

Armitage Response  
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## **Response to 'Setting the Vision: The Calling of the Christian teacher in the Twenty First century World. (Dr. Trevor Cooling)**

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Let me begin by echoing Dr Cooling's thanks to the Headmaster of Shore school, Dr Wright for the invitation to respond to the Fourth Isaac Armitage lecture. I too hope that these brief reflections will be of some help to us all here this evening.

I would also like to thank Dr Cooling for his generous provision of a draft of his paper, which has enabled me to prepare a slightly more ordered response than would certainly have occurred had I not been able to see the paper first. Of course you will make your own judgments about the order or otherwise of these thoughts as they unfold.

I have had a look at the website and the interesting work of the Transforming Lives project as well and note its passion and innovation in the task of encouraging Christians to think about education as a career or vocational choice. I note his concern that there is little understanding of what it means to be an effective holistic Christian teacher in contemporary Britain...one whose professional work is shaped by gospel thinking rather than someone who attends church on Sunday but whose professional work is shaped by the prevailing culture. I take it that this is very much a concern for us all as educators and those interested in education, in whatever context that might be.

A little bit of biography at this point might also help to both frame my comments as well as to point to a potential at least conflict of interest. I was originally trained as a primary school teacher though the early days of the Bachelor of Education course at Sydney University. I taught for 6 years in a Christian parent controlled school where I came into contact with that tradition's particular thinking about education in the name of Christ. I left teaching to study theology for a year with every intention of returning to school teaching but as matters worked out I ended up staying for 4 years, becoming ordained as a clergyman and working in Sydney Diocese as an assistant in Sydney's south west. I was invited back on to the faculty of Moore and have been teaching there for approximately 12 years with a period of time spent overseas pursuing further studies in the midst of that. One of my current extra-curricular activities, so to speak, is to chair the Council of one of the smaller Sydney Anglican School's Corporation Schools.

As I think back over that experience I see echoes of much of what Dr Cooling has been speaking about tonight. The issue of vocation or calling is of interest. The talk of the sacred secular divide I very familiar to me from my parent controlled days though this is of course no guarantee that I am not a victim of it as Dr Bryan Cowling's recent reflections suggest that many are. I now find myself interviewing applicants for full time theological study as well as ordained Anglican ministry and also being vitally interested in a steady supply of well qualified and thoughtful Christian teachers to work in the school for which I have some governance responsibility. I can think of one teacher at our school who I advised three years ago in an interview for Moore that perhaps he should go and teach for some years before making a final decision about some sort of ordained Anglican ministry. He took that advice, has been working in our school brilliantly for the last three years but has resigned and is coming to College next year. I am not sure whether I have won one or lost one at this point. So, as I read Dr Cooling's paper and heard it presented there was clearly much intersection with my own experiences that made it a fascinating presentation.

How to respond? Well let me begin by affirming what I saw as the central thrust or passion of the paper, that is to encourage Christian people to become teachers and to become thoughtful, gospel-shaped, mission-shaped teachers. Who could argue with the importance of this task and its necessity? So my comments will be more by way of questions and dialogue about stations along the way rather than about the shape of the whole project.

Dr Cooling's paper begins with an exposition of the dangers of what he terms the sacred secular divide virus. He objects rightly to the view (albeit held unconsciously?) that there may be areas of life that are not really important to God; and that only religious areas are of any importance. This leads to a restrictive definition of the word ministry as that which is assigned or acknowledged by the church. He rightly points to the double edged danger in of this virus in its effects within the Christian community and definitions and discussion concerning what is 'proper work' and also the perceptive observation that this virus is also useful for world that wishes to keep religion in its place, basically muzzled and restricted to some mythical private sphere.

Dr Cooling's solution or antidote to this virus is to talk about teaching in terms of Christian vocation characterized by a sense of calling and a vision for Christian transformation. It is with respect to these matters, vocation, calling and the vision for transformation that I wish a few questions of my own to prompt our thinking on these matters further.

### **Calling and Vocation**

First the issue of calling and vocation. In the context of some observations from his own experience and that of others Dr Cooling rightly takes us to thinking about the nature of calling and is rightly exploratory in his thinking here describing a primary calling and a secondary calling. The primary calling is to faithfulness to God and reflects the Biblical data at this point. It is observed that the language of calling in the New Testament, some 148 uses of the verb and 11 uses of both the noun and adjective called reflect the fact that it is God who calls such that he can be described simply as the one who calls (Gal 1.6, 5.8; 1 Thess 5.24) and that Christians can be referred to as the ones who have been called (1 Cor 1.23-24; Rom 8.28; Jude 1). God calls by the gospel (2 Thess 2.14) and calls his people to a variety of things: 1 Peter 2.9: called from darkness of ignorance into the light of the knowledge of God and forgiveness; 1 Thess 2.12: called to live in God's kingdom; 1 Cor 1.9: called into the fellowship of those who belong to Christ Jesus; 1 Thess 4.7: called to a life that displays the character of the one who has called us. Now I am assuming that none of this is new or surprising. God calls us to himself and all that this involves: in Dr Cooling's terms faithfulness to himself.

It is interesting to note, however, that the New Testament, except for Paul's references to himself as being called as an apostle, does not use the language of calling with respect to vocation. My point here is that I am not sure what is gained by re-introducing the term 'calling', even carefully or in the qualified sense of a 'secondary calling'. This may sound a little picky but as Dr Cooling has pointed out words do carry baggage with them and the effects can be serious as his illustration points out and no doubt many of us have either personal testimony or friends who have come to grief on the shoals of a 'call' that did not work out for one reason or another. The use of vocation is more satisfactory, but why not job, employment, even simply work in the Lord, divorced from the language of, even, secondary call?

### **Fit and Fulfillment**

My second question is with respect to the criteria offered for establishing one's vocation or secondary calling in life: fit and fulfillment. First of all there is clearly much sense in the concept of 'fit', there is no point putting square pegs in round holes and so on. The question is sensibly posed is 'has the way that God made me equipped me to flourish and serve in teaching? The follow up question is of course how will I know? How does one determine the proper 'fit' for teaching? There is a fascinating quiz that has been developed on the Transforming Lives website to this end. I also found this other slightly more tongue in cheek version:

You Might Be a Schoolteacher if...

- | . you have no time for a life from February to December.
  - | . you want to slap the next person who says, "Must be nice to work from 8 to 3 and have your summers free!"
  - | . when out in public you feel the urge to talk to strange children and correct their behavior.
  - | . you refer to adults as "boys and girls."
  - | . you encourage your spouse by telling them they are a "good helper."
  - | . you've ever had your profession slammed by someone who would never dream of doing your job.
  - | . meeting a child's parents instantly answers the question, "Why is this kid like this?"
  - | . you believe "extremely annoying" should have its own box on the report card.
  - | . you know hundred good reasons for being late.
- you don't want children of your own because there isn't a name you can hear that wouldn't elevate your blood pressure.

The challenge towards the end of the section is to do this better and rightly, though perhaps understated, is the responsibility of the community to recognize aptitudes and giftings and encourage service of the Lord in a variety of capacities.

I find the category of fulfillment to be more problematic. I am suggesting here that this idea especially seems to be conceding a little too much to ideas of self actualization and self fulfillment which may be a benefit of work in general but do form part of a much bigger picture of work and its place in God's world. Perhaps they form a part of that 'me-at-the-centre' culture spoken about towards the paper's end. When one looks at some of the reasons offered in the New Testament for work, they include the reason that one is not to be an unnecessary burden on others (2 Thess 3.7-8 [Paul]; cf 1 Thess 4.11,12) the provision of support and sustenance for others (Ephesians 4.28); especially one's family and relatives (1 Tim 5.3-4). Work might be seen in the broader context of doing good to all people (Gal 6.9-10). In other words there is an outward focus to work and its exercise. There may well be work done for a time, even a lifetime due to circumstances, opportunity or lack of it that is unfulfilling and tedious. The paper speaks to a certain extent out of the comparative luxury of choice afforded Western and middle class existence; that is maybe where many/most are but we need to acknowledge this. This is not to suggest that one should accept one's station in life but to praise God for the freedom of choice that we have by his good providence; freedom which was a fairly remote possibility for the slave in the particular NT context in which this advice is found (1 Cor 7.17-20). But also to recognize that as part of the discernment process is acknowledging there is a wider story of work that means at times, even often, it will be anything but fulfilling.

Let me expand on this briefly. In the third section eschatology is brought in and this is fine and we will return to this shortly but let me simply say here that there is a perspective from creation as well. Work is dominion and due to sin, toil. It is frustrating and apparently futile from the

perspective of the writer of Ecclesiastes. Praise God that Jesus exercises perfect dominion by toiling to death, completing the work that his Father gave us to do.

Having observed this, I do resonate with many of the concerns/implications that Dr Cooling derives from his analysis. Though again I want to broaden the discussion and question the 'professions' emphasis in the discussion. He is right to question the comparative amount of time invested into identifying and developing candidates for ordained ministry (but there may be very good pragmatic reasons for this) and right to ask for similar with respect to teachers, doctors, business people, journalists; can we add garbage men, used car salesman, hairdressers, without any implied slur or prejudice to those occupations? I believe that Luther's illustration was the ploughboy, but may be mistaken here, perhaps that was who he hoped would be discussing justification by faith?

Dr Cooling is right in that the responsibility is a corporate one (congregation and school community) for helping Christian people to decide in what sphere they might usefully find paid employment in the context of their calling to be a child of God. Dr Cooling correctly speaks of the difficulty of discernment both initially and deciding when to persevere under difficulty though as I have mentioned I suspect that we might need a wider framework than fit and fulfillment within which to conduct this discussion.

### **Vocation as Christian Transformation**

The second important discussion that is conducted in this paper concerns the nature of vocation as Christian transformation. Here it is suggested that work becomes a vocation when we see it as a means for contributing to the transformation of society in ways that build the kingdom of God. I have a couple of questions/comments here.

First I am a little confused as to whether this comment applies to Christian vocations or work more generally. Some kinds of work are clearly ruled out as Christian vocations due to their nature. Fair enough. But the question of teaching seems to me to move in a greyer area in this paper. 'I have taken to saying to teachers that their work is important because it has 'eternal consequences'. This statement is immediately differentiated from a narrow interpretation that would see this seen in the narrow terms of evangelism. The concept of building for God's kingdom encompasses a whole range of activities that promote human flourishing, things that will last into the future, things that leave an indelible imprint on student's personalities. But does this apply to all teaching or only to Christian teaching and in asking the question have I reinstated a new sacred secular divide?

We know that every good gift comes from above and that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ. The spirit brings all things to fulfillment in the Lord Jesus such that any knowledge of the truth about the world, any good deed done in it or any beautiful things achieved is a gift from God through the son and by the Spirit.

The skills and experiences acquired by a person in terms of learning about the world and imparting that learning to other people are perfected/fulfilled when used in confession of Christ for that is the goal of any creaturely life but in conjunction with the above, they do not need to be exercised in confession in order to be effective. Yet are they all contributions to kingdom building or is that reserved only for Christians teaching?

I guess that that at this point I am worrying at the placement of work, vocation in an eschatological context solely. We are urged early on in the paper to find a way of formally

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recognizing the work of teachers if we are to really affirm their role in kingdom building. But why the particular accent on kingdom building?

To reiterate my earlier point: from the perspective of creation there is good work to be done on the basis of work being part and parcel of our humanity under God to exercise dominion, to do good to others and so on. I realize that a paper cannot say everything and that there may be a far more nuanced position but I wonder if the attempt to shore up the significance of Christian work by pointing to its longevity runs the risk of pandering to a more worldly pursuit of creating something that lasts (of/by oneself) rather than again a God-centred and other person-centred perspective of vocation. This may be over-stating I realize but I want to emphasise that there is a fundamental goodness or rightness about the activity of teaching regardless of the eschatological perspective. Teachers and the knowledge, truth, beauty and so on they explore and impart are all part of God's good gift to his creation.

This is of course not to deny the central importance of the kingdom of God in this discussion.

### **Kingdom Building**

But my second comment/question concerns this question of the kingdom. I feel that I would like to hear more about the definition of the kingdom assumed in the paper especially when speaking of building for the kingdom. In *Surprised by Hope* Tom Wright does speak at some length about the importance of definitions of the kingdom. 'What is the kingdom?' and 'how is it being built?' are key questions.

At the heart of Bishop Wright's understanding is the declaration that Jesus is Lord. And this is of course true and a salutary reminder to us as we live in a world full of alternative Lords, not the least of which, of course, is ourselves.

But we also need to say I think that this is the Lord who announced his kingdom with the call to repent and believe, who conceived of his mission as the suffering servant who did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many, as the one who interpreted his own death, the seminal moment at which the kingdom is inaugurated, as a sacrifice for sin. This is the kingdom that is announced in the proclamation of the Gospel that Jesus is Lord, who has died and been raised so that sins might be forgiven.

We need to remind Christian teachers, lawyers, plumbers, hairdressers, church workers and used car salesman that this is a kingdom to be proclaimed and lived, lived and proclaimed. Doing good to others, to transform their well being through one's work, is part and parcel of Christian service and responsibility to show love for one's neighbour and is not the preserve of any one class or vocational group of Christian people. Similarly, the role of proclamation is not the preserve alone of any 'professional ministry' but the privilege of all of God's children, whoever and wherever they are. Perhaps it is worth further pondering the thought that the ultimate act of teaching is the one by which the Spirit mediates the word such that a person receives saving knowledge. The role of proclamation is an essential, more accurately, the essential strategy for building the kingdom. This is a point that, I feel, is occasionally lost in talk of kingdom building.

Finally I appreciate the call to cast one's thinking and acting within the context of the Christian world-view so as to act in a distinctively Christian fashion. The final call to offer targeted support and training in being a Christian teacher in a religiously diverse world is surely correct. The complexity of the issues raised in Dr Cooling's paper and (perhaps) this response is surely

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an argument for the ongoing support and encouragement of teachers in thinking Christianly and the AEC is to be commended amongst others for offering this support.

The same consideration applies to the suggestion for vocational training and discernment in our schools with respect to our students: in our Christian schools at least this ought to be conducted in the wider story of God's purposes for work from the perspective of both creation and the new creation. There is a responsibility to help people to understand the implications of the Gospel for work, for service and love of the other. Understanding that at the centre of his purposes for the new creation is the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Understanding that in his service is perfect freedom, if not fulfillment.

May our students and teachers alike in these matters be thoroughly equipped to ask the question 'am I being faithful?' or perhaps better, 'what does the Lord Jesus deserve?'