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Cover Page Footnote

1 See Genesis 11 New Revised Standard Version, "Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." 2 Much of the Christian world has embraced what Darrell Guder has called "soteriological reductionism" which restricts salvation to individual blessedness. Guder says, "The individualism of such a reductionist soteriology has only intensified in the self-centered and consumerist culture of present-day North America" (Guder, 2015, p. 68). Vocational formation embraces a holistic understanding of salvation which has real consequences in the material world unlike the neo gnostic tendencies of much of Western Christianity.

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Vocational Formation, Belonging and Christian Higher Education

Vocational formation is a relatively neoteric concept which seems to have garnered a plurality of interpretation. The vocational understanding of work was popularized by theologian and monk, Martin Luther, in the sixteenth century who critiqued the monastic reduction of vocation to a distinct sort of religious occupation or life. Luther, and many others after him, saw vocation as an invitation to participate in God's activity in the world. Terence E. Fretheim says, "God's approach to creation is communal, relational, and, in the wake of God's initiating activity, God works from within the world rather than on the world from without" (Fretheim, 2010, p. 18). Vocational formation is a critical theological concept that considers the consequences of one's calling within a dynamic understanding of God's preferred and promised future for creation. While vocational formation certainly has Edenic characteristics, it's important to clearly distinguish a robust theology of work from the static framework of preservation that shows up in protological theologies which often deny the dynamic nature of Spirit led eschatological continuity. An anticipatory experience of God's new creation through our work undergirds my understanding of vocational formation. Vocational formation, then, is responding to God's invitation to participate in the healing of creation from a particular social context, with others, for the sake of the world.

The unmistakable eschatological mode of vocational formation makes this concept an excellent starting point for a conversation around institutional belonging, especially within Christian higher education. In this short essay, I hope to reflect on how

the theological posture of vocational formation nurtures what Barbra Holmes has called "a sense of centered belonging" (Holmes, 2017, p. xxii). I will discuss three enduring characteristics of vocational formation, namely missional eschatology, radical hospitality, and missional theosis. My aim is to review and evaluate what various authors have said on these matters while assessing why these themes should be embraced as a pathway to enhance a sense of institutional belonging in Christian higher education. My goal is to explore the intersections of these broad concepts without considering particular modes of implementation. Specific instances of utilization are needed but are beyond the scope of this paper. These expansive characteristics of vocational formation should be viewed as a viable bridge towards belonging since they vehemently oppose the harmful expression of pedagogical evaluation funded by unhealthy inferences of rigid standardization.

Standardization and Pedagogical Evaluation

Standardization is an imperial impulse which diminishes, suppresses, and often denigrates differences. The most harmful expressions of pedagogical evaluation are akin to the primary objectives of the Immigration Act of 1924 which, based on the uncontested embrace of eugenics, argued that "the ways to preserve the best aspects of the human race in the United States was by limiting nonwhite immigration" (Goudeau, 2020, p. 97). Miroslav Volf traces this suppression of differences back to the Biblical narrative around the tower of Babel. Genesis chapter eleven marks a pivotal theological postulation. The architects in the Babel story are preoccupied by complex aspirations of becoming great. Their aim is to build "a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens" (Genesis 11:4b New Revised Standard Version) and in doing so hope to make a name for themselves. Make no mistake here, the building of the tower of Babel is an imperial

endeavor funded by humanist sensibilities coupled with fear. The fear that seems to grip the hearts of these builders is a decentralized scattering[1] which would undermine the unrelenting homogeneity that was at the center of their efforts. Dr. Willie Jennings suggests that theological education in the West "continues to baptize homogeneity, making it holy and right and efficient – when it is none of these things" (Willie James Jennings, 2020, p. 6).

When I say homogeneity, I'm referring to the ubiquitous, uncompromising expectation of unvaried monotony in thought, practice, and cultural expression. The undying resolve that uniformity is the ultimate indication of academic success and grandeur. The aggrandization of homogeneity in Western education is the outworking of the modern turn to the autonomous subject. Charles Taylor refers to this as the bounded "buffered self" giving "its own autonomous order to its life" (Taylor, 2018, p. 38). Within this framework a social atomization occurs, giving the autonomous subject the ability to distance from and objectify the rest of the world. Objectivism is often embraced within academia as the widest accepted epistemological mode. The objectivist posture often hinders the pursuit of intercultural engagement by reducing differences and diminishing one's capacity to discern how their social context, worldview, unique situatedness, and particularity contributes to how we perceive God's invitation. Parker Palmer has wisely said,

> If we regard truth as something handed down from authorities on high, the classroom will look like a dictatorship. If we regard truth as a fiction determined by personal whim, the classroom will look like anarchy. If we regard truth as emerging from a complex process of mutual inquiry, the classroom will look like

[1] See Genesis 11 New Revised Standard Version, "Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

> a resourceful and interdependent community. (Palmer & Scribner, 2017, pp. 51–52)

Objectivism in theology is a response to the European Enlightenment where the scientific method was established as the best of all possible protocols for the discovery of truth. Albert C. Outler acknowledges the distaste for the Christian heritage within the Enlightenment and discerns one central focus and ideal, "the autonomous human being" (Mcginn et al., 2000, p. 249). Outler rightly observes, "The Enlightenment's main concern was the liberation of human beings of all sorts from involuntary dependence on external and arbitrary authority" (Mcginn et al., 2000, p. 249). Consequently, valuable communal expressions of interdependence were violently eradicated in the pursuit of liberation from harmful, autocratic expressions of governance. Theologians felt pressured to formulate a systematic method with the hope of becoming intellectually accepted by the Enlightenment society. The result was "a nontraditional and distinctively secularizing spirituality" (Mcginn et al., 2000, p. 250) which was ultimately funded by a new eudaemonism. Science and technology became a new resource for achieving autonomy. Outler says, "In all fields of inquiry and praxis, from astronomy to medicine, autonomous humanity could look to science and invention as the chief agencies of progress" (Mcginn et al., 2000, p. 250)

This individualist way of being presents a reality in which the world exists solely to be "appropriated by humans for human use" as Jurgen Moltmann has said (Jürgen Moltmann, 2001, p. 29). Moltman contends, "If the immediate self-consciences is constitutive for the space of all possible experience, then narcissism is the logical and practical consequence of this anthropocentric view of the world" (Jürgen Moltmann,

2001, p. 29). This point is not to absolutely discredit the scientific method but a call to faithfully distinguish when, where and how we use such an approach.

Seventeenth century English philosopher and physician, John Locke, arguing for individual rights, limited government, and the social contract as key elements of political power, claimed that God has given us the world as our possession (Locke, 1690, p. 33). Locke introduced an interpretation of work that was deeply funded by the pursuit of self-possession and private property. For Locke, whose ideals reflected the individualist philosophies that accompanied the Enlightenment, any person who labored could extend their self-possession to possession of land. Locke wrote, “So that God, by commanding to subdue, gave authority so far to appropriate: and the condition of human life, which requires labor and materials to work on, necessarily introduces private possessions” (Locke, 1690, p. 33). Thus, with the Enlightenment came a definition of personhood that was marked by, as Dr. Willie Jennings has said, “Self-sufficiency defined by possession, control, and mastery” (Willie James Jennings, 2020, p. 6). Jennings calls this the fragment of commodification. He says that the colonialists who came to the new worlds, “in an act of creation as powerful as God’s turned the world into commodities” (Willie James Jennings, 2020, p. 41). Jennings makes the chilling observation that, “a whole world could be possessed, because everything could be stolen.” Jennings continues, “This fragmentation gave birth to a new focus-to see the planet as knowable and saleable at the same time. The history of modern colonialism made knowing a thing and owning a thing two sides of the same coin” (Willie James Jennings, 2020, p. 41).

The unmitigated modern embrace of the turn to the autonomous subject coupled with a self-sufficient humanism made it possible to view all of creation as our possession.

As commodities that enter our realities only to serve our biases, predilections, and self-interests. Our work or labor, in this paradigm, was not viewed as an opportunity to discern the work of healing and reconciliation in our broken world, it had become a determinative tool to possess, mitigate, and safeguard one's autonomy. Human work became an occasion to expand one's territory and influence instead of being embraced as a responsibility to care for all of creation.

Education, then, became a way in which we assimilate others into this harmful way of thinking. Evaluative pedagogy, in this iteration, focused on how students can become "anticipations of an echo" (Willie James Jennings, 2011, p. 110), reduced to noncombative objects who only exist to affirm and validate a singular lived assumption from a particular view of the world. Jennings asserts, "Echoing in and of itself is not the problem. All education rightly carries an element of echoing back. The problem here is the absence of a reciprocity of echoing that speaks of life aimed at the together" (Willie James Jennings, 2011, p. 111). This sort of one-way echoing is often built into the evaluative systems in higher education. Jennings writes, "Colonialist educational assimilation turned education into an imperialist endeavor, forcing a way of life that would reduce ways of life" (Willie James Jennings, 2011, p. 110). Howard Thurman has called this "a strategic loss of self-respect" (Thurman, 1996, p. 39). Here, we are constrained to diminish the most authentic, God-given, expressions of our identity to accommodate the emergence of the self who will best appease common social, or for the sake of this paper, academic, interest. This points to a deep internal dichotomy, what W.E.B. Du Bois has called a "double consciousness" (W E B Du Bois, 1903, p. 2) a desire to successfully matriculate through the educational system even at the risk of

losing one's cultural, social and God given identity. This distorted form of one-sided assimilation betrays the heart of a liberal arts education which exists to "help students to understand new perspectives as building upon, rather than destroying, the values we bring" (Johnson, 2023). Plurality of thought should not be experienced as an imminent threat since, "an education that exposes people to a different way of knowing only enriches one's learning" (Johnson, 2023).

Parker Palmer writes, "As long as we inhabit a universe made homogeneous by our refusal to admit others, we can maintain the illusion that we possess the truth about ourselves and the world—after all, there is no 'other' to challenge us!" (Palmer & Scribner, 2017, p. 38). Vocational formation resists these pernicious impulses by insisting upon a posture of radical hospitality towards God, self, and others. Parker says, "As soon as we admit pluralism, we are forced to admit that our is not the only standpoint, the only experience, the only way, and the truths we have built our lives on begin to feel fragile" (Palmer & Scribner, 2017, p. 38). Throughout the rest of this essay, I will begin to demonstrate how the framework which undergirds my theological understanding of vocational formation innately nurtures institutional belonging in Christian higher education.

Missional Eschatology

The first obvious characteristic of vocational formation is the anticipatory experience of God's new creation. An eschatological reading of Scripture gives us a radical vision for what Lesslie Newbigin calls, "a new social order" (Lesslie Newbigin, 1991, p. 90). I'm referring to the proclamation and presence of God's universal kingship over the entire cosmos. God's preferred and promised future is a picture of healing that

aims to restore cultural, systemic, socio economic, physical, emotional, and spiritual brokenness. This concept of new creation is accompanied by a soteriological vision of wholeness, wellness, reconciliation, and redemption for the entire world. Theologian Howard Snyder writes, “The gospel is about healing the disease of sin-and the healing of all creation through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. Sin is the disease, salvation is the cure” (Snyder & Scandrett, 2011, p. 65). Vocational formation brings hope of a future consummation of this communal expression of healing along with an anticipated experience of this future right now. Vocational formation, then, is a soteriological endeavor since it is concerned with the healing of creation.[2]

The eschatological framework which funds this concept of vocational formation is met by a missional theology that understands the Holy Spirit to be at work in the world bringing the intention of healing and redemption to fruition. Darrell Guder calls this, “The eschatological shaping of the gospel of salvation” (Guder, 2015, p. 68). Guder calls this a “sense of radical and transforming anticipation, of living hope that profoundly shapes the ‘now’” (Guder, 2015, p. 68). Vocational formation, then, views God as the host who graciously invites human beings to participate in God’s mission of healing and reconciliation. Those who lovingly accept God’s summons into this transformative work do so as invited quests, not as entitled conquerors. The emphasis on a rhythm of call and response inside a theology of work invites us to show up as learners, those who are deeply committed to the work of discernment.

[2] Much of the Christian world has embraced what Darrell Guder has called “soteriological reductionism” which restricts salvation to individual blessedness. Guder says, “The individualism of such a reductionist soteriology has only intensified in the self-centered and consumerist culture of present-day North America” (Guder, 2015, p. 68). Vocational formation embraces a holistic understanding of salvation which has real consequences in the material world unlike the neo gnostic tendencies of much of Western Christianity.

This posture of learning is an integral component of vocational formation. Spiritual formation is primarily concerned with the ways in which we are being formed into the image of Christ. Formation, then, is a phenomenon that is beyond human control. Robert Muhulland rightly asserts, “The difference between forming ourselves and being formed is the vital issue of control” (Mulholland & Barton, 2016, p. 32). Mulholland adds, “Being formed goes totally against the ingrained objectification perspective of culture. Graspers powerfully resist being grasped by God. Manipulators strongly reject being shaped by God. Controllers are inherently incapable of yielding control to God” (Mulholland & Barton, 2016, p. 33). Spiritual formation is often a painful reversal, “from being the subject who controls all other things to being a person who is shaped by the presence, purpose and power of God in all things” (Mulholland & Barton, 2016, p. 33). This way of being in the world undermines the colonialist and imperial sensibilities that has influenced our educational systems. And yet, A.J. Conyers argues that this abnegation of control is the essence of liberal arts learning since it “centers upon the work to be done in the leaner, not by the learner” (Conyers, 2003, p. 124).

Vocational formation insists that the Holy Spirit is the great initiator. James V. Brownson et al point out that “in the kingdom of God, the initiative always belongs to God” (Brownson, et al, 2003, p. 41). Understanding God as progenitor helps our imagination to become fully shaped by, what James Smith calls, “a persistent openness to surprise” (Smith, 2010, p. 39). It also helps us to resist “the powerful and deep human impulse to bind God to human agendas” (Allen, 2018, p. 73). Radical openness to divine surprise invokes a deep sense of humility and dependence on God beyond human agency and initiative which vitiates the ennoblement of American Exceptionalism and self-

sufficient humanism. Incorporating vocational formation into the classroom, then, disarms our proclivities towards control, mastery, and possession, and allows each person, including the teacher, to imagine their environment as a birthing room for kingdom possibility. Since God's promised and preferred future is absent of tyranny, autocratic control and harmful ideological expressions of possession, Christian higher education can become a place where we discern how our work, work environments, and classrooms might be a sign, instrument, and foretaste of God's coming kingdom. In vocational formation, the teacher imagines this possibility along with the student as co-learner, not over the student as their superior.

Prophetic Artistry

Walter Brueggemann has shaped much of my thinking around an eschatological community. Brueggemann says, "The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us" (Brueggemann & Hankins, 2018, p. 3). Brueggemann suggests the prophetic ministry not only imagines an alternative consciousness but also aggressively renounces and discredits the dominant consciousness. Vocational formation, for this reason, is a prophetic ministry because it engages in a "rejection and delegitimizing of the present ordering of things" (Brueggemann & Hankins, 2018, p. 3). For some this will feel like an excursion in fanciful idealism, like the distant grandeur of an all too allusive reality. Yet, Brueggemann convincingly argues that the role of the prophet is to imagine alternatives that might feel outlandish or even eccentric. Brueggeman posits,

> We need to ask not whether it is realistic or practical or viable but whether it is imaginable. We need to ask if our consciousness and imagination have been so

> assaulted and co-opted by the royal consciousness that we have been robbed of the courage or power to think an alternative thought. (Brueggemann & Hankins, 2018, p. 39)

I am aware of the complexities of belonging in various institutional environments. Belonging requires humility and patience; it requires grace and persistent hospitality. The scope of this paper, however, is not to prescribe the journey but to insist that the journey is first and foremost imaginable and worth our time and effort. Brueggemann says, “the prophet does not ask if the future can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined” (Brueggemann & Hankins, 2018, p. 40). Vocational formation is about the healing of our imagination, which requires art, poetry, imagery, videography, and photography. The prophetic commitment to artistry is such a large part of vocational formation because the artist always “engages in futuring fantasy” (Brueggemann & Hankins, 2018, p. 40).

Much could be said about the need to imagine an alternative reality given the harmful demands of much of the Western economy. The harmful insistence on productivity coupled with the overt neglect of soul care has become a breeding ground for burn-out and weariness that is not indicative of a Spirit-filled, God centered life. Our belief, in much of the Western world, concerning our work seems to have been co-opted by the same ideologies that produce economic distrust. Vocational formation reminds us that as followers of *The Way*, we live with a radically alternative set of assumptions about our work, and our primary responsibility is to perform an alternative reality in our places of work, family, and communities. A reality that embraces the notion that we can all experience profound belonging.

Eschatological Community

I first discovered the beauty of prophetic imagination long before I heard the name Walter Brueggemann. This concept was introduced to me in the small Pentecostal church I grew up in just outside of Detroit, Michigan. I understand why James Cone has referred to the Historical Black Church as an "eschatological community that lives as if the end time is already at hand" (Cone, 1978, p. 140). There I witnessed, firsthand, the power of community when its collective imagination is shaped by the sacred ritualized practice of storytelling. Cone, speaking of a spiritual experience similar to my own, says, "This eschatological revolution is not so much a cosmic change as it is a change in the people's identity, wherein they are no longer named by the world but named by the Spirit of Jesus" (Cone, 1978, p. 140). When the people in my community gathered, they believed that God would "bestow upon them a new vision of their future humanity" (Cone, 1978, p. 140). This statement is referring to the life and vocation of the church, but I see this posture as necessary in the pursuit of belonging in any instiution.

Jürgen Moltmann describes this well in his timeless piece, *Theology of Hope*. He writes, "With its face towards the expected new situation, it leaves the existing situation behind and seeks for opportunities of bringing history into ever better correspondence to the promised future" (Jürgen Moltmann, 2021, p. 330). The posture of vocational formation carries with it a present responsiveness towards the future in which it hopes. This is why healing was a central theme in the church where I was raised. Miroslav Volf notes, "healings are not merely symbols of God's future rule, but are anticipatory realizations of God's present rule" (Volf, 2001, p. 104). Physical healing provides "tangible testimony to the materiality of salvation" (Volf, 2001, p. 104) and ultimately

demonstrates "God's desire to bring integrity to the whole human being, including the body, and to the whole of injured reality" (Volf, 2001, p. 104).

Radical Hospitality

Vocational formation is presupposed by a communal expression of hospitality that is informed by a desire for intimacy and not control. There are far too many expressions of hospitality that function as a safeguarding of one's biases. We often enter spaces envisioning ourselves as the host, as the one who bears the responsibility to maintain, moderate, and stabilize the environment we find ourselves a part of. As the assumed host we extend hospitality, but on our terms, in accordance with our vision for favorable outcomes. Isabel Wilkerson, on a trip to India, noticed this perfunctory social ordering in one space where she visited. She called this universal response to hierarchy "a visible expectation of centrality" (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 31). The universal outworking of this assumption is the consequences of the totalitarianism displayed throughout much of the European pursuit of colonial domination. In his book, *Christian Imagination*, Willie Jennings says, "it is as though Christianity, wherever it went in the modern colonies, inverted its sense of hospitality" (Willie James Jennings, 2011, p. 8). Jennings continues, "It claimed to be the host, the owner of the spaces it entered, and demanded native peoples enter its cultural logics, its ways of being in the world, and its conceptualities" (Willie James Jennings, 2011, p. 8). Vocational formation resists the instinct to own the spaces we are a part of. Vocational formation appreciated the ways in which the other enriches and expands our sense of calling.

Trinitarian Hospitality

The framework which funds the persistent presence of radical hospitality in vocational formation is a robust trinitarian theology. Clark Pinnock writes, “God exists in a dynamic of love, economy of giving and receiving” (Pinnock, 2016, p. 30). When did homogeneity become a Godly virtue? According to Clark Pinnock, plurality, throughout history, as it relates to God, has always been a place of theological tension. One major exception was Richard of St. Victor, who emphasized love as “most characteristic of the divine nature” (Pinnock, 2016, p. 33). He came to the awareness that “if God is love everlastingly, this implies a circulation of love in the social context of the Trinity and the understanding of God as loving society” (Pinnock, 2016, p. 33). This, of course, should not be misunderstood as some distorted perception of tritheism. As Pinnock denotes, “There is one God, eternal, uncreated, incomprehensible, and there is no other. But God’s nature is internally complex and consists of a fellowship of three” (Pinnock, 2016, p. 35). He finally concludes, “It is the essence of God’s nature to be relational. This is primordial in God and defines who God is. God is triadic community, not a single, undifferentiated unity” (Pinnock, 2016, p. 35). Augustine, according to Pinnock, created a difficult path for theologians to travel when he “proposed a psychological analogy of the Trinity which could not handle relationality in God” (Pinnock, 2016, p. 33). Pinnock says, “He thought of God as a single mind and the Persons as aspects of it” (Pinnock, 2016, p. 33). This is the analogy that would suggest, for example, that I am one individual but live differently within the various relationships in my life. With that assumption, I could say that I am a husband, a father, and a brother and all three are a single expression of one person. Augustine would argue something very similar while reflecting on the Trinity. It must be said, though, that God should not be reduced to psychological analogies in order to

capture God's elusive and perplexing mystery. Pinnock believes the difficulty with this analogy is that it stemmed from "extrabiblical speculation" (Pinnock, 2016, p. 33). He earnestly persists, "Theology always gets into trouble when its practitioners think they know what God is like apart from what revelation says God is like" (Pinnock, 2016, p. 33).

Our theology can often become a reduction of modalism or even Unitarianism when we use these sorts of analogies. I most certainly understand the impulse to use various metaphors to draw some correlation that will help people understand a mysterious God, but great care should be given to such concepts, ensuring our supposition about God is not protrusive. The Western obsession with monotony has distorted our appreciation for variety and has caused many to fail in acknowledging diversity even within the Godhead.

The manner in which the Godhead functions invalidates the common Western understanding of personhood. Much of our culture have unapologetically accepted the Cartesian axiom, "I think, therefore I am" which views the autonomous subject's individuality as the defining marker of their humanity. A thoughtful trinitarian theology signifies relationality. The idea of personhood which emerged from modernity indicates complete autonomy and independence. Pinnock, in contrast, suggests, "person should rather be defined as that which enters into relationships and does not exist apart from them. The key to its meaning is intersubjectivity along with community and reciprocity" (Pinnock, 2016, p. 36). In vocational formation, relationship is the necessary prerequisite to discerning one's calling. Jürgen Moltmann writes, "we see with the eyes of other

people. We experience ourselves in the experience of other people" (Jürgen Moltmann, 2001, p. 24).

Hospitality and Public Interpretation

It is my belief that vocational formation insists upon what Dwight Zscheile has called "the interpretive dimensions of leadership" (Zscheile, 2014, p. 125). Zscheile says, "Interpretive leadership entails cultivating intentional spaces for practices of listening, storytelling, and peer learning" (Zscheile, 2014, p. 125). Zscheile observes, "It means inviting people across differences together into common spaces of deliberation and inquiry for the sake of discerning who we are in God, where we are in our context, and where God is calling us to go" (Zscheile, 2014, p. 125). Vocational formation is concerned with the condition of the spaces for ongoing communal discernment. The leader, in this paradigm, is not the sole proprietor of God's vision. The leader takes on the responsibility of creating the right conditions for communal discernment; the task is hospitality. Dr. Mark Love says, "Those who are making the interpretations available to all much know the ways people understand their experience" (Love, 2023, p.162). According to Love, "The first move of theological leadership, therefore, is listening" (Love, 2023, p.162).

Theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen describes theology as "an act of hospitality, giving and receiving gifts" (Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, 2016, p. 4). He suggests that theology is "robustly inclusivistic in its orientation" an inviting and dialogical practice which "honors the otherness of the Other" (Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, 2016, p. 4). Vocational formation affirms the theological responsibility to expand our perspective by entering the cultural realities of others. Kärkkäinen, reflecting on the African expression

of communalism, writes that community and participation are “key features of those cultures” (Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, 2007, p. 352). Okechukwu Ogbonnaya, educating his audience on the ways community existed in Africa long before a communitarian Divinity was introduced says, “My belief in African community was formed-long before I heard the word ‘theology’- by a communal experience of belonging among my people and various African peoples” (A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya, 1994, p. vii). In response to such a transcending idea of community, Kärkkäinen writes, “An outsider may gain the impression that the African ethos is so communal that the individuality of the person is negated” (Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, 2007, p. 353). Kärkkäinen assures that this is not the case since “the community among Africans has the capacity of holding together the individual and the community” (Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, 2007, p. 353).

This experience of communalism may feel hostile towards our Western notions of individuality and exclusive humanism, and it is necessary to embrace this tension. I am inviting us to imagine the possibility of genuine belonging in Christian higher education. To reiterate, vocational formation views community as necessary to discerning one’s sense of calling. Engaging any field of study through a vocational lens enriches a student and instructor’s sense of belonging. They belong to God, to one another and to the world, and it is the passion, grief, joy, sorrow, and other emotions that one experiences in the presence of the Other that ignites their imagination for how they might participate in God’s activity in the world.

Missional Theosis

The last component of vocational formation that I will address in this paper is a concept known as missional theosis. Theosis is a term used in Eastern Christian theology

to describe a soteriological vision of participation in the life of God. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen notes, "While true participation, the charge of pantheism is avoided by the distinction between God's essence and energies" (Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, 2012, p. 33). Kärkkäinen asserts that theosis "means partaking in the very energies of the Spirit even though the finite human being can never be part of God's essence" (Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, 2012, p. 33). Clark Pinnock rightly observes that much of our Protestant Christian understanding of salvation places an emphasis on "the sinner's change of status, from guilty to not guilty, rather than on personal union with God" (Pinnock, 2016, p. 149).

Theosis refers to the Holy Spirit leading us into a transforming relational union with the triune God. Theosis speaks to a Divine invitation towards communal intimacy. The Gospel According to John uses the word "abide" to describe a sort of mutual dwelling in God. The biggest quandary many have with a robust spirituality of abiding is its seemingly self-centered and isolated posture that is often devoid of any serious ethical endeavor. These claims are not unfounded since many of our "spiritual" endeavors today, especially a spirituality that is coopted by a society which values an expressive individualism and self-sufficient humanism, seem uninterested in exploring the communal, relational, and missional consequences of our spirituality. Spirituality, in this iteration, becomes an isolated pursuit that caters to and enables one's anthropocentric proclivities. This posture both ignores and undermines the natural rhythms of missional participation that flow out of a life that is deeply connected to God.

Missional theosis, as Michael Gorman calls it, places a high emphasis and priority on union with God that is often the result of intentional spiritual formation practices. It

also, however, places a proportionate insistence on the outworking of this intimate union in community. David Rensberger rightly observes, “Abiding implies persistence, but not stasis” (Painter et al., 2002, pp. 173–188). Gorman calls this a “robust theology and spirituality of abiding in Jesus, not as a private and vacuous mysticism, not even as a sectarian love-feast, but as communal mysticism that is, paradoxically, this-worldly and missional” (Gorman, 2018, p. 102). Elsewhere, Gorman calls this “a theopolitical reality” (Gorman, 2009, p. 172) where we embody and actualize our justification in the world, a sort of participatory justification.

The Civil Rights Movement comes to mind when thinking about missional theosis. Lewis Baldwin, reflecting on the prayer tradition of the African American people suggests that this spiritual movement “never separated intellectual ability, moral responsibility, and social praxis from deep personal spirituality and piety” (Baldwin, 2010, p. 5). Much of the Civil Rights Movement was simply the missional expression of a beautiful and profound spirituality. One could even locate the character of missional theosis at the foundation of the Pentecostal movement known as the Azusa Street Revival which was founded by an African American preacher named William Seymour. Azusa, as it is affectionately called, was known for its Pentecostal like exuberance and demonstrative form. At the core of the revival, though, was the ingrained hope, amidst great racial divide, for an alternative Christian community. Richard Foster writes, “The miracle Seymour had been seeking happened,” that is, “by the power of the Spirit, a revolutionary new type of Christian community was born” (Foster, 2001, p. 117). Seymour believed the manifestation of the Spirit at Azusa Street would have significant immediate implications for “interracial reconciliation and community” (Foster, 2001, p.

120). For Seymour the primacy and expression of God's divine love was the "evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit" not speaking in an unknown tongue.

For many years, those present in the Azusa Street Revival and Civil Rights Movement lived out their vocation in response to deep communion with God. In both instances radical transformation occurred in the lives of the individuals and in their respective communities. Union with God, for them, had imminent and far-reaching consequences for their constructed social realities. Many, as of late, have pondered which programs should be enlisted or which preparations should be made to facilitate diverse community and belonging. I believe that the emphasis on missional theosis inside of vocational formation forms a viable pathway to belonging in any institution since it relies completely on Holy Spirit initiated personal and communal transformation. Belonging, then, ceases from being a project supported only by humanist sensibilities and becomes the by-product of a Spirit-led, eschatological community that aims to participate in God's expected end.

Conclusion

Dr. Mark Love, in his compelling book, *It Seemed Good to the Holy Spirit and to Us*, suggests that we currently occupy a "new missional era" which has decentered the social position of many Christian projects. He says, "the days of 'if you build it they will come' are largely behind us" (Love, 2023, p. 13). The challenge before us, according to Love, is not technical, "Our hope is not in programs or techniques, but in the living God" (Love, 2023, p. 14). Love is proposing a Spirit ecclesiology and is not expressly referencing Christian higher education institutions. I do believe, though, that there is equivocality to his proposal, his assumptions matter to more than the church. Belonging

in Christian higher education requires more than well thought out programs and technique, it requires a community that is committed to discern what the Holy Spirit is up to and then dependent on the Holy Spirit to participate in the life of God for the sake of the world.

Vocational formation is not a program or technique, it is primarily a posture. It is a way of being in the world that resists Pharoah's economy while envisioning a new social order. Vocational formation is about being formed in the presence of God and others, which is always a practice of relinquishing control and power. Vocational formation "replaces our fantasies of power over people with God's fantasy for desire for people" (Willie James Jennings, 2017, p. 29). It is about realizing a robust missional spirituality which sanctifies and mobilizes our influence as a sign, foretaste, and instrument of the Kingdom of God. Vocational formation inherently resists toxic expressions of autonomy and deeply values the otherness of that which is other. It is my belief that vocational formation as an institutional posture organically encourages and incites deep, profound expressions of belonging. This reality, in many cases, feels distant and unsure; but this way of being is imaginable. That is the first step living now as if the end has already begun.

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