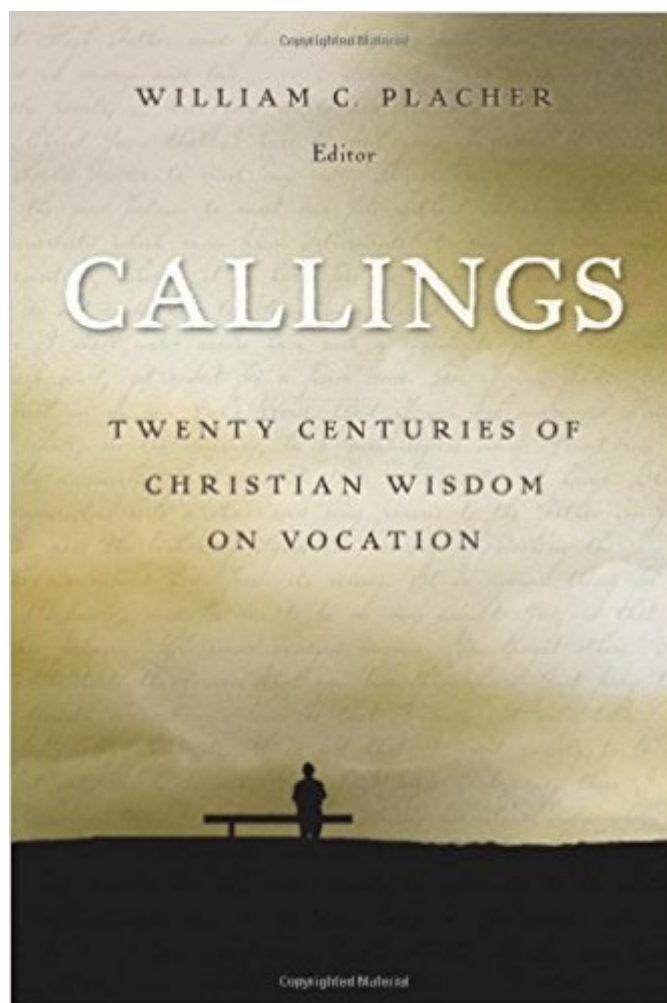


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# Callings: Twenty Centuries Of Christian Wisdom On Vocation



## Synopsis

What am I going to do with my life? is a question that young people commonly face, while many not-so-young people continue to wonder about finding direction and purpose in their lives. Whether such purpose has to do with what job to take, whether to get married, or how to incorporate religious faith into the texture of their lives, Christians down the centuries have believed that God has plans for them. This unprecedented anthology gathers select passages on work and vocation from the greatest writers in Christian history. William Placher has written insightful introductions to accompany the selections • an introduction to each of the four main historical sections and a brief introduction to each reading. While the vocational questions faced by Christians have changed through the centuries, this book demonstrates how the distilled wisdom of these saints, preachers, theologians, and teachers remains relevant to Christians today. This rich resource is to be followed by a companion volume, edited by Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass, featuring texts drawn mainly from fiction, memoir, poetry, and other forms of literature. A study guide is available from Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV) on their website: [www.ptev.org](http://www.ptev.org)

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## Customer Reviews

James E. Carter For those interested in understanding and appreciating the call of God to Christian service, this book is an essential collection of materials covering the full range of Christian history. The introductions to both the sections and the selections are concise but complete. The historical introductions to the four sections are also clear, interesting, and informative.

"What am I going to do with my life?" is a question that young people commonly face, while many not-so-young people continue to wonder about finding direction and purpose in their lives. Whether such purpose has to do with what job to take, whether to get married, or how to incorporate religious faith into the texture of their lives, Christians down the centuries have believed that God has plans for them. This unprecedented anthology gathers select passages on work and vocation from the greatest writers in Christian history. William Placher has written insightful introductions to accompany the selections -- an introduction to each of the four main historical sections and a brief introduction to each reading. While the vocational questions faced by Christians have changed through the centuries, this book demonstrates how the distilled wisdom of these saints, preachers, theologians, and teachers remains relevant to Christians today. This rich resource is to be followed by a companion volume, edited by Mark R. Schwehn and Dorothy C. Bass, featuring texts drawn mainly from fiction, memoir, poetry, and other forms of literature.

This book offers insights about vocation far beyond the usual catch phrases. Filled with excerpts from the writings of a wide variety of people, it stirs the mind and the heart. I would recommend it to anyone interested in changing views of vocation.

As someone who is researching this topic from a social sciences perspective this book was an invaluable compilation of the historical humanities based approaches to making sense of what a calling is and how it operates, particularly from a Christian perspective. Great resource.

Thanks!

Placher has done scholars and readers a tremendous service by compiling this history of philosophical thought about calling. There is no other work of its kind and it is a great gift to anyone who is interested in researching this topic. In addition to history, it is also a great introduction to some important voices of the 20th century such as Dorothy Sayers and Howard Thurman. It is fascinating to see how thinking has evolved and just how enduring the idea has been -- despite some contemporary attempts to dilute it. This book is a classic!

For the past three years, I have taught a class on the theological and practical aspects of understanding one's calling in ministry and in life. In my preparations, I have spent significant time

wading through ancient and modern treatments of the topic of vocation or calling from a Christian perspective. I can say without hesitation that William Placher's *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* is one of the best treatments of the subject of vocation from a solid and balanced theological perspective. Placher, Professor of Humanities at Wabash College, has done an outstanding job in compiling a theological reader of representative historical selections on the understanding of vocation in the first two millennium of Christianity. *Callings* is a part of a larger initiative with the Lilly Endowment's Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV), a network of undergraduate college across the United States examining how to assist students in their understanding of vocation in their lives. A second volume by Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass called *Leading Lives that Matter: What We Should Do and Who We Should Be* (Eerdmans, 2006) is also a part of this initiative. Of course when the Bible speaks of calling, the overwhelming basis is the calling to salvation in Jesus Christ and the calling to sanctification in that faith. It is when the question of "Now what" is posed that the variety of life enters the picture. It is the idea of vocation, of God calling us to something bigger than ourselves, which gives meaning and purpose to life. A thread found in both Placher's introductions and in his selection of the readings is the wide variety of Christian tradition on the topic of vocation. Whether one is called to be a martyr, a monk, a preacher, a career, a parent, or anything else; Christian tradition shows us that all can claim a part of Christianity's understanding of vocation. Placher does an excellent job in introducing his reader to the saints of old and what these men and women of faith were thinking when they considered their personal calling. Some of the accounts in the book, such as "The Martyrdom of Perpetua," are absolutely gripping to even the casual reader. What makes *Callings* so refreshing is that instead of just reading footnotes and very brief excerpts of past and current Christians thinkers, Placher gives his reader over fifty sizable selections of original source material from the likes of Ignatius of Antioch, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Ávila, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, Søren Kierkegaard, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Sayers, Karl Barth, and others. There is no substitute to reading the passion in these various writers first-hand. Placher has made his book accessible for those wanting an introduction to great historical resources on the concept of vocation. Placher frames his work around four key time periods of vocational understanding and development, recognizing the societal changes that influenced vocational thought in each age. With each time period studied in *Callings*, Placher also summarizes the key questions Christian thinkers of that time were pondering. Placher sees the Early Church (100-500 AD) as a time of transition from martyrdom before Constantine to the ascetism of early monastic life, with believers first asking "How public should my faith be?" to later

asking "How do I practice 'self-sacrifice' in my faith?" in a post-Constantine "Christian" world (p. 6, 23). The second period is the Medieval Church (500-1500 AD), with its deeper divide between the "religious" life of the orders (priest, monk, nun, or friar) and the "secular" life of the common people. The question for these believers was what "type" of Christian they wanted to be, where having a vocation was seen almost exclusively as membership in the religious orders. The third period is the Reformation and its repercussions (1500-1800 AD), where the barrier between the "religious" life of the orders and the life of the common people was shattered. Instead of the limited view of vocation in the Middle Ages, Luther and those who followed saw radical understanding of all of life as under the banner of vocation. Since 1800 AD, Placher sees the situation in the Western world as a return in many ways to the conditions faced by the Early Church. Placher sees us in a "post-Christian" world where Christianity is no longer taken for granted and where our neighbor is no longer a fellow believer. And it is also during this time that there appears the lack of a unifying voice on the meaning of vocation or even if the language of vocation should even continue to be used. The combination of original source material and Placher's introductions make *Callings* a very significant bridge in the current conversation on vocation. This book could be used in both the classroom setting and the pastoral study as a valuable resource.

William Placher is a well-known theologian, a good writer and a great teacher, recognised as such by the American Academy of Religion a few years ago. We used the book he edited, 'Essentials of Christian Theology,' last year for the systematic theology class in which I was teaching. This book reminds me of that text somewhat, in that it seems a wonderful resource both for private study and corporate learning. Placher states that this book is intended as a companion book by Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass (another of my favourite authors); both texts 'share [the] conviction that encountering ideas from the past can illuminate our reflection in the present.' Placher arranges this text in a chronological order, going back to the earliest Christian writings, and proceeds to modern times in four broad sections: \* Callings to a Christian Life: Vocations in the Early Church, 100-500\* Called to Religious Life: Vocations in the Middle Ages, 500-1500\* Every Work a Calling: Vocations after the Reformation, 1500-1800\* Christian Callings in a Post-Christian World, 1800-Present Prior to these four sections, however, Placher provides some key biblical texts on calling, which include well-known stories such as the call of Abraham, Moses, Deborah, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Mary, the disciples, Philip with the eunuch, and Paul. These provide source material for many later reflections on vocation and calling throughout Christian history. The names represented in each section are almost all well-known figures from the history of Christianity. Placher provides a brief

introduction for each section to set theological and historical context. In the first section, Tertullian and Athanasius, Augustine and Gregory are highlighted, among others. One key element in this period is that Christians were often not born as Christians - they were converts, and often converting to something less desired (and sometimes actively suppressed) by the general culture and authority. Calling to be a Christian during this time was a life-altering decision in many radical ways, inward and outward. In the second section, which spans half of Christian history, the situation is a bit different. The church, having become the official state religion, was now the expected affiliation. Most people in the Western world (which, despite terminological difficulties, includes the Orthodox East for considerations here) were born and raised into the church. Vocation as an idea here usually meant clerical or monastic life; one did not need by cultural standards a particular call to be a Christian, as this was understood. This does not make this period or the writers on vocation during this time any less valuable or relevant for today. Indeed, some, such as Benedict Nursia, Thomas Aquinas and Thomas a Kempis continue to exert enormous influence in Christian communities today. In the third section, the impulses that drove the Reformation and Counter-Reformation also sparked a new sense of looking at vocation. This is Placher's longest section, and again, the people in this period continue to influence and inspire aspirants in the present day. Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, George Herbert, George Fox, and John Wesley are just some of the key figures of this period. Vocation became a broader ideal, and there were elements of vocation as a Christian, as opposed to vocation being an exclusive province of the religious/ordained ministry, present in everyday life and work. While this is a strong element in Protestant thinking, it also holds true in much Catholic thinking about vocation and calling. This sense of the breadth of the idea of vocation in the Catholic world, nascent in early times, became much more clearly expressed in the post-Vatican II world. An increasing secularisation of society, with separation of church and state commonplace, formalised in many parts of the world and de facto in others, continues to cause many historians and theologians to see this as a post-Christendom or post-Christian world. Once again, the theme of living a calling as Christians in the world resurfaces strongly. Kierkegaard, Newman, Weber, Raucshcenbusch, Thurman, Bonhoeffer, Weil, Sayers, Merton, Day and Barth are some of the contributors to this section. Placher states that 'many Christians today are nervous about defining their job as their vocation or calling.' He writes, 'Jobs can seem not only meaningless but actually destructive of our lives as Christians.' Placher resists the idea of jobs not being vocations (partly because he has discovered his own job as a teacher to have strong elements of vocation about it), but also because the history of Christian thought has shown there to be no single, definitive idea of what vocation is or

should be. (This should be a warning to individuals and institutions that try to insist that their sense of vocation, discernment and attendant processes are the only proper way.) This is a wonderful collection. Placher has a keen eye for selection, showing similarities and differences across the time periods as well as within each age. Diversity has always been an element of Christian life and expression, so why should vocation and discernment be any different? This book is a wonderful companion for those who seek a greater knowledge of what God is calling them to do, a good book for those who want to deepen their spiritual appreciation of God's call in the world, and for students of Christian history to see how this particular element of Christianity is expressed across time.

Our church is studying vocational callings this year in conjunction with our pastor's doctoral program. I decided to read this book not only for that reason, but also the author will be speaking at our nearby college soon. The book has given me an excellent historical perspective on early callings of Christian monastics that I am able to bring to modern life.

this is a classic example of Christians writing a flowery book with massive promises when what they really want is your money. This book was like eighteen dollars. If they care why not sell it for three. Because they are money hungry con men. Sorry for my spelling it has always been bad.

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