Spring 2008

Doing More with Life: Connecting Christian Higher Education to a Call to Service (Book Review)

David M. Johnstone
George Fox University, djohnsto@georgefox.edu

Michael R. Miller, ed. *Doing More with Life: Connecting Christian Higher Education to a Call to Service.* Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007. xvi+225 pp. $29.95, ISBN 9781932792805.

Reviewed by David M. Johnstone, Student Life, George Fox University

In 2005, with a two million dollar grant from the Lilly Endowment, Mount St. Mary's University in Maryland hosted their first *Callings Conference*. The purpose of the grant and conference was to delve deeply into the meaning and implications of vocation, particularly as defined from the point of view of faith both generically and in Jesus. From that event, where some thirty scholars presented their thinking, Michael Miller consolidated a representation of their reflections into this collection of essays. While the volume has a decidedly Roman Catholic flavor, the essays range from Orthodox works to evangelical assessments as well. Some of the papers are very specific in their exploration of vocation, while others only deal with it as a general call to service. Some essays do not seem to fit the flow of the book but could easily stand alone in a quality journal; others are phenomenally written and di-

rectly relevant to the stated task of the conference.

Miller, a professor of philosophy at Mount St. Mary's, convened the conference on vocation and in the preface of this book has reported on the impact of the conversation on his campus. This book reflects the myriad of perspectives raised by colleagues within and without the institution and from the university's students themselves. The cornerstone of the volume is the opening chapter written by Miller called "A Vision of Vocation." It intends to set the tone for the remainder of the book. While not all the essays in the book have taken his cues, his own essay is a thoughtful and provoking exploration of the meanings of vocation. He maintains the integrity of scripture while exploring an understanding of vocation as seen by those who try to follow Jesus.

In Miller's discussion, he begins by affirming that "Christians universally know that they are called by God" (1). As general as this view might be, he stresses also that the conversation about vocation "is a great mystery," for the simple fact "it involves God's action in our lives" (2). Miller challenges the reader by asserting, "if we are being invited by God to do something with our lives we ought to investigate what we are being called to and why—if only so we can better judge if we want to accept the invitation" (4).

Later essays touch the twin goals of self-fulfillment and self-actualization as part of vocation. Miller acknowledges and hints at these views by stating that "the invitation offered through God's call is not for the benefit of God, who needs nothing, but for our own. If God is calling, it is likely that he is calling us to something he knows will be good for us and others" (4). But he goes further and affirms the benefits to the individual as being significant, but reminds the reader that our vocation is particularly "good for...others" (4).

He continues to unpackage some of the presuppositions Christians have in understanding vocation or calling. Two of the basic views are: (i) "to have a vocation is to live as a Christian disciple," and (ii) "a vocation marks as different those who believe" (5). Besides this broad view, there is also a sense that a vocation is tied to "God's invitation to perform certain jobs" (7). These outlooks suggest that some are called to be set apart from their peers, but they also emphasize that God calls each person to complete a particular set of acts. Traditionally this place of being set apart has been within the context of the church (such as monastic, pastoral, priestly, or missionary roles). The challenging question raised by this approach is, "Does...the Christian who works in an office or a factory or in the home...not have a vocation?" (8). A related question is, "what about those who also serve others in God's name, but who are not Christian?" (8).

An alternate view suggests, "living a life vocationally is best seen as being and doing what makes you an authentic and complete human being" (10). Miller, alluding to Buechner, suggests of vocation: "This holy place, this intersection between your joys and the world's needs, may be found in a particular state in life, or membership in a faith community... What matters here is not that you end up in a particular spot, but that you made the journey of self-discovery" (10). This concept of vocation as a benefit to ourselves raises many concerns. Principally, "in spite of assurances otherwise, some believe that the call to personal satisfaction remains fundamentally self–serving, since the view essentially allows the individual...to define both the end and the means of his or her calling" (11). Therefore, in Miller's estimation there are significant limitations to this view, primarily due to the focus on the person who receives the call. He asserts, as reflected in the subtitle to his volume, that vocation is focused on service to others.

Miller concludes his essay by articulating his personal thoughts on vocation: "I believe that to be called by God is a divine invitation to respond to the grace present in one's life. In

answering that call every aspect of our life, including the most ordinary and extraordinary, is transformed" (12). He continues: "Accepting one's vocation, like falling in love, transforms the individual" (13). Miller affirms that a vocation has great significance for an individual, yet at its core, a vocation has ultimately a broader focus: "The excitement of discovering and accepting our vocation is linked to the recognition that we have a role in God's plan for the universe. Both awe inspiring and frightening, God calls us to participate in this plan" (14).

Miller sections his book into three groupings. The first, entitled "Vocation and Transformation," presents loosely connected essays on how a vocation can have a profound impact on a person's view of themselves, particularly how a sense of purpose shapes a person with the transforming effect and power of God's call. The second part tackles "Vocation and Service to Others" by presenting essays which engage in this discussion either broadly or specifically. The third part of this volume, "Vocation and the University," appears to align itself most closely with the title. In this section it was Thomas Hibbs' essay, "The University, the Quest, and Student Culture," that stood out in strength and commentary.

Beginning with references from St. Francis of Assisi and his realization that while satisfying "material and bodily...needs was a good" (128), Hibbs says Francis was convinced that there were "greater wants," tied to a desire for "human service and sympathy" (128). Francis articulated some of his thinking by asking the questions, "What am I? What is this world about me?" (128). He felt that there was more to life than just serving oneself. With this background, Hibbs begins examining social commentators who identify that among college students there is also "a longing for something more than...paths to career success" (129). He suggests that these students are asking similar types of questions as St. Francis. Quoting columnist David Brooks, Hibbs says students are asking: "How do you organize your accumulations so that life does not become just one damn merit badge after another, a series of resume notches without a point? ... [Students] hunger for the solution" (129). Hibbs examines student culture, but also raises broader concerns about North American higher education in general. He suggests it is failing in responding to the longings within students. "The emphasis on comfort and entertainment reinforces the students' sense that they are consumers to whom the university supplies services" (130). Providing services, not an education, seems to be what is happening at many institutions. Sadly, he observes that students "lack a sense of something greater than themselves worthy of admiration and imitation" (130). While exploring the reasons and dynamics for this deficiency, he begins making observations about the rise of spectator and entertainment roles played by students. "As viewers...are we watching heightened things – great danger, great desirability, intense loveliness – without being tied by the responsibility that attach real onlookers? We are...like voyeurs, spies and peeping toms" (133). The worlds of media and technology have had an impact on shaping a culture of observers, spectators and viewers.

Hibbs' purpose for this essay was not solely to assess student culture or create a biting examination of the failings of higher education. He helps identify the despair felt among many college students. There seems to be a pervasive longing for something beyond themselves. This is where Hibbs connects deeply with the thesis of this volume; he articulates that there is a profound need in students to have a sense of significance and purpose in what they do. There is almost a desperate longing felt by many students to identify with something greater than themselves where they might pour their energy.

Other essays that I found helpful include Jessamyn Neuhaus' "Joan of Arcadia and Fulfilling Your True Nature," which provides insight into our culture's pursuit of the self-fulfillment notion of vocation. William C. Mills' "Our Common Calling to Holiness and Sanc-

tity" explores the relevant uses of Orthodox tradition to draw models and lessons of the call to serve others. Charlene Kalinoski's "Calling Students to Transformation" surveys the impact that a vocation can have on the individual and their spiritual and altruistic life.

While value can be gleaned from all reflections in this book, the two essays by Miller and Hibbs stand above the other works as the gems of the volume. As mentioned earlier, even while they are all well written, it does take effort to identify how some are relevant to the general topic. The book makes many valuable additions to the conversation about vocation, the laity, and the significance of discipleship linked to service. At times it is a little inaccessible to evangelicals through the heavy use of references to mystical writers, saints of the Orthodox and Catholic traditions, as well as the liberal use of papal encyclicals. However all these references brought me a new appreciation for the depth and breadth of the discussion about how and what it means when the Father calls us. In the spring of 2007, Mount St. Mary's hosted its third *Callings Conference* and I believe that further compilations of these conversations will be valuable. Many of the authors of these essays articulated the hope that their works might be a starting point for further development and conversation. Their efforts showed the integrity and strength needed to be a foundation for further discussion.