

How Do I Get From Here to There? And, Why Should I Worry About It?

by Jon Huiskens

What do you want to be when you grow up? That is probably one of the questions most often asked of children and young people. Implied, of course, is that you must have an answer whether realistic, idealistic, sad, or funny. Miraculously, sometimes young people know, at least some of them (a very small number really) and become what they say they want to be when they are young. Aside, now, from doing away with this frustrating question, the honest answer, in most cases, would be: "I don't really know at this point; but, please won't you give me some help or some direction to find out?"

That brings me to the *here* and the *there*. How do I get from school, the here, whether it be high school, college, and, yes, even graduate school sometimes, to a job, the *there*, to my life's vocation, to my God-appointed calling?

The question is relevant, the problem is real. One only needs to read his local newspaper to find out that career counseling, career planning, career *everything* is much in the news and one only needs to read his educational journals to discover that this is a much-debated question in education circles these days. Both the College Examination Board (CEEB) and the American College Testing service (ACT) have responded with career assessment and career decision-making packages. Everybody is talking careers and career awareness. The result has been that public education, particularly at the high school level, is in

danger of changing its schools into vocational and technical institutes. In many people's opinions, everybody is, or should be, getting ready for a job! I might caution here that, in my opinion, this is a move we ought to resist. There are several good reasons for this. The first is practical: most jobs currently available, according to personnel specialists, will be obsolete within the next five to ten years. What then, for the narrowly trained technician and specialist? Will he be able to be retrained? Will his basic skills be good enough to make him retrainable? Will his educational foundations in reasoning skills, communication skills, and the like be sufficient for him to move to a new area? While the data is still not collectable, because of the recent nature of this problem, the concerns are being expressed that, unless vocational and liberal education are kept carefully in balance, the work force in ten years, in spite of its capability to succeed on the first job, will not be able to meet future demands. They simply won't be able to make the switch, they will not possess the necessary basic skills to be retrained.

The second reason—more basic and more fundamental—is that our philosophy of education, the purpose we see in educating children and young people, will not allow us to move the curriculum pendulum so far in the vocation/career direction to include such emphasis on vocational training and technical preparation. One central purpose, apart now from all vocational preparation, is to gain a perspective, to gain a world and life view, to learn and to experience the revelation of God in all things. I say, we are in danger of losing that central purpose if we go career crazy.

This is not to say, however, that we are not concerned about vocation. The question is also extremely relevant for us. While we certainly can discern that the emphasis which public education has placed on careers and jobs is too much for us, it is a question which we must address and which we must seriously consider. The reasons are numerous, but let me cite just two. The first is that we must work. God has so commanded it and work we must, and work we do. It is estimated that the average man or woman will spend 90,000 hours working and on 2,000 Monday mornings will roll over to turn off his alarm clock and, bleary eyed, will prepare himself to go to work. But, even more important to us is the view we have of work: we view it as vocation, as calling, as the particular thing that God wishes us to do with our working time. That means, of course, that when we

decide to go from here to there, we do need to worry about it; we must do so with care, we carefully consider the path we are called by God to take, and we carefully consider why we are to do what we do.

Since the idea of vocation is so critical to answering both questions posed in the title of this article, viz., How do I get from Here to There? And Why Should I Worry About It., it is well that we understand exactly what we mean and to deal a little more definitively with this topic. The alternative, you see, is to ignore the question and to simply allow our children to "drift into something."

Vocation derives its meaning from the Latin word *vocatio* which literally means calling. The point is that everyone has a calling. We often lose sight of this fact. To many of us only teachers and ministers are called. Such, however, is not the case. All of us have been called by God to do something and, the point is, that we must find out what that calling is. Paul alludes to this in I Corinthians when he speaks of differing callings within the church. We must extend this in all spheres. Varying gifts, varying qualities, varying personalities—God has given each person a unique position and calling in His kingdom. We do well to remember three basic things with regard to vocation. The first is that we must recognize that one's calling is from God who assigns each his place. This rids us of all complaining. We may not always like to do what we are called by God to do. No matter. Our response has been taught us in scripture: "Here am I, send me." The second is that that calling is to work as a citizen of the kingdom. That limits our choices. Not all vocations are available to us. Professional sports, union shops, to name but two simply are not to be considered for they would conflict with our being citizens of God's kingdom. Thirdly, our calling is always, and will always be consonant with our abilities. We are never asked to do something for which we are not equipped either physically or mentally or spiritually. But, the converse is also true: we must always use all the gifts and abilities that God has given us.

It should be obvious, then, that one's calling is not just something "to get" or "to have" as we often talk somewhat flippantly about getting or having a job. A vocation is far more serious than that. It involves what God wills us to do in our working lives. The point is, then, that we must give some thought, some serious thought, about what we are going to do for work. We must seek out that area of work which God intends for

us. "Falling into" and "drifting into," merely "getting" or "having" just will not do for the responsible Christian.

The question, then, has been posed, it has been shown to be relevant, now how does one actually begin to think about getting from here to there?

The first step in any vocational search and for anybody who enables one to make that search is self-assessment. This point will emphasize in greater detail what was stated above that one must choose his calling consonant with his or her abilities. This presupposes that one *knows* what his abilities are. If one has very little aptitude for mechanical things, for example, he would be well advised not to be an auto mechanic. Or, if one has little ability in communication ideas, he would be well advised not to be a teacher or a preacher.

The question must be raised in this respect, however, whether we are doing an effective job here. Do our children and our students really know who they are? Do they know their qualities, their dispositions, their strengths, their weaknesses? As parents do we discuss these fundamental questions with our children? Have we taken the time to assess our children or, at least, to help them to assess themselves? And, as teachers, do we know what skills our students possess? Do we attempt to articulate to our students that we care about their development as persons? Or, are we strictly content oriented in our courses and teach students all of this stuff because we believe that it is "good" for them? I am not denying, now, that it is "good" for these students to know history, biology, English, mathematics, etc., but, what about that student himself? Do we let him or her know what kinds of skills are being taught in this course and, therefore, let the student know precisely what the purpose of the course is so that he may later articulate that to a prospective employer. Let me be a bit more precise. I am not arguing that facts and perspective are not important, they are tremendously important, but I believe we must do more with our students. We must find out what "makes them tick." Do they reason well, are they exceptional in relating to people, do they organize things well, do they handle details well, etc. etc.,? These are the kinds of things that I am encouraging us to help our children and students understand.

The second step in the vocation search would be to identify those occupations/vocations which lend themselves to the particular type of person that our children or students are. Notice

that there is a direct relation between personal qualities and occupations. Thus, if we are to advise, we need to ask ourselves such questions as, "What is a researcher in biology like? What makes a person a good medical doctor? Why should my son or daughter be a veterinarian?" Do we know what vocations lend themselves to the outdoors or indoors type? Let me illustrate. When asked what kind of vocation a student wishes to pursue, one will often get the answer that he or she would like an outdoors—type job. But, you see, there are a lot of things that can be done outdoors. The possibilities range from gravedigger to geologist to farmer. We need to know what the difference is and why one particular person should be a farmer and another a Ph.D. petroleum geologist. Or, what about the person who just announces himself to a prospective employer that he is an English major. What does that really tell us? The English major must know what qualities and skills he possesses so that he can articulate and, perhaps, persuade, a prospective employer that he or she has the qualities necessary to perform a specific job. Further, do we know which vocations require more or less education? Is college training, for example, necessary? The bottom line in all of this is *knowledge*—of our children, of our students, of our courses, of the vocations available.

The next step in the vocational search is the exploration of vocational choices. And the real test for us is going to be whether we have any idea of what opportunities exist? Do we really know what is available, and, if so, do we really know what these people in their various occupations do? Those who wish to be a secretary, do they really know what a secretary does? Or those who wish to be engineers: do they really know what an engineer does and what it takes to be one?

There are several ways to find out. One good way is to have our students do some on site exploration. We need to know what really goes on in these vocations before we can make good decisions and a good way is to observe these people in action. I want to make an aside here. My experience with some of our young people has been that, in many cases, their aspirations are not nearly high enough. Many underestimate their abilities. They are far too content to just "make a living." They need to be encouraged to seek out that vocation which will use *all* their abilities, not just half of them.

Further, I wish to make a point here that I think we have missed an important resource in career exploration. We have for

the most part overlooked our own backyard, we have given relatively little consideration to our own community—the church. The church membership is composed of many diverse vocations. I think it is time we put them to good use in finding careers for our young people.

The final step is the choice itself. But that can be scary. It is extremely hard work, we have found, to do the self-assessment, it could be “fun” to do the exploration part (at least if we are even, in the least bit, curious), but now we come to the hardest part, the decision as to what I ought to set out to do. How do I go about it? The point has been sufficiently made, I think, that there is not going to be any special revelation to help us. God will indeed show the way, but not with thunderbolts and lightning. It will occur in the way of opportunities presenting themselves, situations confronting us, teachers and parents commenting to us and influencing us. But, a point must be made here: we must work at it. Indeed we must pray. And, God will answer. But He will answer through means.

There are many concrete helps. We have mentioned parents and teachers. Those who go to college will probably be assigned an advisor or counselor. There are also pastors and others close to us. All will play an important part. But there are also objective measures—tests that may give us some indications of strengths and weaknesses. As was mentioned above, both ACT and CEEB have produced career assessment and career guidance packages. The high schools should make these available to the students. Book, all sorts of books, have been written about this subject. These too, can be read with profit.

One final thought: no one ought to be allowed to take the dartboard approach to choosing a vocation. It is not wise, nor is it right. One's calling is too important a matter to allow that to happen. Help is possible and should be sought. *Ora et labora* is a phrase often used in many occasions: Pray and work is also applicable in finding one's vocation.

