VOCATION AT AUGSBURG COLLEGE

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We cannot live our lives constantly looking back, listening back, lest we be turned to pillars of longing and regret, but to live without listening at all is to live deaf to the fullness of the music.
Frederick Buechner[1]

Not long ago while walking out of the Christensen Center I heard the ringing of the carillon bells announcing the beginning of chapel. I passed a student who was complaining loudly about the "noise." "Bells, bells, bells," he cried. "They ring but nobody knows what they mean. Why do they have to ring those damn bells?" Ironically, the bells were playing a tune and it was Martin Luther's great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." I resisted the temptation to answer his question but it did occur to me that this college would not even exist were it not for the efforts of the sixteenth century German reformer.

Perhaps this anecdote can serve as a useful introduction to the idea of vocation. Like all places of higher learning, Augsburg is the scene of a tremendous amount of bustle and activity. A danger is that all this work can take place without any connection to a transcendent meaning or purpose. Analogous to the story related above, there is a considerable amount of institutional "noise" but no one is able to discern a tune. The concept of vocation provides Augsburg with an opportunity to reconnect with its roots and make sense of why it does what it does. The prime assertion of this essay is that behind all the teaching, learning, mentoring and studying is the meaningful melody of vocation.

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[1] Frederick Buechner, Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations with Frederick Buechner (San Francisco: Harper, 1992) 4.

I will proceed by first locating vocation within Augsburg's tradition as a college of the Christian church. Building on that foundation, I will then discuss the various dimensions of vocation in the life of the college.

VOCATION AND THE SCRIPTURES

It is by speaking and hearing that the interaction of the creator and creation take place…God creates by speaking. Creation is to listen and answer. Walter Brueggemann[2]

The word vocation is derived from the Latin *vocatio* for calling. Jews and Christians have long recognized that a central characteristic of God in the Bible is that of one who speaks or calls. For example, the opening chapter of Genesis reveals a God who creates by speaking. There are fourteen references to God speaking or calling in the first twenty-nine verses. Furthermore, Genesis 1 suggests that when God speaks the effect is powerful and transformative. After all, it is possible to talk and have nothing happen. This is not the case with God's speech. At the beginning of each day of creation stands the phrase "And God said…" which is followed by yet more details being added to earth's majestic landscape. The crowning achievement of God is the creation of humanity (Genesis 1:26), which like rest of the world is a result of divine speech and is made in God's very image.[3]

The completion of creation does not result in divine silence. It is the conviction of the Scriptures that the God who speaks continues to be active in the world. Genesis also tells us that God calls the nation of Israel into existence and assigns her the task of

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[2] Walter Brueggemann, Genesis. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) 18.

[3] Ibid., 1-39. Brueggemann organizes his entire commentary on Genesis around the theme of God's call.

being his witness in the world. Moreover, it is important to notice that God's call to Israel is not abstract or general; it is individuals who hear God's voice and respond in various ways. It might be instructive to cite several examples.

The call of Abraham is immediate and direct. God says, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you and I will make of you a great nation and bless you." And the text simply reports that Abraham "went as the Lord had told him" (Genesis 12:1-4). But other calls tend to be more complicated.

Moses is called dramatically by God through a burning bush. Upon hearing the identity of the voice, Moses hides his face, fearing the presence of the Holy One of Israel. However, following this initial encounter the relationship between God and Moses becomes much more mundane and conflicted. God commissions Moses to deliver his people out of the hands of the Pharaoh. But Moses exhibits great reluctance to answer the call. He raises five separate objections to the task God has presented him. Finally God becomes exasperated with Moses's excuses and the reluctant leader of Israel is forced to yield to the divine will.[4]

The prophet Jonah illustrates yet another way of responding to God's call. When he is told by God to go to Nineveh and speak a word of judgment, Jonah flees in the opposite direction. When God foils his travel plans (and the prophet becomes well acquainted with a large fish), Jonah ends up acquiescing to God's command and preaches to wicked city of Nineveh. To his total surprise, his preaching is effective. Nineveh repents and avoids divine retribution. Interestingly, Jonah is completely undone by this turn of events and becomes angry at God for showing mercy and forbearance.

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[4] See Terence E. Fretheim, Exodus. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991) 51-82.

Two examples from the New Testament are also instructive for reflecting on the call of God. Mary is greatly troubled and afraid when she hears the greeting of the angel Gabriel. After learning that she is to be the mother of Jesus, her next reaction is to question the possibility of such a birth, given her virginity. Only after repeated assurances from the angelic messenger does she submit to the divine plan. The call of Jesus' disciples echoes the divine power displayed in the speech of creation. When Jesus sees Simon and Andrew casting nets into the sea, he summons them to follow. The reader is given no hint of hesitation; the fishermen hear the voice of Jesus and they immediately follow. A similar pattern of call and immediate response is repeated with the disciples James and John. These narratives impress upon the reader the irresistible force of Jesus' words and the way his speech results in a decisive break with the past. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes of this text: "This encounter (with the disciples) is a testimony to the absolute, direct, and unaccountable authority of Jesus. There is no need of any preliminaries, and no other consequence but obedience to the call."[5]

These biblical reflections on the call are but a small sampling of the available material. Much more could be said about the centrality of vocation within the authoritative texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition. But based on the material provided we might draw the following conclusions about the shape and content of vocation in the Bible.

The God of the Bible is one who speaks. Fundamental to the character of God is speaking. The Scriptures witness again and again to a God who makes himself known through speech. This has significant consequences for the way a reader approaches the Bible. Instead of assuming a role of mastery over the text where the primary goal is to

[5] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship (New York: MacMillian, 1959) 57.

probe and discover what a particular passage means, the student of the Bible informed by a sense of vocation begins with an attitude of expectant listening. The way to God may first be through our ears rather than a critical busyness that misses what God is actually trying to say. A sense of vocation or calling can only be nurtured if one is first attentive to the divine voice that speaks through the words of the Bible.

God's speech is powerful. As we have seen, Genesis 1 presents a God who speaks with powerful effect. These are not empty words to fill time while waiting for some meaningful activity to take place. The words themselves are the activity. They create and transform reality. As many have pointed out, the language of the Bible is not only informative or descriptive. In many cases it is also "performative." In other words, the speech of Scripture has the power to effect change in the most profound way (Isaiah 55:10-11). Thus one who listens for the voice of God in Scripture must be prepared for the power of the words addressed to him or her. In the realm of vocation, one enters a world that upends traditional ways of seeing reality and reorganizes priorities. Vocation has little in common with the typical human pursuits of comfort, security and stability.

God's call can be resisted. While several of the biblical figures addressed by God appear to respond to the call with unquestioning obedience, some of the examples noted above indicate a less than enthusiastic reaction to the divine summons. Moses is perhaps the most famous example of reluctance in vocation. Before eventually trying God's patience he invokes numerous excuses to avoid the assignment given to him. Jonah tries to ignore the call altogether before he discovers the futility of fleeing from the God of all creation. These examples are useful. While the Bible accentuates the power of God's speech it is not the case that humans are simply automatons without wills of

their own. Thus evidence of resistance in a calling should not be a cause for undue alarm. The Bible provides numerous cases of people whom God used in spite of their reluctance to answer the call.

God's call can be ambiguous. Mary's fear upon hearing the words of the angel Gabriel can serve as a lens for those whom a sense of calling is uncertain or tenuous. There is plenty of room in the concept of vocation for hesitation, questioning, and puzzlement. Even those who take up a stance of "expectant listening" find themselves in significant periods of divine silence. Or they may feel there are too many voices in their lives and thus find it difficult to sort out what constitutes a genuine call. To be avoided, however, is the modern tendency to wallow in ambiguity. While acknowledging the difficulty of discernment, the concept of vocation insists that God has spoken and continues to speak. Our hardness of hearing should not yield to a belief that God has stopped speaking.

God's call comes in the context of community. While the call comes to individuals in the Bible, it is never received in isolation. Vocation is always connected with a mission for the larger community. Moses is summoned by God so that he might lead the people of Israel out of bondage. Mary is called so that she might bear the one who fulfills God's promises to Israel and the world. The disciples are called so that they might constitute the beginnings of a new community charged with telling the world of a new way that God has acted in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Underscored here is the dramatic difference between vocation and some modern strains of individualism. In vocation, the individual never stands alone. Rather, the one called is continually acting in the world and responding to the claims of God and the larger community.

God's call is gracious. This needs to be the last word in our summary comments about vocation in the Scriptures. Those in the realm of vocation often find themselves in bewildering circumstances. God tells Abraham: "Leave your country and your kindred and your father's house (emphasis mine)…" (Genesis 12:1). Embracing the call can mean a heart-rending suffering where the familiar gives way to loneliness and alienation. Therefore it is crucial to remind ourselves that the God who calls us is also a God who fundamentally favors us. The promises of Scripture point to a God who not only calls us but a God who keeps and preserves us. For the Christian faith this is highlighted most dramatically in the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Here we have a model of one who takes all human opposition to God upon himself and is thereby driven to death. In a remarkable reversal, however, death does not have the final word. At the heart of the Christian confession is the belief that God has raised Jesus from the dead and thus vindicated his mission. Upon hearing the gracious voice of Christ in vocation, Christians are empowered to move beyond themselves and live lives of service and love.

VOCATION AND THE LUTHERAN REFORMATION

There was a time when the Christian church considered all secular things to be unclean and profane, not by reason of human sin, but of themselves…An unavoidable consequence of (this) view of the church and the world was that the laity constantly had to be in doubt whether their status was compatible with Christianity. They lacked the quiet trust that God was pleased with their faithfulness in their earthly calling. Georg Sverdrup[6]

Augsburg is a college of the Christian church with deep roots in the Lutheran tradition. Accordingly, its understanding of vocation is shaped decisively by the theological revolution wrought by Martin Luther in the sixteenth century. Unfortunately,

springing fifteen hundred years forward from the Bible to the Reformation creates the impression that the intervening years afford few insights into what it means to be called and have a calling. Such a view is misleading and glosses over the early church and the church of the middle ages. However, given the telescoped nature of our study we must move to the era that has had the most direct and lasting influence on our thinking about vocation.

Luther's theology of vocation must be located in the peculiar cultural context of the sixteenth century western church. At this time there were essentially two classes of Christians---those who supposedly committed themselves to a "holy" life such as the monk, nun or priest and the vast majority of people who continued to live in the "world" and experience its temptations. The former had vocations or "callings." It was believed they performed a higher duty or service and thus were able to gain merit for themselves and those left behind in the world. The latter, such as the midwife, farmer or blacksmith, served humanity by sustaining earthly life with their labors but possessed occupations which lacked the inherent sanctity of the clerical or monastic realm.[7]

A theological foundation based on merit made it possible to construct this two-tiered view of the world. The schemes of salvation in the late middle ages varied but all insisted that humans must do something to make themselves right with God. Note that this did not mean that good works alone were sufficient. Grace was also underlined as necessary and important. But the idea was to combine grace and human effort in order to be saved.

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[6] Georg Sverdrup, The Heritage of Faith, tr. Melvin A. Helland (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969) 92

[7] There is a nice summary of this situation in Lee Hardy's The Fabric of This World (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 22-26. Hardy's book is a thoughtful analysis of our culture's understanding of work.

Illustrative of late medieval theology is the teaching of the fourteenth century British thinker, William of Ockham. Ockham is of special interest to students of the Reformation because the young Luther was schooled by devotees of Ockham's theology. In essence, Ockham taught that a proper relationship with God began with a good effort on the part of humanity. He said that one must "do what is in one" (facere quod in se est) in order to qualify for supernatural grace. Once grace enters your life your character is "transformed" and then you do good works which lead to your justification before God. Ockham's theology formed the intellectual underpinning for a significant portion of late medieval church practice (though it was not the only option). It was assumed that "good works" were a sine qua non for salvation.[8]

As Luther steeped himself in the world of the Bible during his time in the monastery he became convinced that this way of conceiving one's relationship to God was false. Relying heavily on Paul, he began to believe that one is justified not by works but by faith alone. Ockham's paradigm and all others that left room for human works or efforts inevitably jeopardized the certainty of salvation. How does one know when one has done enough? Can one ever be sure that one's works have been sufficient to merit the grace necessary for justification?

Luther found great comfort in the God revealed on the cross of Jesus Christ. This was a God who entered deeply into the human condition, even to the point of becoming "sin" (II Corinthians 5:21) and knowing the desolation and darkness of death, so that men and women might be liberated to serve their neighbors and care for creation. For Luther, the God revealed on the cross freed humanity from their anxious quest for meaning, hope

[8] A good overview of Ockham's position and the other late medieval options can be found in Steven Ozment's The Age of Reform, 1250-1550. An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and

and salvation. Now the basis for that relationship was faith, understood primarily as trust. Even faith itself was understood as a gift, bestowed upon a doubting and despairing humanity through God's gracious word and sacraments.

It is a serious misunderstanding of Luther to think that his views on grace and faith were simply abstract matters of theology with little relevance for earthly life. Luther's rediscovery of a gracious God was not merely an intellectual exercise. Its reverberations would be felt in the homes, villages and town squares across Europe. It is Luther's conviction that if we are saved by grace through faith and not works, then earthly life is experienced in an entirely different way. It is no longer the place where we attempt to placate a demanding God. Or, in a more modern idiom, the world is no longer the realm where we find our core identity in what we do or achieve. Moreover, mindful of the interpretation of the late medieval church, "vocations" are no longer limited to a special class of Christians who by the supposed holiness of their lives have placed themselves closer to their Creator. Instead, all Christians are called by God and empowered by his undeserved love to serve their neighbors. It needs to be emphasized: all Christians have callings or vocations.[9]

As we did with the Bible, it might be useful at this point to note some implications of Luther's teaching. This should not be construed as an attempt to use

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Reformation Europe (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) 231-44.

[9] Luther's comments on I Corinthians 7:20 ("Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called") are instructive: "How is it possible that you are not called? You have always been in some state or station; you have always been a husband or wife, boy or girl, or servant. Picture before you the humblest estate. Are you a husband, and you think you have not enough to do in that sphere to govern your wife, children, domestics and property so that all may be obedient to God and you do no one any harm? Yea, if you had five heads and ten hands, even then you would be too weak for your task, so that you would never dare to think of making a pilgrimage or doing any kind of saintly work." The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther, ed. John Lenker, 10 vols. (Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands Co., 1905) 10:242. For an article on Luther's theology of vocation see Marc Kolden, "Luther on Vocation," Word and World , 3, 4

extra-biblical sources to justify an understanding of vocation that is absent from Scripture. Rather, this should be seen as an effort to use the tradition to further illuminate the biblical worldview. The conclusions reached below are consistent with the view of God, humanity and the world that is presented in the Bible. Here is a partial list of insights that might be gleaned from Luther's theology.[10]

Vocation includes the whole life of a person and is not simply his or her occupation. Because of the biblically-grounded conviction that God operates in every sphere of life (and not just in church or at work), Christians understand the divine summons to encompass every area of life (whether one is an employee, student, neighbor, parent, friend, etc.). Vocation involves all of life's relationships.

The purpose of vocation is to live for the sake of others—for their spiritual, physical, moral and cultural well-being. God upholds his creation and keeps order in human society by means of vocation. The focus belongs on the neighbor and the needs of the world. Luther once noted that God doesn't want a cobbler who puts crosses on shoes. Rather, he wants a cobbler who makes good, reliable footwear.

All true vocations rank the same with God. As already noted, there are no "higher" or "lower" callings. In the human realm distinctions will be made and the value of work measured by human scales. But in God's eyes the manager and the maid are both needed to keep human society functioning at an optimal level.

Vocation cannot be boiled down to ethics. This is a gross misuse of Luther's insights. Crucial to preserving a healthy understanding of vocation is the knowledge that

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(Fall, 1983) 382-393. The best book on the topic is still Gustaf Wingren's Luther on Vocation, tr. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957). The Swedish original was published in 1942.

[10] Compare the following with the list in Donald R. Heiges The Christian's Calling (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958) 48-60.

one's identity and future are in the hands of a God who is trustworthy. If this essential link with the divine is obscured or ignored, then there results the overwhelming temptation to be defined by one's calling in life. Soon the self is no longer looking beyond its boundaries for ways to be of service but is instead trying to secure its own identity by its activity in the world.

Vocation properly locates the role of reason in the Christian faith. Certain truths of the Christian faith move beyond the rational and logical. They have a "theo-logic" that is peculiar to the tradition. An example of such a truth would be the conviction that God experienced death on the cross. This runs counter to the conventional idea that God is eternal and therefore outside the boundaries of death. Consequently, reason has definite limits when it comes to thinking about the Christian faith and probing the mysteries of the divine. However, this is not to advocate that Christians are irrational. It is rather to say that reason has its place, on this earth, in service of neighbor and culture. The worlds of science, literature, arts and commerce are the proper realms of reason.

Vocation distinguishes but does not separate the roles of faith and politics in public life. Luther's teaching on vocation (the complicated legacy of his two kingdoms doctrine hovers over this discussion) makes clear that faith cannot be quiet in matters political. The political sphere is simply another arena where the neighbor is served. But the Lutheran tradition on vocation suggests there is no specific Christian agenda for the world. It walks a fine line that advocates a passionate engagement in political activity while avoiding the zealotry often linked with positions that claim God for a particular position or point of view.

THE VOCATION OF AUGSBURG COLLEGE

It is clear that, according to the Christian view, secular vocations are of God's order and will, and that our exercise of them is pleasing to God if they are carried out in faith. Georg Sverdrup[11]

Now, as president of Augsburg, I am pursuing the application of vocation in our curriculum and culture in ways that reflect my personal and increasingly fulfilled search for my own calling…We have intentionally introduced the concept of vocation into the curriculum and extracurricular activities, and are encouraging all of our employees to consider their work and career prospects in light of vocation. William Frame[12]

It should be evident by this point that Augsburg stands within a long and deep tradition of reflection on vocation. It will surprise no one that the heirs to the Lutheran reformers who were fundamental in the founding of Augsburg were also profoundly influenced by biblical and Reformation views on vocation. Figures like Georg Sverdrup, Sven Oftedal and Bernhard Christensen intuitively saw their work in the world through the lens of vocation. Though there are plenty of hints in their writings to substantiate this claim, work still needs to be done to recover the insights and wisdom that animated the college during crucial years of its history.[13] Thus this essay is but an adumbration of Augsburg's rich heritage. But perhaps enough background has been provided in order to sketch a picture of what an institution might look like with vocation at its center.

By stressing the centrality of vocation at Augsburg, we are doing nothing less than proposing an alternative paradigm for how the college carries out its mission. This point needs to be stressed because vocation is often interpreted as something like a spice

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[11] Sverdrup, Heritage, 94.
[12] William V. Frame, "A President Looks Back 500 Years and Finds His Calling," The Chronicle of Higher Education (September 6, 2002) B11-B12.
[13] See Sverdrup, Heritage, and Carl H. Chrislock, From Fjord to Freeway (Minneapolis: Augsburg College, 1969).

that might be added to the stew. It adds some flavor but it does not fundamentally alter the meal. However, what is being suggested in this paper is that vocation becomes the underlying purpose of the entire college and thus informs our enterprise at every level.

Most institutions of higher learning work within what might be termed as a "professional" framework. This way of thinking tends to be one-dimensional with an emphasis on rational and logical analysis. A decision about a particular career will be weighed on a cost-benefit scale. For example, those contemplating a future as a physician will weigh the costs of a demanding preparatory program, long hours, and job stress against the benefits of social approval, rewarding work, and high pay. The problem with this way of thinking is that the world and the future are limited to the horizon of the self. The needs and wants of the self are the significant determinants for a particular field of work or study. A college is then deemed successful to the extent it helps students progress on paths that are largely self-chosen or that are applauded by the surrounding culture.[14]

A vocation-centered college invites its students to contemplate their futures in a different way. It might be useful to think of this as moving from a one-dimensional space centered in the self to a three-dimensional world in which the realms of self, community and God overlap. Let us explore each of these dimensions in turn, mindful of the dialectic that exists between them.

A college enlivened by vocation commences with the understanding that the students on its campus are not the products of a random and indifferent universe. Because it operates with a conviction that God is alive and continually at work in his

[14] James VanOosting, "Vocation Education," America, 187, 1 (July 1-8, 2002) 8-11. VanOosting outlines the contrast between a "professional" and "vocational" approach.

creation, it views the students in its midst as having "souls," which is an old-fashioned way of saying they are made in the image of their creator. At the most fundamental level, this entails a deep level of respect for every member of the Augsburg community. But it goes beyond that. The belief that God stands behind every individual means they are endowed by their creator with gifts. One of the primary tasks of the college community is to help learners sort out the nature of those gifts. Some students, listening solely to the voices of family and friends, have never given this subject serious consideration. They assume their gifts are consonant with what they have been told they are. Others, having listened to cultural voices urging material achievement, assume that college isn't about self-reflection or consideration of gifts but only the means to obtain skills to make the most money possible. But when Augsburg accepts a "soul" into its midst it makes a commitment to stretch and challenge the student to think about their life in terms of gifts and service.

It also suggests a high level of concern for the student that moves beyond the collecting of tuition, giving of grades and assignment of dorm rooms. The cultivation of a sense of vocation requires a deep and, at times, exhausting commitment from the Augsburg community. This should not be mistaken for soft-minded paternalism. In fact, a college centered in vocation will regularly see the need to challenge students to rethink how they see themselves and their roles in the world. Vocational reflection is not sentimental. It recognizes the harm done when an object of God's creation is given eternal value and it will be bold when speaking of the culture's numerous idols (money, nation, drugs etc.). Students, like the rest of us, succumb to these temptations. A school grounded in vocation will provide guidance and structure so that students are not left on

their own to sort out these vital issues. There may not be uniformity in the community about how one ought to conduct one's life. But the vitality of the discussion will give evidence that this is a college which believes every person bears the mark of her creator. The overall goal is to equip each student with a deep and abiding sense of their value before God and their wider responsibility to the community.

Further, a college grounded in vocation will highlight the important role of the community in the discernment of a calling. Again, it will resist cultural tendencies which view the wants and needs of the individual as primary. Instead of focusing on questions like 'What do I want to do with my life?' and 'Where can I make the most money?' there is a shift to a sense of accountability to the wider world. Within a vocation paradigm, the questions are more likely to be 'What are the needs of my community and world?' and 'How do my gifts fit in with these needs?' Implicit in this shift of focus is a college that makes available to its learners a diverse campus which exposes students to different cultures, races and ideas. As a college in the heart of the city, Augsburg's commitment to vocation also means that learners will be engaged with the wonderful variety of neighborhoods and ethnic groups in the urban area as well as the problems of poverty, crime and injustice that often imperil it. The school's proximity to the business community and public sector also afford numerous opportunities for the shaping and discernment of a call. In summary, a sense of vocation calls us away from the isolation of the self and sets us in a much wider arena. As a result, callings have the possibility of being shaped by a multiplicity of voices. This can make life more complicated (as anyone knows who has listened to sophomore angst over a choice of majors) but a school

that values vocation should expect ambiguity and struggle about the nature of one's gifts in light of the world's needs.[15]

The third part of the vocational triad is undoubtedly the most controversial: the role of God. As long as the discussion is left somewhat general and vocation is equated with a hazy form of "spirituality" no one seems to be offended. Religious differences can be safely glossed over and faith can be relegated to a private realm. A call becomes something you hear within yourself and the community becomes the realm to exercise the call. Talk of God in any concrete way makes things messy. This is the "safe" route that seems to be preferred by many in the Lutheran college community.[16]

However, a Christian understanding of vocation will resist this gutting of the tradition. At the same time it will avoid a sectarian mentality that attempts to baptize or "Christianize" all knowledge. It is suspicious of those who jettison the use of reason in favor of some "higher" form of knowing based on the Bible. It knows that a healthy sense of vocation on a college campus can only be cultivated when voices from the margin and outside the tradition are given a full and fair hearing.

So what is being advocated? It appears that institutions either err on the side of too little or too much of God. Can there be some sort of via media that culls the best from these opposing positions while discarding the worst?[17]

A school shaped by a biblical and Reformation understanding of vocation has to insist on a central role for God in life of that institution. Or, it might be more proper to

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[15] The importance of cultivating a mentoring community is stressed in Sharon Daloz Parks's Big Questions. Worthy Dreams (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2000) 127-205.
[16] For an incisive critique of "spirituality" shorn of the particulars of a faith tradition see Eugene H. Peterson, "Missing Ingredient. Why Spirituality Needs Jesus," Christian Century (March 22, 2003) 30-37.
[17] For how to think about this issue within a Lutheran context see Darrell Jodock, "The Third Path. Gustavus Adolphus College and the Lutheran Tradition," The Gustavus Quarterly (Summer, 2003) 12-23.

say that it has to confess that God is active and alive in its midst, no matter what some may say. For a number of people this will not be difficult. Many faculty, staff and students are willing and eager to talk about God and have no hesitation about embracing a Christian concept of vocation.[18] Perhaps it might be wise if our institutions were more intentional about nurturing that faith.

For others, God has become problematic--or at least the versions of God that closely link him with life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. As colleges have moved away from traditional constituencies and attracted students and employees from outside the Christian tradition a well-documented process of secularization has occurred on the campuses of many church schools. Sometimes this manifests itself as outright antagonism to the faith and is accompanied by a tendency to caricature Christianity as anti-intellectual or "non-inclusive" in order to dilute or dismiss it. More often, those who stand outside the tradition are not hostile but in fact are often curious about the beliefs of Christians. They are willing to listen and learn about Christianity provided a "space" is created where mutual conversation can occur and they do not feel coerced or manipulated.

It is typical for Christians in church college settings to lament the level of secularization and yearn for the good old days when a common creed could more or less be assumed. And we should not be indifferent to some of the trends and what has happened to the church connections of many schools.[19] However, the concept of

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[18] We are wary of the notion that we are "introducing" or even "reintroducing" vocation to Augsburg. Many of Augsburg's employees and students have a strong sense of calling. The goal here is for Augsburg as an institution to be explicit about vocation's centrality.

[19] James Burtchaell, The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

vocation might even provide some room for gratitude about the present state of affairs, as audacious as that might seem. Let me explain.

The insertion of vocation into the center of campus life means we cannot be silent about God. Nor can God be compartmentalized within the religion department or campus ministry. God is at work in all sectors and levels of the school, undergirding and guiding the life of the college. Consequently, vocation will at least insist that what one believes matters. Students may reject the concept of vocation or they may voice doubts about the "God" component. But no one who matriculates at Augsburg should be allowed to be indifferent about God and a sense of calling. Or if they are indifferent, they must at least have the skills to justify that indifference in a coherent way.

In other words, vocation demands that talk about God becomes public at Augsburg. Teachers across disciplines should recognize opportunities to talk about their sense of calling. The venue may be a classroom setting or private conversation in an office. But vocation in all its dimensions should be part of the "teaching horizon" of all faculty and staff.[20] Likewise, students at Augsburg should be expected to think critically about their vocation and the role of God in their lives. Recent curricular changes are encouraging on this front.[21] But it goes beyond changes mandated by administrative committees. It must become part of the ethos of the campus.

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[20] This should not just be interpreted as a "personal" concern divorced from subject matter. As Robert Benne points out: "Students learn in Christian theology that they are created as the crown of God's purposeful creation, but learn in biology that they are accidental products of a blind evolutionary mechanism…We treat the mind, body and spirit separately, so that a cacophony of claims pulls our students in many different directions…We leave the task of integration to the student, a pretty fragile reed indeed for such a challenge." See Robert Benne, "Lutheran Quietism in Higher Education?" The Cresset (Trinity, 2003) 53.

[21] Augsburg recently adopted a curriculum that makes vocation central in two religion classes that all students are required to take at the beginning of college and also mandates significant vocational reflection in a senior seminar.

It might be asked: What about those who dissent? What of those who are outside the Christian tradition? Won't all this talk about vocation be offensive and disrespectful? Here is where a sense of gratitude for those who differ plays an important part. It can be argued that in order for vocation to occupy the role envisioned above it is necessary that it be challenged and critiqued from different angles. If the conversation about vocation is only among Christians it will quickly grow stale and self-righteous. Christians need outside voices to help them reflect upon their faith. Their beliefs require the skeptical question from one who has been alienated by Christianity. Faith demands discerning inquiry from those who come from different religious traditions. The concept of vocation being advocated here suggests that God has placed these "outsiders" in our midst to help us think about vocation. So instead of viewing outsiders as threats they ought to be seen as valuable partners that actually invigorate and enliven our understanding of our vocations.

Similarly, part of the task of those within the Christian tradition is to help those on the outside think about what vocation might mean for them. For example, a coherent case for vocation is possible on purely humanistic grounds. For some, a concept of God is fraught with too many difficulties. Nevertheless, a sense of calling from the community is strongly felt and then is interpreted with a vocational framework. A Christian can surely be supportive of such an understanding because it represents a significant advance over a life centered on self and its needs and wants. However, a proponent of a humanistic understanding of vocation should not expect that Augsburg will simply leave the "God" question alone. He or she should understand that they will

be respectfully questioned about their beliefs and that there is an obligation in turn to question the Christian viewpoint.

In order for this vigorous discussion on vocation to occur, two things will be crucial. The first is a cultivation of civility so that respectful conversation can occur. A campus with vocation animating its ethos ought to be such a place. As we have seen, the Scriptures underline that God's call is finally gracious. Two things are implied here. First, if God communicates primarily by speaking then the proper posture of the recipient of a call is listening. Second, since God's call is gracious this indicates that the object of the call is undeserving and therefore humble. This includes a recognition that one's own position is human and finite and possibly in need of correction. Seasoned by vocation's virtues of listening and humility, a campus conversation about God has the potential to bear much fruit rather than rancor and division.

Alongside civility it will be important that the campus develop a "critical mass" of adherents in order to insure that the concept of vocation flourishes. If key members of the administration and a large majority of faculty fail to embrace vocation, the prospect of a civil conversation is doomed from the outset.[22] If the proponents of vocation on campus feel unsupported and in the minority they will unlikely have the energy and enthusiasm necessary to sustain an ethos. While the members of this "critical mass" must always be on guard against the hubris that has often been linked with religion, they must also be careful to encourage the college to hire a significant number of people that are at least sympathetic to the idea of vocation.

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[22] Robert Benne, Quality with Soul. How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 179-206.

In summary, vocation at Augsburg involves entering a space anchored by God, self and community. It is Augsburg's conviction that all three are necessary for a vigorous understanding of vocation that transforms lives and sparks courageous service in the world. Of course not all will agree. But it is the genius of vocation that it has the capability of embracing that disagreement without having it lead to division. It will respectfully listen to its critics and change when necessary. But it will also venture forth with assertions of its own and carefully question those on the "outside." All of this is done with confidence and humility. The former because it is convinced that it stands in a long line of those who have wrestled with God's call and the known the joy of grace. The latter because it recognizes that vocation is finally in the hands of God and that we must not confuse our efforts on earth with heaven's design.