

The Gospel as the Answer to Youth's Problems: Vocational

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The dilemma that all of us face as we try to speak with young folks is well depicted in a cartoon in the Saturday Review. A young father comes into the living room looking distraught and harried, followed by little Junior who has all the marks of an imp about him. Father, who had evidently just come from a conference with Sonny, says to his wife, "I quoted Dr. Spock and he quoted Dr. Freud."

Now it is that kind of separation between the generations—even for those of us who consider ourselves members of the younger generation—which constitutes a division, a barrier, which I suppose you people have noticed popping up in almost all the areas you are discussing but which probably pops up most often in the area of vocation.

The questions you folks sent in all confine the vocation problem to those who do not already have a job, with one exception. The one exception is this question: "For those who do have a job, how do I convince them that they have a Christian vocation?" All the other questions deal with the concerns of youth just before that stage, youth when they are asking the question, "What do I do for a job?"—when they are saying, "What's going to be my vocation?" And in a sense their vocational problem (it is really

a misnomer) is that they don't have any vocation. They don't have any calling. At least, by and large, many of them do not feel called to anything in particular. I would say their problem is not really a vocational one but an avocational one. The problem is, "I don't have a vocation and I'm having a devil of a time trying to find one." So I would like to address my remarks to the situation of career decision, the situation which most of you evidently feel is youth's basic and primary vocational problem.

If there is an answer in the Christian Gospel to youth's vocational problems we will have to make sure that we are asking the question in the right way, that we are asking a question which the Gospel can answer. For example, "How much is two and two?" is an important question which is not answered by the Gospel. There are even some rather religious-sounding questions which the Gospel does not answer. And so if we want to have, or to find, or to look for the Gospel's answer to youth's vocational questions we have to be careful in formulating the question. Most often I suppose it comes in some such form as this: the Christian young person asks, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" And if you take the Gospel at its least common denominator, you might well be tempted to reply, "Repent, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." For after all, isn't that the Gospel? Yes, it is. But I can well imagine that if you have tried to do this or something relatively close to it (and I imagine you have: at least I have in my counseling and conversation with young folks), you have gotten the reply, "Oh, sure, yes, yes, I know, that's first, that's got to be there. But now, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" And the implication is that really the Gospel doesn't answer my vocational question. "Oh sure, repentance, salvation, and believing on Christ—these are necessary ingredients. But they do not and, I mean, the Gospel does not give me the

assistance I need for my waking, working, and thinking hours of the week. In fact, it is precisely at this time, during these waking, working, daylight hours of my life, that the Gospel deserts me.”

Maybe you, as I, have agreed—although never having said it out loud—that often, when the chips are down, the Gospel just doesn’t seem to stand up. Now maybe I am confessing only my own sins, but have you not also felt that we were sort of grasping at straws instead of the Gospel when this vocational question comes up?—straws that maybe do sound quite religious and sometimes even more than that, quite Christian, but which nevertheless are straws because they circumvent and distort the Gospel of the crucifixion and the resurrection of the Son of God. Here are a couple of straws which I have sometimes used, usually unsuccessfully because they aren’t Gospel. We say something like, “Oh, pick a career of service. Follow the Golden Rule.” Or we say, “Remember that God in Jesus Christ loves you, so pick a career keeping this in mind, that your career should show your gratitude to God for all the love He has given you.” And I know now as I think of this gratitude theme that, for all of its theological weaknesses, one of the things which makes it especially weak is that, in this career-decision situation, youth most often feel deserted by Jesus Christ. And how can they feel gratitude toward someone, who, as far as they can tell, has deserted them? They’re like the man who has heard over and over again, “Out of gratitude, out of gratitude, you should do work. Out of gratitude you should help the church.” And the man sits in the pew and looks at himself and says, “Well, what do you know, I am out of gratitude!” Or we grasp at the very last straw and say, “Well, go home and read your Bible. Go home and pray.” Now I would not wish to underrate Bible reading and prayer as valuable implements in God’s armor and as good things for the Christian to use, but if we say nothing more than any of these

four things we have not responded with the Gospel. Maybe we have passively admitted that the Gospel has no answer as far as we can see.

The question, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?", becomes a question which the Gospel can answer when you first of all say that the question which we are really asking is not, "Should I be a plumber, pastor, or professor?" If that should happen to be the person's real question, then I suggest that the Gospel does not have an answer—not because there is no answer, nor because God doesn't have an answer (for He does) but because this answer is not in the Gospel. God has other ways of giving this answer. In traditional Lutheran theology the source of this answer is to be found in what we call God's "kingdom of the left hand," God's other non-Gospel oriented work in the world. These left-hand things, which may seem pretty plain but which are God's instruments, are aptitude tests, entrance exams, maybe even the want ads in the newspaper which, for any given person, determine what their career possibilities are, at least at that moment in that place. Maybe it is the counsel of common sense or of the people around him. Maybe even hero-worship can be used by God in His left-handed way to have a person resolve the plumber-pastor-professor dilemma, thereby finding out which one God wants them to be. And I would suggest that if the church ever does get involved in out-and-out "straight" vocational guidance and vocational counseling, it should really do so only as a stop-gap measure where the church comes in to plug a hole that some other left-hand institution of God's should have been taking care of. And the church should realize that this should only be temporary, that this is certainly not its best work. The Church has more important work to be doing, or at least work for which it is much more practically and better qualified.

The question, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?", does, however, become a question which the Gospel can answer when we

see and hear in these words such questions as these coming through: "Why am I here in this world in the first place?" "What am I good for?" When students and young folks ask such questions they are not just asking, "What am I qualified to do?" They are really asking, "What am I good for? What do I count for in this world? How can I make my life worth something? How can I do worthwhile work?" This is a question of extremely different caliber than the question of what career I would like to head for. This is the kind of question that the Gospel begins to speak to.

I suppose I don't have to convince you folks that it is not platitudinous to suggest that young folks do ask these kinds of questions. Maybe they don't ask them outright, but the young folks are thinking on these rather profound levels. Young folks do operate with these concerns, even though they don't operate quite that way verbally. But suppose now we did take this kind of question—"Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" "What am I good for?" "How can I make my life worthwhile?"—and suppose we gave the answer which I suggested to begin with, "Repent, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." We might get the response, "Yes, I know that already, but it doesn't help. That's not what I wanted to hear!" Yet, before we rule that answer out just because it wasn't wanted, we should be reminded that the Gospel often is not the desired answer. Nevertheless, it is the most salutary answer.

Here I want to put in a disclaimer. I am not saying that in the long run this answer will do the teenager's soul the most good or anything like that. No, I'm saying, as a matter of fact, that it is the best thing at that time for this person, even though they may not bless you but rather curse you for it. For the Gospel is not always the desired answer. If it should suddenly become the desired answer, we evidently would be in a new era, an era radically different, for example, from the New Testament

era when the Gospel surely was not always the most desired answer. In fact, by and large it was refused wholesale. People stayed away in droves. And yet it was the most salutary answer, even though it did always come out in some form or another as a variation on this theme, "Repent, believe me, the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will have life of the Eternal One." Christians should be aware of this, not pessimistically but realistically. There are, indeed, real barriers to the Gospel—barriers in everyone, barriers even within the Christian young man and woman. Let's face it, there is a barrier within ourselves, a barrier which makes the Gospel dissatisfying, which makes it disappointing, even to us professional church workers. The New Testament always talks about it as being scandalous, this Gospel. It will not always be just the thing you are looking for. It never was. In Jesus' ministry almost every conversation started out on some other subject. In your Bible study routines, as you have probably noticed, Jesus invariably had to bend the question back to the point where the Gospel would be the answer. Jesus has not always fulfilled people's desires. The Gospel will seldom be greeted with a sudden lift of the head, a sudden straightening of the spine, a new gleam in the eye, and a smile on the face. At least it will not usually be received this way initially.

This is probably no more dramatically expressed and demonstrated anywhere than in the question, "What vocation should I choose?" What can I do to do meaningful, worthwhile work in my life? The desires of the questioner, even when he is asking the basic question, are for a straight answer, contrary to what I have been calling the Gospel's answer which doesn't seem very straight at the moment. And even if you direct him to other sources and resources what he wants is a straight answer and a straight answer is so desirable because it will not necessitate any changes on the part of the questioner. He can just go on

from where he is, he can just build on to whatever existing structure he had when he came with the question. But this the Christian cannot do. For the Christian life, of which vocation is evidently a part, is a participation in the living Christ himself. And that kind of life is never expanded or promoted by just adding on to the existing structure, even to the existing structure of the Christian that I am. No, the earthly life of our Lord is the model for our own life, but not in the sense that we merely imitate him. We know as Christians that we don't run our life any more. "You are not your own, you are bought with a price." But the life of the Christ is a model for us in that God does to us, the "little Christ," what originally He did or let happen to our big brother, our Lord, Jesus Christ. So, in this sense, Jesus Christ's life is the model. The model is death and resurrection. You can't build on to the existing structure. You have to crucify the existing structure and let God raise you anew again. This surely is nothing new to Lutherans who have memorized from Luther's Small Catechism the Article on Baptism. Luther says that the daily Christian life where you live out your vocation is not just building on what you achieved the day before but it is the daily drowning of the old Adam (mortification) and the daily appropriating again for myself of the forgiveness of Christ (resurrection). In Luther's language, a new man daily comes forth and arises with this faith and lives before God in righteousness and holiness. But still, isn't this kind of unrealistic, even if Brother Martin said it? Wouldn't it make more sense to give them good advice, to lay down a few good values of thumb or even maybe in specific cases tell them personally what they ought to do for a living?

Suppose I am the questioner now and you are the counselor. Such a procedure, where you finally just up and told me what to do, i.e., answer what I really seem to be asking you, would surely put my psyche at rest and at peace. But, you see, it would

really leave me unaffected, the real me that is here inside. You may have answered my specific question, but you really haven't helped my questioning self. For example, suppose I was a Lutheran Pharisee who walked into your counseling room—a Pharisee in the sense that, because I am a Lutheran with pure doctrine and because I have been at the right schools all my life, therefore I'm convinced that God has to like me for all the good things I've done. Suppose I was a Lutheran Pharisee asking you this career choice question, and then you told me what I could do as a profession for God to like me. I didn't mention that I wanted God to like me but you just gave me a suggestion, "Here's a job you could do," and I walked away convinced now that you had given me something whereby I could practice outwardly what inwardly I had been preaching to myself. You would have answered my question with a straight answer but you surely would not have gotten the Gospel to me; in fact, you probably helped insulate me off and away from the Gospel better (that is, worse) than I ever was before. You have fulfilled the desires of my heart, but my desires were wrong. If that is all that happened in this counseling session you didn't really help me.

Suppose on the contrary, that I, the young adult you are counseling, am not a Pharisee but an admitted Joe Shmoe, the self-confessed good-for-nothing, taking the word literally. There is nothing I am good for. I just don't fit in any place. Now suppose you, as vocational counselor, finally convince me after long, strenuous hours or weeks that you think I am good for something. There is some one little occupation where I can count; maybe it's just appearing in those before-after ads in the box labeled "before". At least you've convinced me that in some little place I count, I matter, I'm worth something. You have fulfilled the desire of my heart but you have not gotten the Gospel to me; and once more, maybe, you have even helped

insulate me from it more than ever before. For, you see, the desires of my heart are wrong. These are what have to be changed. I hope you see that I am not saying, "When a young Christian is in the throes of vocation decision and crises, after all it is nothing more than a spiritual problem. All he needs is the Gospel." Rather, what I am saying is that in the stress and strain of vocation decision the soul is laid bare. And what a shame if all of that trouble is wasted, all that stress and strain! What a waste, if this ideal time hasn't been used to drive home the Gospel answer through that bare and basic question, "What am I worth? What am I good for? How do I count for anything in the world at all?" What a waste, if this time of stress and strain isn't used to drive home these "Gospel-y" answers: "You are worth everything that God is worth. You are bought with a price. The price is God himself. That's how much you are worth. What are you good for? You are good for eternity, that is what you are good for—for sitting down to God's eternal banquet and putting your feet under God's own banquet table because you are a redeemed person. You belong to that family. How can you do things worthwhile? You can do things extremely worthwhile when you do them on God's steam, running on God's power, not on the strength of your own boot straps." Now this doesn't mean that I suddenly have to switch to the clergy or to church-related activities. Once more Brother Martin comes to the rescue, telling us that God's work, doing work for God on God's steam can include hauling manure, washing dirty diapers, and brewing beer.

When our youth is faced with the career choice crisis, we must realize that this isn't the red light of danger, but rather the green light of Go. This is the time when the Gospel can really go. Sure it's troublesome—it might be literally "hell" for a young teenager in this situation—but it's the time of opportunity. I suspect that you and I often demonstrate our own

unregenerate desires when we long for some sort of Utopia in our youth work where we wouldn't have problems, where there wouldn't be all these troubles, all these people to take care of. But the time of trouble is the big chance. To adopt this perspective on trouble, that trouble is the time of the big chance, requires a similar perspective in reference to the Gospel.

The Gospel is not a fire extinguisher hanging on the wall to be used only in emergencies if a conflagration should break out in a person's life, with the parentheses, "the less used the better." Rather—let's face it—the fire is raging already. If our people are Christians at all, according to the New Testament's definition this means that the flesh and spirit are burning inside them in battle. Sinner and saint are fighting within them, so that by definition we know the fire is going on and as God's churchly agents we are the firefighters there with the live hose of the Gospel, eager to find the places where the conflagration is going on, waiting for places where it breaks out so that we can apply the remedy that God has given us.

What use can be made, then, of this kind of strain and stress to get in a good lick for the Gospel? In answering this question we have indeed one extremely large nut to crack. It is the very fact of what has happened to the word "vocation." It has become quite secularized in our culture. I don't mean merely that it has gotten pulled away from God. It is secularized in the sense that it has been pushed into a sort of straight-jacket that focuses vocation only on occupation. At least the students I talk to, when they come in and have questions on vocation, are invariably thinking of nothing else than "What am I going to do for a living when I get out of school?" I imagine that for your young folks, too, vocation is "what I can do," most likely "what I'm going to have to do when I get out of school." And therefore young folks by and large haven't the foggiest notion of vocation. They think of it only as something in the future—maybe

the near future, but it's still the dim future. It is something that has never been part of their experience— something which is the great unknown, the black abyss, the dreadful bogey man up there ahead. And most of them are scared stiff.

For better or worse (I think it was for better) there was a time, at least among Christians, when everyone had a vocation, just because of the fact that they were a Christian. Even the bed-ridden invalid who never lifted a finger in constructive work or the tiny tyke who was too little to do anything—they all had vocations. They had vocations in the sense that they were really called for something special, that God had called them for something special. This “something special” is not merely what the New Testament says, “Called out of darkness, into his marvelous light.” I say “not merely” because, for some of us, as soon as a reference like this is made we think “Oh, that refers to the religious part of my life. There, Gospel is fine. But now what about my vocation?” If that is the way we think, then I say it's not merely that. Such “merely” thinking will never realize that already in the mere statement of being called out of darkness into this marvelous light there are more than just religious overtones, that these are daily-life sorts of things. But actually in this religious vocation—“out of darkness into marvelous light”—God has called His Christians into a whole battery of vocations. Not just one but a whole raft of them. At least as many vocations as I have people in my life around me. Anybody to whom I have a connection represents, in the New Testament sense, a special vocation. Now these connections may well have been there when I was “in the darkness” and they may well be there for those non-Christian people in the world who are still in theological darkness. But one of the things that happens when I am “vocated”, when I am called into God's life, is that I now begin to see this vocation in that very light. I begin to see that not only do I have a connection with my

children, wife, colleagues, fellow citizens, property owners, and so forth, but that I have a connection with them wherein God wants me to do something—not just to be taking care of kids, not just to be kind to my wife, not just to be a good citizen, but to be doing God’s work in this context. You may remember that Luther talked about this also: “Here consider your vocation, whether you are a father, mother, son, daughter, master, servant.” Significantly enough, Luther did not say, “Whether you are a plumber, preacher, professor, farmer.” He didn’t talk about vocation as a thing you do for a living. He talked about vocation as a relationship in which you stand to other people, a relationship where God calls you to do something. It’s not just where you put in your 40-hour work week—that might determine the vocational relation you have to your employer but it’s where God calls you for the full 168 hours of every week.

Vocation in the Biblical sense, at least, is not primarily a question of “What do I do for a living?” Vocation is a matter of what I am in the eyes of God and in relationship to the people with whom God has placed me. These are not two things, what I am in the eyes of God and what I am in relationship to the people with whom God has placed me. Think, for a moment, of an inverted letter “T.” God’s relation to me is the vertical member of the inverted “T,” I and my fellow people on either side the horizontal. These are not two things but one T. The inverted T is one organism. It has two distinct dimensions, but if you separate the two dimensions you don’t have the inverted T anymore; it exists only when it exists as a unit. Well, this is the way the New Testament talks about vocation. Many of you, I am sure, have run some sort of Bible study to find out where the New Testament uses the word vocation. You have found that the New Testament actually can use the word vocation or calling in reference to almost all the big concepts that are contained anywhere in the New Testament. In one place or another the New

Testament actually says vocation (calling) equals justification, predestination, peace, fellowship with our Lord Jesus Christ, being a sheep of the Good Shepherd, attending God's banquet, church, glory, grace, freedom, or hope. All the big words the New Testament uses to define Christianity are invariably attached to "calling", "called", vocation. Once more you may be tempted, as I am often too, to say, "Sure, that is the religious dimension, but now let's get practical. What has this got to say about this crisis that a young person is in when she wants to pick a job? Sure, that is all fine, but now what do I do for a living? Come on, now, let's get serious. Let's talk about my vocation." Here maybe it has to be said that not only has the concept of vocation been corseted down into nothing more than a reference to my job, but that the religious side of being called, of being "vocation", has been slapped into its own little Slenderella so that it is just something "over there" all by itself. The Gospel has literally been curtailed, cut off, minimized, and reduced to just this one area, the area of religion.

So what use can be made of the time of stress and strain in vocational matters for getting a lick in for the Gospel? Answer: all sorts of use. Any one of the New Testament terms, for example, that equate with vocation would be a good one to start with. For a few moments let us navigate around the term "church." Many of you know that the New Testament word for church is ecclesia and that the basic meaning is "the called-out people." The word vocation is right smack in the center of the word church. We are the "vocations folks," called out because of Christ's work and not just for some sort of canning-jar preservation or isolation but to do Christ's own work. This is not just the work of saving souls, but the real big work, the work of redeeming and reconciling the world. It is in my vocations (plural) that God is carrying out and finishing off

this reconciling and redeeming work. He is completing it in me, since I too am still a part of that world that needs reconciliation. So one thing that has to be said is that a Christian in his vocation is not just doing something because Jesus Christ sort of gave him the interest and he goes off on his own with this good motivation behind it. In the New Testament, what you do in your vocations is what God is doing in the world. It isn't that God has wound you up and says, "OK, Mickey Mouse, go"; the only way God does His redeeming work in the world is through your hands and fingers. In my vocations this is what happens. This redeeming work is going on in me in my vocation because God has to finish the job of redeeming me, too, and not just the rest of the world that I am touching. So in me, in my vocation, there is a constant repetition of Good Friday and Easter Sunday wherein God lets His cross take form in me. Thus the Christian's vocation is always cruci-form. In my vocation, I continue to grow up into the fullness of the stature of Christ and the more I grow up into that form, the more it looks like Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The crucifixion aspect of my vocation is not the unpleasantness of work, and in the words "crucifixion" or "mortification" you ought not to read this idea of dull drudgery. It may in some cases be that this drudgery is my own personal crucifixion, but what has to be killed off in me is not my good spirits or something like that. The crucifixion that takes place in my vocation is that my self-confidence is crucified, my self-assertiveness, my own self-assurance, my chronic conviction that if I am, or at least if I could be, on top of the pile, then at least in one respect I would have the world under control. And that means that, at least in one respect, I would be able to get along without God, without trusting in Him to take care of me and to see to it that my welfare is achieved. At this "self" gets crucified in me by my vocation I am participating in my own Good Friday. I am being driven away from self-reliance to reliance on God. This

reliance on God is trusting that in the work of Jesus Christ God does indeed like me. This is faith, and as faith breaks forth from my own personal Good Friday it is already Easter Sunday for me. Then I am becoming alive again; I am being brought back to Life, Life with a capital L. This is how God works in me personally via my own vocation.

Now a few concluding words on how God works through me redemptively on the world around me. If my vocation "exercises" me in faith in the Gospel as it constantly drives me to trust in God, so my vocation also exercises me on the horizontal plane, on the plane which is called love. It may sound trite to be talking only about faith and love. But to make sure once more that you understand what I mean by faith and love, I mean the vertical and horizontal elements of the "T." I am emphasizing both. Faith in Christ's sacrifice is always and only the saving connecting link between me and God on the vertical. By emphasizing this, I am prevented from entertaining the notion that in my vocation, even in my Godly vocation, there somehow is something in it which will make God like me. There is indeed something valuable in it, but it is not valuable in the vertical dimension. Its sole value is in the horizontal dimension, in the dimension of what God wants to have done. For in the horizontal dimension, the life of Love, the emphasis is 100% on the neighbor. I cannot even take a nickel's worth of that to butter up my position with God. If I do, as Luther says, I'm really gypping my neighbor out of what God wants him to get. God wants him to get 100% of me, and thereby 100% of God's goodness toward him, as I live out my vocational life. I am gypping him of this 100% if I in my respect try to use a little bit of it for myself. I misuse my vocational works of love in the mistaken notion that maybe somehow I could use them to make God like me. And what's so damnable about this, of course, is that I am finally rejecting the Gospel by saying, "God, I don't think your

given connecting link of the vertical really stacks up. At least it is not enough. Maybe you're just like Ivory soap, 99.44%, but then I have to kick in the .56%."

My vocations are the places where God lets His cross take form in me to crucify this notion. If we could convey this Gospel to this area of youth's problem, we would surely be doing them a genuine Christian service. We ought not only to get them to see their future vocations (which is what they always mean, by and large, when they use this term), but their current vocations, as the very places where God is exercising them in both the vertical and horizontal dimensions, working on them to make them trust Him again and trust Him more and bringing them back from having to trust in themselves, back from the notion that in their varied vocations on the horizontal level they must somehow show God or show the world that they really count. One of the places where we can do this is in that very crisis when a young person is fighting through their own vocational problems. For one of the vocations of a teenager, one of the jobs God wants them to do, is to pick their career. The picking of a vocation itself is one of the vocations a young person has. If this is the case, then everything we have said about vocation ought to apply in some respect to this one rather small crisis area. In this time, whether it be shorter or longer, painful or pleasant, God wants to promote His work of mortifying an old sinner and reviving a brand new young Christian. For this, indeed, is a moment when the Pharisee heresy makes such good sense. In early adulthood it makes such good sense now finally to strike out on your own, to be yourself, finally someone worthwhile, to finally do something significant, something valuable, the real good service. It is at this decisive point that these qualities must be redeemed for Christ; and the redemption pattern is always the same—mortification, vivification; cross, resurrection; God's thumbs-down on any solitary self-assertion, and God's granted

gift of Jesus Christ and Christ's work to that youth, and thereby really significant work. Work on the horizontal plane is not just people to people, but it's me and God to people.

Perhaps in the moment of career strain and stress we could do no more for a Christian young person than give them the Gospel. Give them the Gospel which says, "Right at this time when you are going through your own Good Friday, trust Jesus Christ." While they are crying out, "I thirst!" or "My God, my God, why?", ram home the Gospel so that they will also be able to say the last words of Good Friday, "Father, into your hands I do at this moment commend my spirit." Even as a crazy mixed up kid with apparently no future, he/she is indeed one of God's kids, and his/her future is, to say the very least, fantastic. And I suspect that as they sweat over their vocations tests, job interviews, entrance requirements, advice and what not, if they go into this with the godly good cheer that their vertical relationship is signed, sealed, and delivered and that therefore God is going to see that their horizontal vocations work well, they can already now be influencing the lives of other teenagers who are sitting in the same stew and who maybe don't have the Gospel of the godly good cheer. They can in this small vocation, this horizontal-level relationship, get across a little bit of what God wants other people to have, the good cheer and good news of the Gospel. Perhaps last but not least we, you and I who sit and talk with these young persons, may also be affected by the spark of this godly good cheer as it rubs off onto us. Perhaps in the mystery of God He thereby calls us to the real graces of what our vocations are in both their vertical and horizontal dimensions.

As I see it, this is youth's problem and the Gospel's answer in this area of vocation.

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