

Helping Students Confront Vocation

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I. INTRODUCTION

James Fowler, in his new work — *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* — has provided campus ministers with a timely resource to use with our students as they move through the transition years we lovingly call “college.” It seems rare these days to be with a group of campus ministers and not hear at least a few laments from those who counsel students regularly concerning the priorities and decisions students seem to be making which impact their careers and their futures. Any generalities must be given with caution, but there seems to be a consensus among many campus ministers that students today are not basing more and more crucial life decisions on a sense of personal fulfillment, Christian lifestyle, or service to mankind. Rather, students today seem, in general, to be much more grossly concerned with money and other less altruistic motivations as they approach these decisions. For the past two generations we, as a society, have been actively raising our children to “have it better than we did.” Our children are beginning to take us seriously with this wish and the consequences are beginning to cause campus ministers to sit up and take notice. *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* speaks to this issue and others as Fowler strives to give us a fresh look at human vocation and Christian covenant as they impact adult development.

For the purpose of this article, I will attempt to give a clear and concise record of Fowler’s ideas as they speak to 1) the concept of vocation, 2) students’ needs and the problems they face, and 3) the campus minister’s role in promoting wholeness among students.

I will not attempt to communicate all that can be found in this book which relates to adult and faith development. Readers will find Fowler’s critiques of four current adult development theories to be insightful and on target. However, be forewarned

that while this book, as a whole, is a bit easier reading than his earlier work, *Stages of Faith*, there are still those sections whose reading can be compared with walking through molasses. There's lots of good material to go through; it just takes a little while to make the journey.

II. FOWLER'S CONCEPT OF VOCATION

Generally, when we define the notion of "vocation," Fowler feels we are being terribly short-sighted. One of two images probably comes to mind if I were to ask you to define "vocation." Some would say vocation is your career — that one life-work for which you prepare and then live out your days working toward. Others might hear "vocation" and believe it to be what we as Baptists call "full-time Christian service" — the giving up of oneself to a lifetime of professional ministry.

Long before one attempts to answer the question, "What will I do with my life?", one must first ask more foundational questions. In this section of Fowler's thoughts, I was reminded of a message John Claypool delivered to a BSU Convention in which he told the students, "There are two great moments in every person's life — the day you were born and the day you discovered for what purpose you were born." This is the essence of what Fowler wishes us to grasp when he talks about human vocation. The human calling is available to be discovered by all who are born on this earth regardless of what race, sex, religion, etc. one happens to be born into. All of us have the opportunity to participate in the human calling "which we take to be universal — to undergo and participate in the widening inclusiveness of the circle of those who count as neighbor, from the narrowness of our familial beginnings toward real solidarity with a commonwealth of being. This calling means movement from the limiting love of those who love us and on whom we are dependent, toward the limitless love that comes from genuine identification with the Source and Center of all being" (p. 75). Our call is to become fully and wholly human.

For Fowler, the way to truly become fully all that we were created to be is to discover and participate in the Christian understanding of the human vocation. It is here that the terms "limitless love," "commonwealth of being," and "the Source and Center of all being" come to be most fully understood.

Central to the understanding of Christian faith as it

enlightens and fulfills human vocation is the call of God which is a call to a covenant relationship with God. God forms a partnership in which steadfast faith is promised to all who will become partners with God in bringing about justice and righteousness on earth. God is the one who created and yet is still in the process of creating and happening. We are invited into partnership with this God who creates and who governs with a "structure that intends righteousness in the process of human history" (p. 87).

The partnership with God also calls us to involvement in God's liberative and redemptive actions, which Fowler believes are best understood in the incarnation of Jesus the Christ. Just as God participated in a self-emptying pouring out of self to become Jesus the Christ, so also are we as Christian disciples called upon to a self-emptying pouring out of the self.

Strength becomes the act of giving oneself away. Leadership involves becoming a servant. Wisdom is found not from within oneself but rather it is found by "fixing one's navigational instruments on the purpose and vision of a commonwealth of love" (p. 92).

What is to be our vocation? "Vocation is the response a person makes with his or her total self to the address of God and to the calling of partnership. The shaping of vocation as total response of the self to the address of God involves the orchestration of our leisure, our relationships, our work, our private life, our public life, and of the resources we steward, so as to put it all at the disposal of God's purposes in the services of God and the neighbor" (p. 95).

Truly the call to understand one's human and Christian vocation must take precedence over the myriad of decisions students feel compelled to make during the college years. To find fulfillment as a person, as a parent, as an employee, as a spouse, etc. one must have begun already to understand what Claypool means when he speaks of the second great moment in one's life — when one understands for what purpose he or she was born.

The final two sections of this article are intended to be very practical in their application. A reading of Fowler's book brings to mind numerous problems individuals face as they confront the meaning of human and Christian vocation. I have attempted to select those problems which speak directly to what students

are experiencing. Finally, I will list some practical steps campus ministers can take to help students confront and address these problems.

III. PROBLEMS STUDENTS FACE

1. The first problem college students face which is readily apparent in reading this book as well as *Stages of Faith* is the crisis created by our American educational system. We expect our youth to *begin* making serious career-sensitive decisions by the middle of their high school years. One's college is chosen and on that first registration day we expect a major to be declared. Granted, there is time to change majors as well as career aspirations many times during the college years, but the fact remains that by our educational systems' expectations, we communicate that those who don't have a clear path in sight by their junior year must be either underachievers or misguided idealists. Fowler's work suggests that our system of education may be pressuring students to make career decisions long before they have dealt with the issues of human and Christian vocation.

2. In the absence of more positive models, society's values become the prime models for career decisions. Today society values the appearance of success and wealth, exciting and fast-moving lives, and public notoriety. There is little wonder that we have seen an erosion of the traditional "helping" professions in our society. The definition of a "good or well-lived" life is changing drastically right before our eyes.

3. Students searching for their human and Christian vocation are constantly confronted by societal values which seek to make them feel inferior. Society says, "Be all that you can be." Christian vocation says "The more of yourself you give away, the more fulfilled you will be." Society says "Lead, follow, or get out of the way." Christian vocation says "The true leader is the one who is the servant of all."

4. Today self-actualization is presenting problems to students as never before. It is based on an ancient Greek notion that one should rely on one's inner voice (*daimon*) for personal guidance and direction. The idea of the *daimon* is not harmful in and of itself. Fulfillment is found through faithful attention to the guiding voice of one's personal *daimon*. The problem arises when we examine exactly what this guiding voice is composed of. Self-actualization says that the guiding voice should be indi-

vidual self. You are responsible to no one but yourself. Self-fulfillment is generated by, and is only responsible to, the self.

The Christian view of the human vocation contrasts almost at every point with the notion of self-actualization. From the perspective of Christian vocation, we are called to personhood in relationship and in community. "There is no personal fulfillment that is not part of a communal fulfillment. We find ourselves by giving ourselves. We become larger persons by devoting ourselves to the pursuit of a common good" (p. 102). In the Christian view, the guiding voice is not to be found within one's own self. Rather, it is found in relationship with the living God, as our values become one in the same with God's.

5. Despair is often what characterizes students who attempt time and time again to actualize their vocational ideals yet suffer repeated obstacles and setbacks. The despair is more often than not the result of a student's eagerness to have all the practical questions of life answered before Christian vocation has been adequately explored.

IV. THE CAMPUS MINISTER'S ROLE IN HELPING STUDENTS

1. Read available resources in the area of faith development. They will aid you in understanding where your students are as well as where you and your family members are in these areas. Current pace setters in these fields include James Fowler's *Stages of Faith* as well as the book upon which this article is based, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*; Daniel Levenson's *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, and Scott Walker's *Where the Rivers Flow*. I have not attempted with this writing to compare and contrast all these thinkers and their writings on the subject at hand.

2. There is no doubting the need for a renewed emphasis, on the part of campus ministry, with prophetic preaching and teaching. Fowler shares some suggestions from Walter Brueggemann and his work *The Prophetic Imagination* which states "that prophetic preaching and teaching do not begin with scolding or diatribes. Rather, they begin with inviting people like ourselves — numbed with overstimulation and excessive demands or with defensiveness against our own inner accusations of moral failure — to begin to *feel* again. Prophetic preaching and teaching," he goes on to say, "provide new energy

and the gift of refreshing images by which to steer our lives and to make sense of our callings" (p. 93).

3. We must help students learn the very real distinction between vocation and career. Vocation is not one's job, work, or occupation. Vocation is not one's profession. Vocation is not one's career. "Career *may* be expressive of vocation, but it is not necessarily identical with it" (p. 94). Campus ministers can help students explore for careers which can be reflective of Christian vocation but first we must help them to explore the Christian view of the human vocation.

4. We must help students to learn the positive consequences of understanding their lives in terms of vocation. These include:

a. In vocation we are called to an excellence that is not based upon competition with others. God has called each of us, with our own unique range of gifts, to our own unique vocational adventure. We do not compete with each other. In reality our call is to complement one another's calls.

b. Because God has called each of us to our own unique vocational adventure, we needn't worry about whether someone else will beat us to a particular destiny or achievement we seek to reach. We are called to partnership in God's work with all others who have also been called.

c. We should encourage students to rejoice in the gifts, graces, and resources of others. We are called to orchestrate our gifts collectively in achieving God's purposes. The whole will be much greater than the sum of its individual parts.

d. If students have been freed from jealousy and envy and are able to celebrate the gifts of others, they will also be freed from the sense of having to be all things to all people. Our partnership with God and with others insures that we will all, in community, ultimately be all that we need to be.

e. Students need to learn that vocation is the opposite of workaholicism. We are called to seek a responsible balance in our investments of time and energy. Patterns of faithfulness exist in all areas of our lives.

f. Time is a friend — not an enemy. In the absence of vocation, time is a tyrant. There seems to be less and less of it to be found as our needs for it become more intense. Vocation tells

us that time was not created to serve our needs. Rather, we are called to serve others in the midst of time. Our time on this earth will be different from the time given others. The concern is not how much time is given or how much is accomplished. Instead, the crucial concern is that we approach with integrity the whole of time we are given.

g. We can help students to understand that one's vocation is dynamic. Its focus and pattern, though consistent through all of life, can take many different forms in time. As we orchestrate our lives with others, our life structures will change and evolve over time. Students are so concerned with making long range decisions which tie them and commit them to a single job or way of life for an extended period of time or perhaps for their entire career. To do so is to deny the dynamic nature of the human vocation (pp. 103-105).

5. We must help students to learn that their discovery of personal vocation is better discovered in community than it is individually. Corporate discernment and imagination call out the best from us and demand our integrity to the needs of the community. We are called to help our students with these negotiations as they make proposals and counter-proposals in response to life's experiences and dynamism. Baptist Student Union and the local church, upon which BSU is modeled, potentially can be these kinds of dynamic communities of covenant.

6. Campus ministers can present some role models for vocational fulfillment which contrast with those society presents. Our temptation occasionally is to bring on campus the sports star, the TV or movie star, or the beauty queen who is a Christian. We in essence confuse our students by telling them, "Look, you can know the success of all worlds." We really need to examine what we are subtly inferring to students through our programs. The Christian faith is not always a call to monasticism — but for some it is. It is not a call to worldly wealth — but for some it is; it is not a call to worldly poverty — but for some it is. The Christian faith is a call to be all that God intends us to be as we exist in community with others. We would do well to invite some members of our Christian community who can talk about and communicate to our students that fulfillment is not necessarily equated with glamour and excitement. One of the most alive program speakers I ever heard while serving as

campus minister at Berry College was a gentleman who served bi-vocationally as a pastor and college maintenance man. We should present our students with some genuine alternatives to "fulfillment" as society defines it. The Christian faith must "witness to the faithfulness and power of a providential God who invites, helps to shape, and invests in active partnership with those who genuinely seek to respond to their callings. . . . Christian community needs to offer a spirituality of vocation that can nerve young women and men against panic and seduction, on the one hand, and stand with them in discerning the shape of their callings in light of their gifts, the needs of the world, and structures of opportunity and creativity that confront them, on the other" (p. 144).

7. In surrounding our students with an alternative consciousness, we will be inviting them to dream — often for the first time. The invitations to dream will often take the form of questions in formal and informal counseling situations. Fowler offers the following suggestions: "What seem to be your gifts? What kinds of things do you do well? What kinds of activities and contributions really give you a sense of worthiness? What kinds of things do you find most challenging and fulfilling to do? In what kind of activities do you feel that you are most yourself? What kind of people do you most admire and would you particularly like to count among your associates? Do you feel an inner nudge or call that seems to be pointing you in some particular direction? What kinds of things do you feel that you and God can do with your life that will make a difference for good in our world?" (p. 143).

There can be no greater priority for us as campus ministers than to create the kind of Christian community where students have the freedom to find the God who called them into being, the freedom to explore what God's calling means to each of them, and the freedom to begin exploring and learning, within the community, how to live out that calling. Each one of us must, at some point in life, take a break from our "busy-ness" and get in touch with what it means to be human and to be Christian. For all of us there is a need to discover for what purpose we were born. With God's help our churches and BSUs can become those kinds of communities.