

Abstract

Vocation as Placemaking: Protestant Theologies of Calling & Environmental Justice

Kiara Jorgenson, St. Olaf College

Discourse on vocation (or calling) threads throughout Protestant ecotheologies. While not a major doctrinal category, theologies of vocation epitomize early Protestant thought as they stem from the 16th-century democratization of calling wherein all were classified as priests. As a kind of theological lynchpin, vocation bridges and links Protestantism's famed bookends of Law and Gospel, making calling both a duty and a gift, something one both does and has. Today popular use of the term vocation nearly exclusively refers to work, as characterized by the monetary value of time and productivity. In some elite contexts vocation has come to mean the opposite, an escape from the banality of work. But vocation must not be cast as either of these; rather as the vibrant space among the myriad roles any person inhabits at a particular time in a particular place. When understood in this light, vocation signals much more than a job, a passion, or a quest for self-discovery.

Unfortunately, Christian concepts of 'ecological vocation' often underscore thin takes on calling, advocating for a posture of environmental stewardship that is adjacent to a person's 9-5. Rarely does deep attention to the integrated nature of one's place and the social relations

born of it inform calling, be it personal or corporate. Yet, within Protestantism seeds germinate for a much more expansive rendering of calling, one uniquely tethered to the particularities of place and centrally concerned with matters of justice.

This paper speaks to the compelling promise of ecotheological readings of vocation and demonstrates how vocation, understood as placemaking, inherently calls for the pursuit of what has come to be known as environmental justice. The paper begins by tracing how and why early Protestant place-based theologies of vocation were reduced to the particular aim of work, work increasingly disconnected to physical place. It then demonstrates how some contemporary thinkers have reclaimed the embodied theologies of early Protestantism to create relevant, contemporary theological concepts of calling. Locating ecological resistance within the church, the paper tells the story of several Protestant bodies who have lived out callings to environmental justice and the critical role they've played in negotiating regional and federal environmental policy. It ends by raising challenges and opportunities for the work ahead in light of declining membership within certain Protestant sects and foreboding projections of our shared planetary future.