

WORK AS CALLING AND CONSECRATION



THE NOTION OF WORK AS VOCATION came into prominence during the Reformation. Vocation was a key concept for Luther. Luther insisted that Christians could love God and neighbor in the shop, home, court, or field just as well as in the monastery and cloister. Hence, any honest labor could become a form of worship. Work thus came to be regarded not just as a mundane means for earning a living but potentially as a consecrated way of living.³⁰

This Protestant concern for vocation encouraged people to seek to know how heaven expected them to use their individual talents—whether to trade or teach, manage or marry, plow or paint. In the Early Modern period, Protestantism together with capitalism led people to experience an urgent new need: the need to figure out what they were supposed to be when they grew up. This need eventually gave rise to a new industry: vocational guidance. In a theological sense, however, true vocational guidance does not come from vocational counselors. It comes from heaven.

Few people nowadays look to heaven for career guidance, although, as Max Weber observed, “the idea of ... calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs.”³¹ At BYU, the idea of calling is scarcely a dead religious belief. It is alive and well. We routinely seek divine guidance in our choice of careers, as did early Protestants. A year ago in our annual college visits, we invited faculty to tell

what led them to BYU. This elicited story after inspiring story about how faculty felt prompted—called, if you will—into their particular disciplines and to BYU. I was deeply touched by the personal testimonies of faculty who felt called here.

Faculty also often regard administrative assignments as something like a calling—in this case, a Church calling. Unlike a vocation, a Church calling is not something we choose by personal inspiration but something chosen for us by inspired leaders and then willingly accepted. The habit of willingly accepting Church callings spills over into BYU. Our people are habituated to saying yes to work which requires them to set aside personal agendas and serve the common good. We are blessed by this, but we must be careful not to abuse such willingness by presenting university assignments as callings. They are not. Nor is it our prerogative to issue calls. Nevertheless, BYU is blessed that many here accept difficult assignments and labor diligently in them as though they were callings.

We are also blessed that faculty and staff approach their work in terms of consecration as well as calling. Consecration is a powerful way the gospel invites us to regard work. It implies that we strive to make work holy. It erodes the boundary between work and worship, sacred and secular. As Latter-day Saints, we are encouraged to approach our careers in a spirit of consecration, finding in our daily labors ways of worshipping God. We seek to lay all our talents on the altar and consecrate our whole lives—not just our Sundays—to building up Zion.

The spirit of calling and consecration is a wonderful thing for BYU—mostly. A sense of calling and consecration can also complicate normal employment decisions. When a decision is made to eliminate a course or program, faculty who feel a sense of calling about working in these courses and programs are likely to regard these changes not as practical or prudential actions but as perverse and contrary to the manifest will of heaven. Likewise, when colleagues or administrators evaluate job performance as substandard or deny promotion or CFS,

faculty may see these assessments not as expected employment evaluations but as an attack on their existential worth and perhaps even on their patriarchal blessings.

These challenges aside, I am grateful to work at a university where faculty approach their careers with a sense of calling and consecration. A special spirit suffuses the workplace when the workforce is bound by commitments larger than a cash nexus. A sense of calling helps professionals resist the pitfalls of careerism, where performance is motivated by the desire to impress more than to bless. A collective sense of consecration allows BYU to weather storms like the current hiring freeze by uniting those who work here in a spirit of self-sacrifice.

I well remember my decision to come to BYU. I had a tenure-track job at a good university and wasn't sure I wanted to leave. I felt torn between a desire to give my gifts in the so-called mission field or in an institution whose mission spoke to my soul. There was no one right choice. I chose BYU. After more than a quarter century at BYU, I look back on that decision and count myself deeply blessed to have cast my lot with others bound to their place of work by calling and consecration.