risky to practice faithful action? What is risked, if not our lives?
- What role, if any, should the early church's apparently invigorating demands on the lives of the faithful play in contemporary religious thought and practice? To what extent can the contemporary church maintain the same expectations of members?

Action Project

- Interview someone who seems to live by a strong sense of Christian calling. (Alternatively, invite a guest speaker to visit the group and tell his or her vocational story.) Learn the story behind the calling—the person’s feelings and thoughts, attributions and explanations, memories of open and closed doors, turning points and epiphanies.

Personal Reflection/Journaling

Begin a personal autobiography of calling by writing about some of the following:

- Do you sense God’s calling in your present life? How? In what ways? Looking back, what have been the major turning points, signs, or guiding events that have directed your life so far?
- What other voices speak their desires for your life? How do you try to distinguish God’s call from these other voices?
- Have you experienced any inner resistance to what you think God desires for your life? How about resistance from other people? Describe.
- What do you make of Frederick Buechner’s description of calling as “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet”?
 - o Have you begun to get clues about your deep gladness? What are they?
 - o How are you attempting to learn about the world’s deep needs? Have you gotten out of your comfort zone? What have you learned?
- Is the Christian church today is experiencing some important “deep hungers” or needs?
- What do you need from God or from the church as you try to understand and respond to your calling? How can you ask for help?
- Are there times within or outside the church when you find yourself reluctant to express your religious perspectives? What is the risk?
- What are the most striking contrasts you experience between culture’s conformity pressures and the countercultural teachings of Christ? How do you respond?
- Should contemporary Christians embrace suffering and self-denial—as did the early Christians? Why or why not? What is the point of suffering for Christ’s sake?

Additional Resources

Books

- *Markings* by Dag Hammarskjöld (Knopf, 1964, 256 pages). Dag Hammarskjöld left behind the manuscript of this book to be published after his death. It is a record of the spiritual life of a man whose public image was universally known and admired—a record that reveals the extent of his commitment to the Way of the Cross.
- *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* by Parker J. Palmer (Jossey-Bass, 199, 128 pages). Palmer invites readers to listen to the inner teacher and follow it toward a sense of meaning and purpose. Telling stories from his own life and the lives of others who have made a difference, he shares insights gained from darkness and depression as well as fulfillment and joy, illuminating a pathway to vocation for all who seek the true calling of their lives.
- *A Hidden Wholeness* by Parker J. Palmer (Jossey-Bass, 2004, 224 pages). At a time when many seek new ways of working and living, *A Hidden Wholeness* offers insight into the human condition and personal and communal guidance.
- *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* by Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon (Abingdon Press, 1989, 175 pages). Two leading Christian thinkers explore the “alien” status of Christians in today’s world, and offer a vision of how the Christian church can regain its vitality, battle its malaise, reclaim its capacity to nourish souls, and stand firmly against the illusions, pretensions, and eroding values of today’s world.

Movies

- *The Mission* (Warner Bros., 1986, PG, 126 minutes). Two missionaries fight for the rights of South American Indians against Spanish colonial landowners. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0091530/>
- *Gandhi* (1982, PG, 188 minutes). Biography of the lawyer who became the famed leader of the Indian revolts against the British through his philosophy of non-violent protest. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0083987/>
- *Babette’s Feast* (Orion, 1988, G, 102 minutes). Babette, a refugee from the wars of the French Revolution, works as a cook for two sisters in a Danish town. When she unexpectedly wins the lottery, Babette decides to prepare a feast for several members of the village. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0092603/>
- *Romero* (Four Seasons, 1989, PG-13, 102 minutes). This film recounts the life of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who, because of his opposition to the repressive government of El Salvador, was killed while saying Mass. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0098219/>
- *The Insider* (Buena Vista, 1999, R, 157 minutes). The true story of tobacco industry whistle-blower Jeffrey Wigland, the former head of development at the Brown & Williamson Tobacco Company, who went public on an episode of “60 Minutes.” Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0140352/>

- *Dead Man Walking* (Gramercy, 1995, R, 122 minutes). A nun, while comforting a convicted killer on death row, empathizes with both the killer and his victim's families.
Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0112818/>

Giving Up Worldly Things

To The Teacher/Leader

In preparation for this lesson, the teacher will do well to review the introduction to the chapter as well as the reading from Augustine so that this important traditional story can be told, even if it is not assigned to students.

- Introduction to Chapter 1 pp. 23 - 32
- Augustine: *Confessions* (Books VI-VIII) pp. 89 - 101

Selected Readings for Students

- Athanasius: *The Life of Anthony* pp. 59 - 65
- *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* pp. 80 - 82

Optional

- Augustine: *Confessions* (Books VI-VIII) pp. 89 - 101

Key Points

- When Constantine made Christianity the religion of the Empire and ended martyrdom, the idea of calling came to be reserved for ascetics and monastics, who were *called away* from the ways of the world.
- Athanasius, fourth-century theologian and Bishop of Alexandria, portrayed the ideals of such Christian calling in his *Life of Anthony*:
 - Anthony, hearing the Biblical text, gave all he had to the poor and embarked on a solitary spiritual journey to perfect a lifestyle of patience, piety and self-denial.
 - In a tomb outside the city, Anthony struggled through a host of intense physical and spiritual rigors, emerging years later healed in body and soul.
- *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, a collection of anecdotes from the fourth and fifth centuries, gives a picture of Christian monastic life. Those choosing that calling were to be:

- o Prepared to be accused of madness
 - o Willing to sacrifice time, money or health for another's sake
 - o Forgiving
 - o Peace-seeking
 - o Humble and obedient
 - o Patient
 - o Accessible, bringing light to the world
 - o Praying without ceasing while also working to meet their own and others' needs
 - o Celibate
- Augustine, a North African teacher of rhetoric during the fourth and fifth centuries, knew about Christianity but was more attracted to the intellectualism of the day. His calling/conversion story has become a Christian epic:
 - o In his *Confessions*, Augustine describes his life prior to conversion as full of empty vanities, sexual pleasures and superstitious religion.
 - o He describes a series of remarkable meetings and events that, in hindsight, appeared to represent God's way of preparing him for conversion from his life of "two wills"—one carnal in its desires, and one spiritual.
 - o At a point of extreme anguish, Augustine heard a child's voice saying "Take it and read it." At that moment, he opened the Scripture at random and read the passage in front of him—a text in Romans 13 about giving up the desires of the flesh. With this apparent sign, he finally experienced complete conversion.

Questions for Discussion

- In the early church, how did the particular practices of "called" or exemplary Christians serve as their witness to the truth of the Gospel? Give some examples of their counter-cultural commitments. How do you suppose their actions affected the people of faith at large? How does reading about them affect you?
- With all due respect for the ascetic choices of the early Christians, what is the purpose of such rigorous self-denial? In consideration of the great sacrifices of early Christians for the faith, have contemporary Christians become too complacent?
- What might be the value to Christian faith of withdrawing into a place alone or as a community apart from the mainstream (i.e., the monastic way)? How do you feel about persons who choose that lifestyle? For those who do not, are there some alternative routes to the same goals?
- A variety of people and rather bizarre experiences served to guide and mentor Augustine's journey to conversion. How can people of faith serve one another in the discernment of vocation? In particular, what roles and responsibilities does your congregation have in mentoring those in search of a calling?
- Prior to his conversion, Augustine reported experiencing extreme anxiety and illness. Do his experiences offer you any ideas about the relationship between health and wholeness, sin and sickness? What cautions ought we to consider when making such connections?

- Augustine has written a very personal document that he names *Confessions*. What is he confessing—his sins or his faith, or both? Look up some of the church’s “confessions” in your hymnal or prayer book. What is being confessed? What is the role of this kind of confession in the discernment of calling—for individuals or for the church?
- Based on this section of the reading, what relationships appear to exist among confession, conversion, and calling within the Christian faith?

Action Projects

- Arrange to visit a monastery or convent. If possible, stay for a weekend or several days, allowing yourself to experience the rhythm of the hours. If this is not possible, have a non-cloistered monk or nun visit with the group and share some of the details of living within an order.
- Try re-enacting Augustine’s moment of conversion—where he put his finger on a random text in the Bible that seemed to speak directly to his situation. That is, try opening a Bible to a random page and, with your eyes closed, pick a spot on the page to begin reading. How do you connect personally—today—with the text under your finger? You may want to try this more than once—perhaps on different days. How did you experience this exercise? Did you find it a particularly profound way of gaining spiritual direction? Why or why not?

Reflection/Journaling

- Do you ever long for a life of material simplicity? What pros and cons can you see for such a life? How could you bring more solitude, simplicity and spiritual discipline into your life?
- Make a list of things (not necessarily material things, but also people, ideas, or behaviors) in your life that you would like to let go of or leave behind, perhaps because you no longer need them or because they cause you anxiety. Journal about each of the items in your list, pondering what attracts and repels you.
- Reflect on a situation in your life where you felt put to the test with regard to a choice between culture and Christian values. What consequences did you fear or experience? Are you satisfied with your choice?
- Do you or did you ever feel hated or persecuted for your faith? Write about your feelings and where this takes you.
- How does your faith enter into your sense of yourself as a public citizen?
- Write a personal confession of your own, following the model of Augustine in which he describes his sense of what is wrong with his life, his perceptions of God’s guidance, and his final conclusions about faith and freedom. Consider how you would feel putting your confession in print for anyone to read—as Augustine did.

Additional Resources

Books

- *To Love as God Loves: Conversations With the Early Church* by Roberta Bondi (Fortress Press, 1987, 111 pages). According to Bondi, God's love has definite characteristics to be learned in the course of life, in the behavior and teaching of the early monastics, in what is said about God as God acts, and finally, as followers model what they have learned.
- *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose: Vocation and the Ethics of Ambition* by Brian J. Mahan (Jossey-Bass, 2002, 240 pages). Mahan considers how it is possible to create a meaningful spiritual life while living in a culture that measures success by ownership.
- *The Cloister Walk* by Kathleen Norris (Riverhead Trade, 1997, 416 pages). A lifelong Protestant, Norris gives insight into the lives of Benedictine monks in this story of her decade as an oblate at a monastery.
- *The Seven Story Mountain* by Thomas Merton (Harcourt, 1999, 467 pages). *The Seven Story Mountain* is about Merton's search for faith and peace. His curiosity about spiritual matters led him first to baptism as a Catholic and ultimately to entry into a Trappist monastery: "the four walls of my new freedom."
- *Faith's Freedom: A Classic Spirituality for Contemporary Christians* by Luke Timothy Johnson (Fortress Press, 1990, 188 pages). In this book, Johnson explains his belief that Christian spirituality needs an intellectual recasting that takes seriously the life of ordinary people in a world shaped by modernity.
- *The Wounded Healer* by Henri Nouwen (Image, 1979, 128 pages). *The Wounded Healer* speaks directly to those who want to be of service in their church or community but have found the traditional ways often threatening and ineffective. In this book, Nouwen combines case studies of ministry with stories from diverse cultures and religious traditions in proposing a new model for ministry.
- *Confessions* by Saint Augustine (Oxford University Press, 1998, 352 pages). Written in the form of a long prayer addressed directly to God, *Confessions* is the chronicle of Augustine's conversion to Christianity.

Movies

- *Satya: A Prayer for the Enemy* (Bruno Films, 1995, NR, 28 minutes). For more than 40 years the Tibetans have adhered to the principles of nonviolent social change. *Satya* seeks to understand the basis and inspiration for this choice of nonviolence, and the spiritual principles that undergird it. Link: <http://www.brunofilms.com/satya.html>
- *The Mosquito Coast* (1986, PG, 117 minutes). An inventor sells his house and takes his family to Central America to build an ice factory in the middle of the jungle. Conflicts with his family, a local preacher and with nature are only small obstacles to his obsession. Based on a Paul Theroux novel. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0091557/>

- *A Time for Miracles* (1980, NR, 97 minutes). Elizabeth Bayley Seton, America's first native-born saint and founder of the Sisters of Charity, is the subject of this film. After the death of her husband and children, Seton founded the American Sisters of Charity and the first American Catholic schools. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0081634/>

Lesson 3

The Vocation of Daily Discipline

To The Teacher/Leader

In preparation for this lesson, the teacher should review the introduction to the chapter.

- Introduction to Chapter 2 pp. 107 - 114

Selected Readings for Students

- John Cassian, *Institutes* pp. 115 - 123
- Sulpicius Severus, *Life of St. Martin* pp. 123 - 127
- Benedict of Nursia, *The Rule of St. Benedict* pp. 128 - 132

Key Points

- Primary social divisions of the early Middle Ages were: clerical/religious, military, and peasant/labor, with clergy being the most powerful and literate. “Calling” referred only to the *religious* vocations.
- European monasteries, while based on those of the early church, were less ascetic and more focused on spiritual community. Many religious orders founded in the Middle Ages still exist today; e.g., Benedictines, Franciscans and Dominicans.
- The goal of religious calling in the Middle Ages was to model a rhythm of daily discipline centered on God, from which could emerge the personal qualities needed for salvation.
- John Cassian, whose life spanned the fourth and fifth centuries, brought the influence of his Egyptian desert monastic experience to Western Europe, founding two monasteries in France.
 - o Cassian’s rule of monastic discipline included:
 - Rigorous testing to ensure commitment and humility.
 - Dispossession of all property.
 - Renunciation of all worldly relationships.
 - Self-effacement within the community of monks.
 - Subduing of all bodily desires.
 - Subduing of all distracting emotions.

- o Cassian addressed the issue of “accidie” or the weariness and despair that could arise and tempt desertion from the discipline, especially under conditions of solitude.
- Sulpicius Severus tells the story of St. Martin of Tours, a fourth-century monk, bishop and Christian exemplar:
 - o Despite his longing to become a monk, Martin obeyed his father and entered military service, but even in the military, he remained Christ-like, taking the role of a servant.
 - o A dream of Christ quickened his desire for baptism; he requested military discharge, but was instead thrown into prison. When a miraculous military victory was attributed to him, he was released.
 - o On his way home to seek the conversion of his parents, he was accosted by a robber, whom he was able to convert to Christianity. Thus in every aspect of his life, he lived for Christ.
- Benedict of Nursia, the sixth-century founder of the Benedictine monastic order, offered what has become the paradigm for spiritual discipline within monastic life:
 - o Obedience to superiors—an indication of humility before God.
 - o No personal possessions; all things held in common.
 - o Service to brothers through weekly kitchen assignments.
 - o Avoidance of idleness through labor, prayer and reading.

Questions for Discussion

- How did the idea of calling change from the earliest days of the church through the medieval period? To what do you attribute these changes? How are our ideas about calling affected by external conditions such as public opinion, economic conditions, etc.?
- When you consider the available life options, what was the appeal of a religious calling in the Middle Ages? What appeal does church ministry or leadership have for young people today, compared to other options? What about church ministry or leadership may be unappealing in our times?
- Religious disciplines as originally conceived were largely communal undertakings. Does your congregation have any such commonly shared practices such as regular contemplative prayer gatherings? What advantages might a community (i.e., congregational) structure for spiritual discipline have over the more individualized practices of contemporary spirituality?
- What advantage to spiritual development might there be in following a daily rule or order of worship, work, prayer and care for the needs of the community?

- Of what modern condition does “accidie” remind you? What are the modern remedies for burnout? Do they work for *spiritual* burnout? Do you or does your church suffer from any symptoms of spiritual accidie or burnout? What do you suspect as the precipitating conditions? What remedies might you propose?
- How did Martin of Tours integrate his public (military) role with a sense of religious vocation? How does his effort resemble or differ from modern conflicts between public roles and private religious commitments? In your opinion, can a person follow the teachings of Jesus (be truly Christian) and effectively fulfill a role of state? Why or why not? What are the issues?

Action Projects

- If you have not already done so (see Lesson 2), arrange to visit a monastery or convent. Many have retreat centers for just such purposes. Stay a full 24 hours or more if possible, so that you can experience the daily rhythm.
- Develop a simple “rule” within your group for members to follow for a set period of time. For example, what activities will you each perform, how often, when, and for how long? What will you each give up or avoid? How will you serve others? How will you perform your public duties? To whom will you be accountable? Debrief the outcomes of your experience as a group.

Reflection/Journaling

- Make a list of your daily activities/schedule for several days—a sampling of your typical week. Include everything you do and account for all hours of the day. Don’t go on to the rest of this assignment until you have done this part.
- After the completion of the above task, examine your “findings” as if you were an objective observer. (Or papers could be swapped within the group.) Try to figure out from the activity lists:
 - o your strongest values
 - o the rhythm (repetitions) in your days
 - o what activities you seem to avoid
 - o what activities seem to compel you
 - o other interesting observations
- Based on the above analysis, journal about your own spiritual disciplines. Do your activities truly reflect your religious commitments? How can spiritual discipline be incorporated into the fragmentation and busyness of contemporary life, and of your life in particular?

Additional Resources

Books

- *Making Life a Prayer: Selected Writings of John Cassian* (Upper Room Books, 1997, 71 pages). This volume includes a significant sampling of writings by John Cassian, a monk and contemporary of Augustine.
- *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict* by Esther de Waal (Liturgical Press, 2001, 168 pages). In this book, the Rule of St. Benedict is explored in relation to the demands of modern living and the importance of balance between prayer, work and study.
- *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence (Whitaker House, 1982, 96 pages). A spiritual classic for more than 300 years.
- *Disciplines of the Spirit* by Howard Thurmond (Friends United Press, 1977, 127 pages). Thurman explores five major dimensions of the spiritual life: commitment, growing in wisdom and stature, suffering, prayer and reconciliation.

Movies

- *Essene* (1972, UR, 86 minutes). A documentary of daily life in a Michigan Benedictine monastery, *Essene* maps the space between faith, personal need and mental anguish. An abbot and the twenty monks in his charge negotiate not only their own individual sacrifices but the values and obligations at stake in the formation of any community. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0068549/>
- *The Heart Has its Reasons* (Journey Films, 2001, NR, 60 minutes) tells the story of the l'Arche community and its founder, French-Canadian Jean Vanier. After serving in the Royal Canadian Navy, Jean Vanier felt "the desire to live the Gospel". On the advice of a priest, he invited two mentally disabled men to leave an institution and share his little stone cottage in Trosly-Breuil. He named the community l'Arche, the French word for "the ark," the biblical symbol of deliverance. Directed by Martin Doblmeier. Link: <http://www.journeyfilms.com/cgibin/SoftCart.100.exe/scstore/p-024.html?L+scstore+apgw6151+1138255736>
- *Taizé: That Little Springtime* (Journey Films, 2001, NR, 26 minutes) is a documentary portrait of the ecumenical community in Taizé, France, and the hundreds of pilgrims who visit it each year. Directed by Martin Doblmeier. Link: <http://www.journeyfilms.com/cgibin/SoftCart.100.exe/scstore/p-023.html?L+scstore+apgw6151+1138255736>

Lesson 4

Contemplation, Charity and Obedience

To the Teacher/Leader

Review the general introduction to Chapter 2 so that you can set the assigned readings in context. A reading of *The Mission of Joan of Arc* will enable you to retell this familiar story in your own words if the assignment seems too long. The assigned reading from Aquinas is somewhat complex, but it addresses the key themes of this section.

Selected Readings for Students

- Bonaventure, *The Life of St. Francis* pp. 143 - 150
- Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* pp. 154 - 175

Optional

- *The Mission of Joan of Arc* pp. 190 - 196

Key Points

- Bonaventure (13th century) wrote of the founding of the Franciscan order:
 - o Always exceptionally generous and compassionate, young Francis gave up his material and civic goals to serve Christ through a discipline of radical simplicity.
 - o Persecuted for this decision by his family and community, Francis went before the bishop of Assisi, who received him with grace. Eventually, the new order of Franciscans was blessed by the Pope.
- In his *Summa Theologia*, 13th-century theologian Thomas Aquinas attempted to integrate faith and reason regarding the virtues of Christian perfection: contemplation, charity and obedience.
 - o The contemplative life is superior to the active life in Christian perfection, because it relies on our best human quality—our intellect.
 - o Contemplation is unending, delightful, restful and intrinsically satisfying.
 - o The active life, however, can serve as training for the contemplative life—if activity teaches one how to calm distracting inner passions.

- o Christian perfection resides primarily in charity (love), because charity is what unites us with God.
- o To attain a state of true charity, one must give up attachments; voluntary poverty is essential to Christian perfection.
- o Obedience in religious matters (i.e., instruction and discipleship) is likewise a requirement of Christian perfection.
- Excerpts from the trial testimony of Joan of Arc (15th-century martyr) tell of powerful obedience to God:
 - o From the age of thirteen, Joan experienced voices and visions that she attributed to God's guidance, including the direction to lead France in battle against England.
 - o Despite the strangeness of Joan's proclamations, her consistent goodness and extraordinary closeness to God prevailed in persuading the king of France to follow her directions.

Questions for Discussion

- A theme addressed in this section is the tension between the active life and the contemplative life for Christians in various roles. How does this tension play out in your life? Is contemplation a valued activity in the world today? Should it be?
- Another choice facing Christian religious leaders of the Middle Ages was how to enact voluntary poverty. Why is voluntary poverty considered to be an important calling? Do you know of anyone today who chooses voluntary poverty for Christ's sake? What is your response to this?
- What does Aquinas mean by charity? In what sense does radical charity unite us to God? What is the relationship between poverty and charity, as Aquinas sees it? Are there ways of detaching from one's possessions in the service of God, other than voluntary poverty?
- Signs from God are mentioned in the stories of Francis of Assisi and Joan of Arc. What do you think about the interpretation of signs from God? Have you ever felt that you experienced such a sign?
- What is the religious purpose of obedience to another human? How do you feel about this? Think of examples where this works for good and examples where it might not.
- To what extent does your congregation practice the disciplines of contemplation, charity and obedience? How might the congregation become a school for these disciplines?

Action Project

- Experiment with a practice of contemplation (e.g., using the methods of centering prayer or meditation). Try increasing the amount of time you spend in intentional, contemplative silence each day for a week. See if you can work up to at least an hour a day. You may wish to combine this activity with journaling (below). Allow this to be a time of listening—and not speaking—to God. Don't be discouraged if you don't "hear" anything at first except the sound of your own voice rehearsing pressing issues. Keep still and silent. Spiritual insight often slips into the spaces between our thoughts and becomes more apparent to us later.

If you are unused to such practices, seek an experienced guide, acquire resources (e.g., www.centeringprayer.com) or find a group that regularly engages in centering prayer or meditation.

Reflection/Journaling

- Write about your own efforts to live according to Christian virtues, especially the ones proposed in this lesson: radical simplicity, contemplation, charity, voluntary poverty and obedience. In what ways are these virtues easy or difficult to live out in your daily life?
- What specific spiritual disciplines do you observe in your own life? Do they correspond to any of the virtues mentioned in the readings? What new disciplines might you want to consider? Develop a plan of practice for one new spiritual discipline—perhaps the one described under Action Project above.
- Consider the radical simplicity of St. Francis. In what ways, by what things or activities, is your life made complicated and distracting? Outline some specific and realistic ways of simplifying your life and observe your own inner responses to these proposals. How does the idea of simplifying your life feel?

Additional Resources

Books

- *Saint Francis of Assisi* by G. K. Chesterton (Image, 1987, 160 pages). Chesterton depicts a man who loved women but vowed himself to chastity, an artist who loved the pleasures of the world, but renounced them to embrace the most austere poverty.
- *The Way of St. Francis: The Challenge of Franciscan Spirituality for Everyone* by Murray Bodo (Saint Anthony Messenger Press, 1995). This book is composed of chapters on ways of letting go, of achieving poverty, simplicity and nonviolence.
- *Saint Thomas Aquinas: The Dumb Ox* by G. K. Chesterton (Image, 1974, 192 pages). Chesterton's Aquinas is a man of mystery. Born into a noble Neapolitan family, Thomas chose the life of a mendicant friar.

- *Joan of Arc* by Mary Gordon (Viking Books, 2000, 180 pages). *Joan of Arc* penetrates the popular cultural icon to examine the vulnerability of a woman forced by her mission into the public world of men, from her first march at the head of the French army at the age of 17 to her capture by the British in 1430, and from her vilification as a witch to the legacy of her struggle.
- *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* by Dorothy Bass (Editor).

Movies

- *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (Sony, 1999, R, 148 minutes). Director Luc Besson's historical drama captures the life, moral convictions and death of the young French girl who came to be known as Joan of Arc. Battling the enemies of France while propelled by heavenly visions, the teen who would become a saint is betrayed by King Charles of France, who, after taking advantage of her military prowess, consigns her to be burned at the stake as a heretic. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0151137/>
- *Reluctant Saint: Francis of Assisi* (2003, NR, 60 minutes). Pamela Mason Wagner produced this in-depth look at the life of Saint Francis. Set in his native Umbria, Italy, the film details the events and influences that shaped Saint Francis. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0395727/>

Acquiring a Christian Character

To the Teacher/Leader

There is a wealth of material in Chapter 3 covering the period after the Protestant Reformation. Prepare by reading the introduction to Chapter 3. The selected and optional readings, coming from quite varied Christian perspectives, present the reader with even greater diversities of interest and doctrine than heretofore encountered. Accordingly this chapter of the study guide contains more key points. The teacher may have to make some decisions about what to include; i.e., what may be of greater or lesser interest to the group at hand.

More than one week could be spent on this lesson, if interest in the various subtopics warrants. Particular themes could be isolated, such as the roles of clergy and laity (see Luther and Herbert, for example) or salvation/conversion (see Calvin, Teresa and Bunyan, for example).

- Introduction pp. 205 - 210

Selected Readings for Students

- Martin Luther (5 readings) pp. 211 - 227
- John Calvin, *Institutes* pp. 232 - 239
- William Perkins, *A Treatise of the Vocations* pp. 262 - 273
- George Herbert, *The Country Parson* pp. 273 - 276

Optional

- Teresa of Ávila pp. 244 - 253
- John Bunyan pp. 286 - 294

Key Points

- Conflict over the purification of the Church of England (1640s) resulted in major divisions in religious perspectives, eventually forming denominations.
- The 1688 restoration of the Church of England as the national religion reinvigorated theological discussion, but also stimulated persecution and the exodus to America of some opposition groups.

- Ushering in the Reformation (1520s), Martin Luther argues for the priority of faith over works as the source of salvation. His followers eventually became generally known as Protestants, from whom the modern denominations (e.g., Methodists, Lutherans and Presbyterians) issued.
 - o Ordinary work (including household work) and ordinary stations in life thus became legitimate “vocations” for the faithful.
 - o Luther believed in the priesthood of all baptized believers, thereby reducing the status of clergy to that of elected officeholders.
 - o Luther distinguished between the moral goodness of an occupation and that of the person who occupies it; thus a morally good job can be corrupted by a morally bad person. He criticized profiteering, in particular, as detrimental to those already disadvantaged.
 - o Luther defended the work of soldiers but noted that they are still vulnerable to the same corruptions as persons in any other “good” job.
 - o Luther believed that parents who kept their children from education, particularly education to prepare them to enter the clergy, for the sake of family income, contributed to the advance of evil in the world.
- John Calvin, a 16th-century Protestant theologian, wrote of Christian calling as predestined; i.e., God prepares our rank and call (job) in life to keep us from aimlessness.
 - o According to Calvin, God’s word can be heard by all (the general calling), but the deeper illumination of the heart that actually brings one into the faith is a special calling (election), reserved by God for a select few.
 - o In Calvin’s view, we may delight in God’s earthly gifts (food, clothing, nature), but we are nonetheless to use them in moderation and to bear deprivation with humility and patience.
- William Perkins, a 16th-century Puritan theologian, defined vocation as “*a certain kind of life, ordained and imposed on man by God for the common good.*”
 - o Perkins distinguished between a general calling into Christian faith and a particular calling to a specific role in society. We are not to envy the callings of others, but a person may change callings out of personal necessity, or for the public good.
 - o Adults may discern a particular calling by attending to what they love to do and to their special gifts. Parents should guide and actively support their children in these discoveries.
- As a country parson and poet in 17th-century England, George Herbert offered his reflections on the calling of pastor.

- o The parson, Herbert says, must live an exemplary life, sacrificing wealth and luxury as well as strong drink; he should be trustworthy in all matters to ensure his credibility in the pulpit.
- o With regard to other vocations, Herbert identifies idleness as the bane of the culture and asserts that employment is available for all who prepare and seek it.
- o He also notes that those with greater freedom to choose should consider vocations beneficial to society, such as law, mathematics, matters of national defense, or international trade and commerce.
- Teresa of Ávila, a 16th-century Carmelite nun, recalled her conversion to monastic life, giving credit to virtuous parents and to childhood games imitating religious role models.
 - o Sent to live in a convent, Teresa began to consider committing to convent life despite her father's opposition.
 - o Once resolved to commit, Teresa began to suffer serious illness, during which time she left the convent and sought to learn of God on her own by reading and praying. She acknowledged an occasional mystical state of union with the divine.
 - o Teresa, by her own record, learned the way to salvation without a spiritual guide other than God and her prayer books.
- John Bunyan, a 17th-century Baptist lay preacher in England, began writing *Pilgrim's Progress* while in jail for religious dissent.
 - o The allegorical pilgrimage of the main character, Christian, provides a metaphor for the lifelong process of discerning God's will and reveals distinctions between deep and shallow religious dispositions.

Questions for Discussion

- What new perspectives on vocation does Luther's "priesthood of all believers" introduce? Does this make the calling to ministry more or less appealing?
- What is your response to the division of the church into denominations? How does one choose a denomination? How does the idea of denominations affect vocational ministry today?
- Does a denomination have a right to call only the ministers it approves for the pulpit and not others who claim to have experienced God's calling? What criteria for calling would seem to be most faithful in this matter?
- Describe the understanding of calling under Calvin's doctrine of predestination. Is the idea of "special calling" helpful or limiting, in your opinion?

- How does the “faith versus works” discussion affect your personal understanding of vocation? Ought we to understand calling more as an inner disposition of faithfulness or as action in the world, or can both be related to calling?
- What do you think about the distinction Luther made between the morality of the job and the morality of the person holding the job? Is this a helpful distinction? What are some modern jobs that you would consider immoral? Might they be held by moral persons? Under what circumstances and to what effect?
- How does Luther’s model of a Christian business person fare in capitalist America? Would changes in attitudes and in the system would be needed to accomplish a Christian economic agenda?
- Speaking to ordinary Christians, how does Calvin deal with economic matters and enjoyment of material possessions? How does this compare with the monastic view of possessions and their use?
- In Calvin’s view (or Teresa of Ávila’s), how would we know that we are off-base in our perceived calling? Are these helpful or appropriate indicators for you?
- Given the emerging association between one’s calling and one’s job, what makes a job a calling and not just a job?
- Can the roles of parent or student be callings? Is *any* decent (i.e., not unlawful or sinful) life pursuit a possible calling? What, precisely, makes a life choice a calling?
- What are some of the circumstances for changing one’s calling? Does this make theological sense to you?
- In some of these writings, one learns that calling is not a direct path to perpetual happiness. What is happiness? Do we rely too much on happiness as a criterion of calling?
- The Puritans (e.g., Perkins) wrote specifically of the callings of all social classes, wealthy and servant alike. What role does social class plays in the fulfillment of calling today?
- Is the aim of vocation “the common good”? How does that fit into the Christian traditions of calling?
- Is it fair to place the parson (minister) on a vocational pedestal?
- What “labor” (that is, performing a task that is physical and perhaps menial, such as preparing a meal, weeding the garden or washing dishes) do you do each day? Is actual labor an important aspect of human calling?

Action Projects

- Interview several people in your church or community who hold ordinary jobs, perhaps ranging from elevated to menial in status. Inquire as to what, if anything, makes their daily work meaningful, and in what sense, if any, they feel they are serving God in their daily work. Do a short newspaper-style story on one of your interviewees as a “local hero.” Share stories with your class or group.
- Arrange to spend at least a day in voluntary *labor*. This could be a community service project that individuals or groups undertake; e.g., painting, house or yard work, construction, etc. Consider what it would be like to labor in this manner all the days of your life. Could this kind of labor could realistically be a calling for you? For anyone?

Reflection/Journaling

- Write down five possible occupations or jobs that would be intensely interesting to you. Be a little wild and include ideas that seem unlikely, but truly interesting, like Arctic explorer or astronaut. Journal about the reasons each of these jobs appeals to you.
- Based on the above, identify the essential features or values of each of your dream vocations, such as adventure or service. Summarize what you have learned about your values and about the vocational significance of these jobs.
- How does your social class, gender, religious perspective or other feature of your background or identity affect your pursuit of a calling?
- Consider both general calling (to be faithful) and particular callings (e.g., to take leadership or engage in a new course of study) in your life at the present moment. How are you experiencing those callings, and what are you doing to explore them or enact them more fully?

Additional Resources

Books

- ***Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*** by Roland Bainton (Plume, 1995, 336 pages). Bainton examines Luther’s widespread influence. He recreates the spiritual setting of the 16th century, showing Luther’s place within it and influence upon it.
- ***Martin Luther*** by Martin E. Marty (Lippner, 2004, 240 pages). Marty sees Luther as someone who was engaged in a lifelong search not only for the grace of God but also for assurance that it was directed toward him. He sought this certainty partly so that he might lead others to explore their consciences, see their faith nurtured, and be ready to take public stands.
- ***John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait*** by William J. Bouwsma (Oxford University Press, 1989, 320 pages). A depiction of Calvin’s life as a French exile, a humanist in the tradition of Erasmus, and a man sensitive to the complexities and contradictions of later Renaissance culture.

- *The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Ávila: The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus* translated by David Lewis (Tan Books, 1997, 516 pages). In a translation, the great Reformer of Carmel describes her life and the extraordinary workings of grace within her soul.
- *The Way of Perfection* by Teresa of Ávila (Image, 1991, 320 pages). This practical guide to prayer sets forth Teresa of Ávila's counsels and directives for the attainment of spiritual perfection.
- *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan (Penguin Classics, 1965, 336 pages). After rejecting his former life, the pilgrim Christian embarks on a perilous journey toward the Celestial City. Bunyan portrays the parallel worlds of Christian's physical and spiritual journeys.
- *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems* by John Tobin, Editor (Penguin Classics, 1992, 496 pages). Herbert, a devotional English poet, uses ideas typical of 17th-century metaphysical poets, as well as imagery drawn from musical structures, the natural world and domestic activity to explore a mosaic of Biblical themes.
- *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest for Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World* by Tracey Kidder (Random House, 2004, 336 pages). Farmer, a leader in international health and a doctor who finds time to make house calls both in Boston and the mountains of Haiti, overcomes obstacles to health care.

Movies

- *Luther* (RS Entertainment, 2003, PG-13, 113 minutes). This movie follows the life of Martin Luther, author of the then-controversial 95 Theses and founding father of the Protestant church. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0309820/>
- *Here I Stand: The Life and Legacy of Martin Luther* (2002, NR, 120 minutes). Producer/director T.N. Mohan returns to Germany for this special two-part program about historic figure Martin Luther. This program explores the life and legacy of one of Christianity's most central figures, from his life as a 16th-century peasant to his search for salvation. Issues discussed include Luther's opposition, the forces that led him on his path, and the ways in which he contributed to the Protestant Reformation. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0443745/>
- *Babette's Feast* (Orion, 1988, G, 102 minutes). Babette, a refugee from the wars of the French Revolution, works as a cook for two sisters in a Danish town. When she unexpectedly wins the lottery, Babette decides to prepare a feast for several members of the village. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0092603/>
- *Chocolat* (Miramax, 2000, PG-13, 121 minutes). A woman and her daughter open a chocolate shop that shakes up the rigid morality of their small French village. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0241303/>
- *October Sky* (Universal, 1999, PG, 108 minutes). As the Soviet satellite Sputnik streaks across the heavens in October 1957, it's a source of inspiration for 17-year-old Homer Hickam, who refuses to follow in his father's footsteps laboring in West Virginia's coal mines. Drafting a few friends, he sets about crafting a rocket to compete for a science fair scholarship. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0132477/>

- ***Billy Elliott*** (Universal Focus, 2000, R, 110 minutes). When 11-year-old Billy Elliot trades boxing school for ballet lessons, his father is less than pleased. The hardworking miner from Northern England despises the idea of his son running around in toe shoes, but when the boy wins an audition for the Royal Ballet School, he experiences a change of heart. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0249462/>
- ***Witness*** (Paramount, 1985, R, 112 minutes). In director Peter Weir's thriller, cop John Book goes undercover in an Amish community to protect a boy who witnessed a murder. Once inside, the faux-Amish Book must adjust to major culture shock. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0090329/>

Personal and Social Awakenings

To the Teacher/Leader

A review of the introduction to Chapter 3 will help recreate the post-Reformation context of these writings. The optional reading from Jonathan Edwards addresses youthful religious awakening in particular.

Selected Readings for Students

- George Fox, *Journal* pp. 294 - 299
- John Wesley (three readings) pp. 316 - 324

Optional

- Jonathan Edwards, *Personal Narrative* pp. 310 - 315

Key Points

- George Fox, the 17th-century founder of the Society of Friends (Quakers), recorded personal mystical experiences that led him to believe in the inner light of God's truth in *all* persons.
 - o Fox asserted that God's spiritual presence was not limited to well-trained clerical minds or to church buildings.
 - o Fox was himself opened and moved by God as a personal source of revelation—often in the form of transcendent experiences. He believed others could be similarly called.
 - o During his ministry, Fox dealt with religious dissent, personal doubts and public injustices—difficulties for which he sought the leading of the inner spirit.
 - o In this reading, Fox reports upon a dramatic revelatory incident, replicating Biblical prophetic visions, in which he was led to give away his shoes and run barefoot through the town crying out against injustice.
- John Wesley, the 18th-century English founder of Methodism, wrote of the origins of that movement at Oxford, and of social awakening.

- o A small group of students who gathered regularly to read the classics and discuss religion were moved to visit prisoners and the poor in the name of Christ.
- o Wesley found poor “heathens” to be more in favor with God (though they do not know it) than “good” Christians who stockpile more earthly treasures than they need to provide for themselves and their families.
- o Wesley noted that as stewards of God, we are both indebted to God for all we have and entrusted with the responsibility to use those gifts for God’s purposes.
- Jonathan Edwards, an 18th-century American pastor, used his personal story to give examples of temporary and shallow youthful religious awakening as well as a description of authentic conversion, which comes as an intense and permanent change in disposition, initiated entirely by God’s grace.
 - o This grace-transformed character is described as calm, sweet and filled with insatiable longing for God and Christ, while perpetually sensitive to its own sinful nature and God’s absolute sovereignty.

Questions for Discussion

- What role do transcendent or mystical experiences appear to play in the discernment of calling? What counts as an experience of personal awakening? Give some examples from your own experiences or some about which you have read or heard.
- The language and understanding of religious conversion today tends to sound somewhat different from these writers’ ideas about personal awakening. What is different? Are we awake in the same sense or has tradition lulled us to sleep? What would it mean to be personally and socially awake in Christ today?
- Social responsibility arises as a theme of calling in these readings. How is it made concrete by Fox and Wesley? What ought we, as the Christian church at large, to be doing—in and for the world today?
- How would a contemporary congregation hear John Wesley’s message about not laying up treasures on earth? Does he offer a *reasonable* plan? What arguments can you imagine against it? How does this affect your calling?
- What if one person’s perceived inner light of direction or guidance and the community’s wisdom conflict? Can you think of examples when the individual has stood alone against the community and changed the course of history for better or worse? How ought the question of individual versus group authority be resolved in the church? What is the value of the community (e.g., the church) in individual discernment?

Action Projects

- Experiment with small groups of items that have something in common. For example, your group could be given a picnic basket containing a variety of items (some more or less appealing) to share for a meal. What are the pros and cons of interdependence?

- Make or keep a list of your “stewardship” activities on behalf of the creation in the last six days (e.g., recycling waste, reducing consumption, sharing with those who have less). Then make a list of your “lordship” activities with regard to the creation during the same time period (e.g., unnecessary or over-use of natural resources, undue interest in material “treasures”). Reflect on the results of this exercise in your group, trying not to be overly defensive or overly self-congratulatory.

Reflection/Journaling

- Contemporary author Brian Mahan (see Additional Resources, below) uses the term “epiphanies of recruitment” to describe specific experiences of personal awakening to the moving and guiding energy of the Holy Spirit. (Think about Biblical persons who were recruited in moments of powerful and directive experiences, e.g., Moses and the burning bush.) Write about awakenings or epiphanies of recruitment in your own life. What persons or events provoked you to become more attentive to God and/or the needs of the world? How did others respond when you told them or acted on your new sensitivity?

Additional Resources

Books

- *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose: Vocation and the Ethics of Ambition* by Brian J. Mahan (Jossey-Bass, 2002, 240 pages). Mahan considers the question of how it is possible to create a meaningful spiritual life while living in a culture that measures success by ownership. Drawing on nearly two decades of teaching experience, Mahan shares stories of personal struggle and triumph that demonstrate how those who seek meaning and purpose have reclaimed their authentic selves by resolving the inevitable tension between personal ambition and spiritual vibrancy.
- *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* by Kenneth J. Collins (Abingdon Press, 1999, 184 pages). While exploring Wesley’s ancestry, birth, death and every major biographical and theological event between, Collins also explores the theme of John Wesley’s spiritual growth. Real Christianity, as Wesley understood it, embraces both works of piety and mercy, the personal and the social.
- *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology* edited by Albert Cook Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Abingdon Press, 1991, 572 pages). Using the texts of Outler’s critical edition of Wesley’s sermons, this anthology presents a selection of 50 of Wesley’s sermons.
- *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* by George Marsden (Yale University Press, 2003, 640 pages). A biography of Jonathan Edwards.
- *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader* edited by Wilson H. Kimnach et al. (Yale University Press, 1999, 336 pages). Edwards was a preacher and pastor whose primary tool was the sermon, out of which grew many of his famous treatises.

- *A Burnt-Out Case* by Graham Greene (Penguin, 1992, 208 pages). When Greene's protagonist, Query, a world-famous architect, no longer enjoys life or takes pleasure in art, he sets off on a voyage to a leper colony in the Congo.
- *The Power and the Glory* by Graham Greene (Penguin, 2003, 240 pages). In a poor, remote section of southern Mexico, the Red Shirts have taken control. God has been outlawed, and the priests have been systematically hunted down and killed. Now, the last priest strives to overcome physical and moral cowardice in order to find redemption.

Movies

- *Romero* (Four Seasons, 1989, PG-13, 102 minutes). This film recounts the life of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was killed for his opposition to the repressive government of El Salvador. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0098219/>
- *Gospel of Liberty* (1996, NR, 37 minutes). Reverends George Whitefield and Samuel Davies preach during the Great Awakening, and Thomas Jefferson makes appeals for religious autonomy. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0210079/>
- *The Power and the Glory* (1961, NR, 90 minutes). This film adaptation of Graham Greene's novel recounts the tale of a priest caught up in the Mexican Revolution. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0054561/>
- *The Mission* (Warner Bros., 1986, PG, 126 minutes). Two missionaries fight for the rights of South American Indians against Spanish colonial landowners. Link: <http://imdb.com/title/tt0091530/>

Faith and Work in a Modern World

To the Teacher/Leader

Read carefully the introduction to Chapter 4 on calling in a “post-Christian” world. Chapter 4 is full of worthy readings, the authors of which are more likely to be familiar to the group. It may be interesting to assign different selections to different members of the group, in addition to the required readings, in order to gain breadth of perspective. I would encourage the leader to read and present the reading by Kierkegaard on Abraham and Isaac. It is complicated but worthy of attention, because it acknowledges the role of anxiety in obedience to God.

- Introduction pp. 327 - 332
- Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* pp. 333 - 343

Selected Readings for Students

- Horace Bushnell, *Every Man's Life...* pp. 353 - 359
- Walter Rauschenbush, *...Social Crisis* pp. 377 - 385

Optional

- Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* pp. 349 - 352
- Simone Weil, *...Right Use of School Studies...* pp. 400 - 404

Key Points

- Industrialization and the rise of relatively meaningless work raise the question of whether a job can or should be considered a vocation.
- Some theologians argue that work gets in the way of qualities crucial to Christian calling: devotion to God and care of others.
- On the other hand, simply being a Christian in the complex settings of the modern world may be considered a worthy and serious calling.
- Post-Christian ideas about calling are, in general, quite varied, creating many options for both men and women, laity and clergy.

- In *Fear and Trembling*, 19th-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard offers a narrative study of the vocation of Christian faith.
 - o Using the Biblical story of Abraham’s call to sacrifice his only son Isaac, seemingly defeating God’s covenant to make Abraham the father of a great nation, Kierkegaard demonstrates the paradoxical quality of genuine faith.
 - o Highlighting the anxiety that should be aroused in the reader of the Abraham story, Kierkegaard criticizes those who too easily translate the intention of murder into the notion of offering one’s best to God.
 - o Kierkegaard thereby criticizes those who make faith too easy—simply a matter of enlightened resignation to God’s will.
 - o He insists that obedience to God, though faithful, often contains pain and sorrow. Yet, as in Abraham’s story, true faith transcends alienation, unfulfilled expectations, sorrow and infinite resignation, remaining open for the fulfillment of eternal promise.
- Horace Bushnell, a leader in the 19th-century American Sunday School movement, wrote of the plan that God has for every person’s life.
 - o The logic of God’s planning for human life is contained in the functioning wholeness of the universe; human beings, however, can refuse to cooperate in God’s plan for their lives.
 - o God still uses every human being, if not for positive purposes, then to be an example of the misery and suffering of those who do not follow.
 - o Our lives contain the lessons needed to unfold God’s plan; we benefit from studying our experiences at different life stages.
 - o Bushnell sets forth specific guidelines for vocational discernment:
 - Seek to be in harmony with God’s character of goodness and truth.
 - Seek to center our will in God’s will.
 - Use our conscience to interpret God’s will.
 - Study God’s Word and God’s commandments.
 - Study our own experiences for evidence of Providence.
 - Ask friends to give their assessments of our gifts.
 - Ask God to guide us.
- Writing in the early 20th century, Baptist pastor/theologian Walter Rauschenbush pled for strong religious leadership in the American marketplace to counteract the forces of capitalist greed.
 - o In his theology of the social gospel, Rauschenbush attributes the loss of worker motivation and creativity to mass production in which individual workers lose ownership and pride in their work.

- o Class lines are increasingly defined by economic dominance and dependence; as class consciousness increases, so will class struggle.
- o However, when rich and poor have genuinely democratic interactions as was historically the case in America, then “natural differences” (sex, age, education, rank) can be transcended by a sense of social equality.
- o Rauschenbush argues against the idea that competition is essential for economic development; Christians should work against the reign of competition and work for cooperation, which promotes both economic welfare and “brotherhood.”
- o Rauschenbush calls for societal repentance for the sins of the present order and for “faith in the possibility of a new social order,” and solicits new leaders who will put justice over profit.
- o He urges anyone (of any class) who has this vision of the kingdom of God to participate in the education and guidance of others. Clergy are specifically called to be facilitators of the vision and its enactment.
- Fyodor Dostoyevsky, a 19th-century Russian novelist, used fiction to explore the controversies of faith. *The Brothers Karamazov* was his last novel.
 - o Responding to a growing contempt for the monastic life, Dostoyevsky (in the character of Father Zossima) points out the dangers of worldly progress.
 - o The worldly replace God with science and reason, freedom and rights, rejecting spiritual values; the result is a “multiplication of desires” and disinterest in humanitarian concerns.
 - o At its best, monastic life suppresses greed and offers freedom from materialistic tyranny.
 - o Peasants, also tempted by desire, are more likely to be called back to faith because they still believe in God; the rich who have put their faith in science and reason no longer even acknowledge their sin.
- Simone Weil, a French philosopher and social activist during Germany’s occupation of France in World War II, pointed out the spiritual callings of students and their teachers.
 - o The effort to learn any subject offers an opportunity to come closer to God through the practice of attention, through the humility of ignorance and stupidity, and through the successful quest for small fragments of “the living Truth.”
 - o The essential ingredient in the sacramental approach to study is genuine attention, which involves suspension of interfering thoughts and waiting for insight to emerge, as in prayer.
 - o True attention is not tiring, but is rather a relaxed state without “muscular effort” or the tense motivation of will power.

- o Even unsuccessful efforts to learn a subject or solve a problem can enhance spiritual development; however, error is often a function of haste and lack of attention.

Questions for Discussion

- In some of these readings, the calling of the poor seems to be resignation to, if not acceptance of, their station in life. Do you think God calls people to their status in life? What evidence, if any, do you see of class struggle in America today? Are class lines blurry or distinct? Give examples from your experiences.
- Bushnell says, "...God has a definite life-plan for every human person, girding him, visibly or invisibly, for some exact thing, which it will be the true significance and glory of his life to have accomplished." What is the basis (or metaphor) of Bushnell's argument? What, if anything, strikes you as problematic about this perspective on calling?
- Is the "spirit of capitalism" necessarily in conflict with Christianity? Is Rauschenbush's belief that capitalism and social equality can co-exist compelling? If you have doubts, what is the basis of your concern?
- Is the picture that Rauschenbush paints of the relationship between labor and management still accurate? What current evidence is there that organizations have "seen the light" and begun to make some changes in the treatment of labor? If you perceive positive change, what is the underlying motivation? Would Rauschenbush approve?
- Is competition necessary for industry and commerce to thrive or is this a myth to preserve the status quo? Where do you experience competition in your own life? Examine and share your feelings in this regard.
- What specific symbols, archetypes or rituals serve to perpetuate and justify the spirit of competition in this culture?
- Do you agree with Rauschenbush's assertion that "the social body needs moral innervation"? What kinds of callings might that represent?
- How does the vocation of "minister" fit or contradict our culture's images of success? What socioeconomic or cultural prejudices might work against the young person considering such a vocation? How can or should a Christian congregation that seeks to nurture emerging church leaders and ministers respond?

Action Project

- Watch a movie or documentary about industrial conditions in the mid-20th century (e.g., *Norma Rae*, *Matewan*). Then, if possible, visit a modern factory or bring in someone who works in one and who can personally describe the conditions. What differences do you observe? What do workers do in the modern factory? What is the environment like? How are relationships managed? Is class struggle or injustice evident? Has the alienation of labor been solved? How does this picture look when expanded to the global level?

- In order to better understand the commitments of those who accept the vocation of ministry rather than more socially ambitious opportunities, invite to class (or visit) a pastor of a small rural or urban church to tell his or her story. What makes a potentially countercultural vocation such as ministry worthwhile? How can congregations provide better support for such vocational decisions?

Reflection/Journaling

- Bushnell’s thoughts on how God shapes one’s “life-plans” fits fairly well with contemporary literature on how one learns one’s calling through analysis of one’s life experiences (e.g., *Let Your Life Speak* by Parker Palmer). Name and *reflect on the significant turning points of your own life* that seem providential. Has your life been a school for the discovery of calling?
- How would you characterize your own social class, both while you were growing up and presently? Write about how your sense of class may have affected your attitude toward work, toward practices of faith, and towards persons of other classes. Has class been a real consideration in your perspectives on personal and communal calling?
- As you contemplate particular directions that your career or job could take in the future, what concerns do you have about the general future of work in America? What looks good and what seems problematic?
- Where do you find your faith potentially to be in conflict with the demands of work (even schoolwork)? How can work, as you experience or anticipate experiencing it, become more sacramental—or is that possible?

Additional Resources

Books

- ***Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*** by Parker J. Palmer (Jossey-Bass, 199, 128 pages). Palmer invites readers to listen to the inner teacher and follow it toward a sense of meaning and purpose. Telling stories from his own life and the lives of others who have made a difference, he shares insights gained from darkness and depression as well as fulfillment and joy, illuminating a pathway to vocation for all who seek the true calling of their lives.
- ***Fear and Trembling*** by Søren Kierkegaard (Penguin Classics, reprint addition 1986, 160 pages). Søren Kierkegaard influenced Protestant theology and anticipated 20th-century existentialism. *Fear and Trembling* is addressed to a general audience.
- ***The Brothers Karamazov*** by Fyodor Dostoyevsky (Vintage, 1991, 832 pages). In 1880 Dostoyevsky completed the story of a patricide and of the four sons who each had a motive for murder: Dmitry, the sensualist; Ivan, the intellectual; Alyosha, the mystic; and twisted, cunning Smerdyakov, the bastard child.

- *The Puritan as Yankee: A Life of Horace Bushnell* by Robert Bruce Mullin (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002, 310 pages). In this biography, Mullin considers Bushnell in the context of his time and milieu. Mullin argues that Bushnell was quintessentially a Yankee and a Puritan who sought innovation, yet he was sustained by a bedrock trust in the values and continuity of the Puritan tradition.
- *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth* by Jon Sobrino (Orbis, 1994, 308 pages). For the last two decades, liberation theologian Sobrino has been writing on christology. This work is shaped by his long years of experience in El Salvador.
- *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* by Alfie Kohn (Mariner Books; Revised edition, 1992, 336 pages). Kohn, a journalist whose work has appeared in such publications as *The Nation* and *Psychology Today*, has written a summary of research and commentary by others on the psychology of competitiveness. He argues that, while competition is deeply ingrained, it is also inherently destructive.
- *Waiting for God* by Simone Weil (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2001, 192 pages). As Leslie Fiedler writes in her introduction to Weil's book, "She speaks of the problems of belief in the vocabulary of the unbeliever, of the doctrines of the Church in the words of the unchurched." Included are "Spiritual Autobiography" and "Meditation on the Pater Noster."
- *Gravity and Grace* by Simone Weil (Routledge, 1988, 160 pages). *Gravity and Grace* was the first publication by thinker and activist Simone Weil. Gustave Thibon, the priest to whom Weil entrusted her notebooks before her death, compiled these writings.
- *A Theology for the Social Gospel* by William Rauschenbush (Westminster John Knox, 1997, 279 pages). As the father of the social gospel in the United States, Rauschenbush articulates the theological roots of the social activism that surged forth from mainline Protestant churches in the early part of the 20th century.
- *The Social Gospel Today* by Christopher Hodge Evans, Editor (Westminster John Knox, 2001, 213 pages). The contributors explore how the theological tradition of the social gospel, born within the social and cultural dislocations of late 19th-century America, relates to the dislocations of the current American scene. The contributors argue that America's only indigenous theological tradition remains powerfully relevant to mainline churches and to the scholars who work out of these institutions.

Movies

- *Matewan* (1987, PG-13, 132 minutes). A labor union organizer comes to an embattled community that is brutally and violently dominated and harassed by a mining company. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093509/>
- *The Girl in the Café* (2005, NR, 94 minutes). Lawrence, an aging, lonely civil servant, falls for Gina, an enigmatic young woman. When he takes her to the G8 Summit in Reykjavik, however, their bond is tested by Lawrence's professional obligations. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0443518/>

- *Norma Rae* (1979, PG, 110 minutes). A young single mother and textile worker agrees to help unionize her mill despite the problems and dangers involved. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0079638/>
- *Redentor* (2004, NR, 95 minutes). Célio Rocha believes he is assigned by God to persuade his childhood friend Otávio Sabóia, a corrupt entrepreneur in the construction business, to give all his possessions to the poor. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0328316/>
- *The Take* (2004, NR, 87 minutes). In suburban Buenos Aires, 30 unemployed auto-parts workers walk into their idle factory, roll out sleeping mats and refuse to leave. All they want is to restart the silent machines. But this simple act—the take—offers insights on the globalization debate. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0426596/>
- *Erin Brockovich* (2000, R, 130 minutes). An unemployed single mother becomes a legal assistant and almost single-handedly brings down a California power company accused of polluting a city's water supply. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0195685/>
- *Dead Poet's Society* (1989, PG, 128 minutes). English professor John Keating inspires his students to a love of poetry and to seize the day. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097165/>
- *Conrack* (1974, PG, 106 minutes). A young, white teacher is assigned to an isolated island off the coast of South Carolina populated mostly by poor black families. Based on Pat Conroy's novel *The Water is Wide*. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071358/>

Costs, Courage and Commitment

To the Teacher/Leader

Review the introduction to this chapter and remind the group of the context. Study and summarize Barth's essay for the group. Key points are provided for you below. The essay is complex, but offers an essential set of church-related themes. As in some earlier lessons, there are many themes addressed and a host of key points. The teacher may wish to divide or consolidate topics according to group interests and needs.

Given that this is the last lesson in the series, it would be beneficial for teacher and group members to reflect on the similarities and differences among vocational perspectives across the historical epochs and to discuss individual and group gleanings from these materials. An additional concluding session with a different format to tie together the implications of the course, perhaps using group members as a panel of respondents, could heighten the community's benefit from this endeavor.

- Introduction pp. 327 - 332
- Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* pp. 429 - 443

Selected Readings for Students

- Howard Thurman, *What Shall I Do...* pp. 385 - 389
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* pp. 389 - 399
- Dorothy Day, *Selected Writings* pp. 413 - 420

Optional

- Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* pp. 421 - 428

Key Points

- Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian who authored the Barmen Declaration of the German Confessing Church (in opposition to Hitler's regime), compared Christian vocation and "objective" work in his voluminous *Church Dogmatics*.
 - o In contrast to one's necessary and potentially righteous worldly labor, Christian vocation is the unique way God intends each person to respond to the *divine* command and its existential claims.

- o Barth is critical of both the idea of an exclusively religious vocation and the idea of all forms of work as callings.
- o Nor, says Barth, is our Christian vocation to radically reform the world. That is impossible for humans to do and will only frustrate us.
- o Responding to God's divine call does, however, enable a progression of life changes and choices, and sometimes mistakes, all directed by God for good.
- African-American pastor, theologian, and civil rights leader Howard Thurman used the story of Jesus' temptation in the gospel of Matthew to describe Jesus' own vocational discernment.
 - o The temptation to eat, experienced while Jesus was intentionally fasting, reveals that food is both essential and yet not enough for life; the deeper needs of the spirit must be fed as well.
 - o The temptation to defy natural law, anticipating a saving miracle, reveals an attractive but unfaithful illusion; God works through the "natural unfolding" of the creation.
 - o The temptation to make the whole world into God's kingdom reveals two half-truths: 1) that the world will be good if all individuals become good; and 2) that all individuals will be good if social systems are good. Rather, individual and systemic goodness must be mutually engaged.
- Twentieth-century German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught in an underground seminary during Hitler's rise to power. Involved in an assassination plot on Hitler's life, he was jailed and executed at the age of 39. Bonhoeffer wrote about the call to discipleship.
 - o The *call* of God in Christ, the response of immediate *obedience*, and the experience of *faith* are inextricably related. Faith becomes faith through obedience.
 - o One does not initiate one's own calling; God calls.
 - o Barriers to obedience, and thus to faith, lie within us; we justify our delays by calling upon the law or personal contingencies. We seek to come to God on our own terms.
 - o Faith is not an "academic" question; long discussions of conscience and moral difficulties only postpone obedience.
 - o Obedience will require, at minimum, detachment from our former lives.
- Dorothy Day, 20th-century cofounder with Peter Maurin of the Catholic Worker Movement, wrote of the calling to solidarity with the poor through activism, voluntary poverty and direct service.

- o Day wrote of her pilgrimage to learn how to love without ceasing, to see the good in all people and to endure the antagonism this response inevitably generates in others.
- o Love, for Day, means voluntary participation in the world of the poor, denying riches and privilege, refusing comforts until they are available to all, and avoiding jobs that “increase people’s useless desires” such as advertising, insurance and the media.
- o Those who love the poor should boycott purchases of materials made under conditions that further contribute to poverty.
- o Day believed in the value of manual labor as work that simplifies, upholds quality, and conveys a love of Christ and of the poor.
- o In Day’s recollection, the amazing outcomes of the Catholic Worker Movement were a matter of just “sitting there talking.”
- Thomas Merton, a 20th-century Trappist monk known for his writings on spirituality and social justice, described the mutuality of Providence and human freedom in the discernment of vocation.
 - o Each person is called by God to a particular role in the salvation of all humankind. Complete happiness and wholeness is contingent on discovering that role.
 - o As an interaction of God’s guidance and our freedom to choose, vocation can be clarified both by our perceptions of the needs of others and by our own relational and spiritual needs.
 - o Whether we get our destined calling exactly “right” or not, God will be pleased by our honest efforts to discern.
 - o Merton places the vocations of marriage, the priesthood, and the contemplative (monastic) life on a hierarchy of spiritual focus, with the monastic vocation being the highest.
 - o Marriage, an “ordinary” vocation, is available to many as a way to holiness through practices of spontaneous love and charity. The sphere of this vocation is, however, generally limited to the family.
 - o The priest, foregoing family, takes on a larger sphere of vocational expression as the visible and sacramental presence of Christ in the world.
 - o The monastic vocation requires detachment from the world to be with God in solitude. Merton emphasizes the potential for loneliness and misguided motives in this vocation.
 - o Selection for the calling of marriage comes through natural attraction; the calling to the priesthood (and other active vocations) comes through attraction to and ability for the work.

- o Calling into the contemplative life rests on neither attraction nor aptitude for that life, but solely only on the desire and the ability to “love the whole world in God” while seeking nothing in return.

Questions for Discussion

- Thurman offers a useful interpretation of Jesus’ three temptations and the insights they brought (Matthew 4: 1-11). In your own words, state the three “shafts of light” for which Thurman praises Jesus. Do you find this interpretation helpful? Why or why not?
- Bonhoeffer suggests that Jesus would have little patience for those of us struggling to discern our calling by seeking guidance from mentors and reading and studying pertinent sources. What is his point? How ought we to hasten our questing?
- What is problematic for Bonhoeffer in the idea that one might offer one’s life to Christ?
- Day calls everyone who seeks “love of brother” to participate in the suffering of the poor. What are some specific ways she suggests, or that you can suggest? Do these seem feasible or effective to you? Why or why not?
- According to Day, why is manual labor a good thing, even for those who do not have to labor? What do you see as the limits of the value of manual labor, if any?
- For Thomas Merton, complete happiness and fulfillment will come only if we discover exactly what God wants us to be. Do you agree? Yet Merton says that human freedom to choose, and thereby risk error, is important. Why?
- Merton’s suggests a hierarchy of vocations: marriage, priesthood, the monastic life (the highest calling). What is the basis of this ordering? Might an alternative hierarchy be based on some other vocational value?
- How does calling risk being culturally conditioned when understood solely as a personal response to the *inner* voice of God? What can aid this inevitable dilemma of discernment?
- Each of these authors united their vocation and their daily work or profession. Given the questions and perspectives each one offers on the subject of vocation, how do you think each one would describe his or her call story?
- If each of the four writers in this section (Thurman, Bonhoeffer, Day and Merton) could offer words of wisdom for a person considering Christian ministry as a possible calling, what would they say? What kinds of discerning questions might they pose? How might your congregation choose to help a person clarify the calling to ministry based on, or differently from, these ideas?
- As we come to the end of this walk through church history seeking to understand vocation, have you come to any conclusions? In particular, do you feel better equipped to reflect on calling in general? On the call to ministry in particular? In the role of a congregation wishing to nurture the call to ministry in youth or others? Describe what you have learned that will be useful in these respects.

Action Projects

- Visit some type of residential center for those with special needs; e.g., a homeless shelter, a recovery center, a safety shelter or a group home for children. Report to your class or group your observations about the attitudes and practices evident in that “house of hospitality.” Do they conform to Dorothy Day’s ideals? Where do they fall short? Why?
- Visit the web site www.responsible shopper.org and consider whether such a site is useful to those who would follow Day’s challenge of boycotting goods produced in ways that are unjust to workers. Discuss with your class or group how this exercise affected you.
- To share what you have learned in this course, prepare a religious or other educational lesson (or series) on calling for high school youth. That is, distill what you have learned from this collection of essays, and find a way to communicate the essentials to youth in the throes of making life choices.
- Design a discernment workshop for persons in your congregation(s) considering ministry vocations. Using what you have learned in this course, devise a set of practical and inspiring program materials for large and small group activities that will nurture and guide the discernment process.

Reflection/Journaling

- How do you feel about “miracles”? Do you find Thurman’s interpretation helpful or limiting?
- Re-read and ponder Howard Thurman’s poem (pp. 388-389). Write a letter of response to Thurman from the perspective of your own vocational journey.
- Put yourself in the place of the young man in Matthew 19: 16-22. Write out both sides of a conversation that you can imagine yourself having with Jesus about the nature of salvation. Free associate; don’t try to make the conversation come out any particular way. What did you learn about yourself?
- Write about what holds you back from complete and immediate obedience to the call into faith.
- In what ways have your thoughts or attitudes about ordinary work been affected by these readings? Write about your own work and any changes in your sense of purpose.
- If Providence gives small signals to guide us in our freedom, what small signals have you detected in recent weeks or months? If you have detected none, what distractions may be at work in your life?
- We are taught biblically to seek perfection; yet Barth warns against the impulse to undertake radical reform. What has your experience taught you about the effort to reform others or systems? Think about specific examples.
- What are you currently doing to bring about positive change in the world?

- In considering how to be in solidarity with the poor, Day notes, “God help us if we got what we deserved!” How do you feel about charity for those who seemingly don’t want to help themselves? What does Jesus say?
- Where in your life do you have difficulty managing to love without ceasing? Reflect on who or what is involved here.

Additional Resources

Books

- *Disciplines of the Spirit* by Howard Thurman (Friends United Press, 1977, 127 pages). Thurman explores five major dimensions of the spiritual life: commitment, growing in wisdom and stature, suffering, prayer and reconciliation.
- *Jesus and the Disinherited* by Howard Thurman (Beacon Press, reprint edition 1996, 112 pages). In this theological treatise, Thurman demonstrates how the Gospel may be read as a manual of resistance for the poor and disenfranchised.
- *Howard Thurman: the Mystic as Prophet* by Luther E. Smith (Friends United Press, 1992, 252 pages). This book is meant to stimulate scholarship on Thurman’s significance as a major religious figure.
- *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* by Howard Thurman (Harvest/HBJ Book, 1981, 304 pages). Thurman in his own words.
- *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Touchstone, 1995, 320 pages). First published in German in 1937, this book was Bonhoeffer’s answer to the questions, “What did Jesus mean to say to us? What is his will for us today?” Bonhoeffer’s answers are rooted in Lutheran grace and derived from Christian scripture.
- *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* by Eberhard Bethge (Augsburg Fortress, 2000, 1048 pages). Victoria Barnett’s review of this edition of Bethge’s exhaustive biography of Bonhoeffer corrects mistakes and omissions, and adds sections from the German on Bonhoeffer’s childhood.
- *The Long Loneliness* by Dorothy Day (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997, 304 pages). An autobiographical testament to the spiritual pilgrimage of a woman who, in her own words, dedicated herself “to bring[ing] about the kind of society where it is easier to be good.”
- *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion* by Robert Coles (Perseus Books Group, 1989, 182 pages). Dorothy Day and Harvard physician, teacher and author Robert Coles first met when he worked in her Catholic Worker soup kitchen. They remained close until her death in 1980. Coles’ volume is based on many years of conversations, correspondence and tape-recorded interviews she shared with him.

- *The Seven Storey Mountain* by Thomas Merton (Harcourt, 1999, 467 pages). *The Seven Storey Mountain* is about Merton's search for faith and peace. His curiosity about spiritual matters led him first to baptism as a Catholic and ultimately to entry into a Trappist monastery.
- *No Man Is An Island* by Thomas Merton (Harvest/HBJ Book, 2002, 288 pages). A recapitulation of his earlier work *Seeds of Contemplation*, this collection of 16 essays plumbs aspects of human spirituality.

Movies

- *Bonhoeffer* (2003, NR, 93 minutes). Dramatic documentary about the young German pacifist and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who resisted the Nazi regime and was hanged two weeks before the end of World War II. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0371583/>
- *Conrack* (1974, PG, 106 minutes). A young, white teacher is assigned to an isolated island off the coast of South Carolina populated mostly by poor black families. Based on Pat Conroy's novel *The Water is Wide*. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071358/>
- *Hotel Rwanda* (2004, R, 121 minutes). Don Cheadle stars in the true-life story of Paul Rusesabagina, a hotel manager who housed more than 1,000 Tutsi refugees during their struggle against the Hutu militia in Rwanda. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0395169/>

About William Placher

William Carl Placher is currently the Charles and Elizabeth S. LaFollette Distinguished Professor in the Humanities at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Ind. Placher was born in Peoria, Ill., and was educated at Wabash College, where he graduated summa cum laude in 1970. He completed graduate studies in philosophy and religion at Yale University, where he earned the Master and Doctor of Philosophy degrees. Placher's teaching career has been centered at Wabash College, with visiting positions at Stanford, Haverford, the Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton, and the University of Chicago.

The author of 11 books, and the editor and contributor to a host of other books and publications, Placher has examined and extended Christian theology from within the reformed tradition of the Presbyterian Church (USA). His books are known for their accessibility, historical sensitivity and contemporary relevance. As a teacher of both philosophy and Christian theology, Placher has retained strong interests in the points of significant historical and cultural intersection between these disciplines. His breadth of knowledge offers his students and readers an extraordinary opportunity to explore the integrity of the humanities.

In keeping with his background, experience and personal commitments, Placher has selected for *Callings* a set of historical texts ripe with meaning for modern Christians and the Church. These "old" questions and issues, brought into sensitive conversation with post-modern experience, command contemplation and response.

About Elaine Nocks

Elaine Nocks is a professor of psychology and the project director of the Lilly Center for Theological Exploration of Vocation at Furman University, Greenville, S.C. She came to Furman in 1973 with a B.A. in psychology from Winthrop University, an M.A. in psychology from the University of Florida and a Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In 1996, Elaine completed an M. Div. at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. She is a certified candidate for licensed ministry in the South Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church; she preaches on an ad hoc basis and regularly teaches an intergenerational Sunday school class in her local church. With interests in both psychology and religion, she has team-taught numerous interdisciplinary courses involving both fields of study. She takes great pleasure in generating conversation and interpreting differences between these two perspectives on human meaning.