

Let's start with the basics: vocation and calling. These two words mean the same thing. Calling comes from a Greek word, *kaleo*, and vocation comes from a Latin root *vox*, meaning voice. Each was intended by Protestant Reformers to point to *an entire life lived in response to the voice, or call, of God*.

Clear enough. But there are two confusing parts: one secular, one religious. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, when American culture began to secularize, vocation became divorced from reference to God, and vocation became synonymous with work, particularly manual labor and the rise of "vocational education." So for most people today, vocation and work mean the same thing. But this isn't necessarily true for Christians, who see these ideas as overlapping, but distinct.

The second confusion: inside of Christianity, generally there are two meanings behind ideas of vocation or calling. The first order usage is the "call" to love God and love your neighbor. This is the highest calling and is common to all people in all places. The second is specific: God's call to specific people to do specific tasks at specific times. This is generally where we use the word in relation to work, though not exclusively.

Clear as mud. But let's at least agree, that vocation and calling is the biggest category, and encompasses the entire life of the Christian, whether that be **career, family, hobbies, or friends**. Each of these activities belong to God, and should be done for him and with him.

So, then, what is a **career**? For most, it's your life work, or the aggregate of all or your jobs or occupations. This is why I chose it as an umbrella category.

However, people see their careers very differently. Some see their life's work as series of **jobs** or **occupations** (which, I think are the same thing). Both jobs and occupations are a set of tasks I do for money.

Others, see their career as a **profession**. This word has a rich heritage. A profession can be seen as a community of people who *profess* and uphold a set of moral standards that hold together their industry. Generally, we think about doctors, lawyers, or business professionals here. But the point of this word is about disinterested service to others, not just personal gain.

Fair enough. In today's economy, where people change jobs on average every four years, it may be tough to describe what your career is. But most do their work as either an occupation or job, or a profession.

Great. Then what on earth does the word **work** mean? Well, that depends on who's asking! I think there are three basic options:

1. Work = Job = \$. The question "Where do you work?" means for most "What is your job?" Who pays your bills? This is the probably most common view.

2. Work as defined by Christian faith. Two examples are definitions from Dorothy Sayers and John Stott.

Dorothy Sayers says, “[Work] should be the full expression of the worker’s faculties, the thing in which he finds spiritual, mental and bodily satisfaction, and the medium in which he offers himself to God.”

Now, John Stott says this: “Work is the expenditure of energy (manual or mental or both) in the service of others, which brings fulfillment to the worker, benefit to the community, and glory to God.”

What’s interesting about both of these definitions of how influenced they are by the Protestant vision of vocation or calling. Work may be what you get paid for. But the emphasis is on service of others, fulfilling our role as co-creators, and giving the credit to God. This is what I call “the heavenly view of work.”

3. Work = Non-rest, Any task. Here, work is basically everything you’re doing, or any task you define as work, as long as you’re not sleeping. (Even watching TV could be work if your job is a TV critic.)

I think this definition is too broad, and makes life about work, rather than about God. Work is not just a job, but neither is it everything! When Joseph Pieper says that Leisure is the Basis of Culture (he’s wrong of course – work is!), he’s responding to this totalizing view of work, which was nearly salvific in Marxism. But that’s beside the point here...

So, of course, I **opt** for definition #2, which means work could be paid or not paid. The vocation-infused definition of work is where we ought to aim.

The challenge is, of course, The Fall. For most people, work sometimes seems divine, but more often is toil. Work is hammering away in the factor or at the task list, and just something I need to do for money. Occasionally it’s a profession, but in an age “beyond good and evil,” agreeing on the moral codes guiding, say, law or health care, can be tricky business – and is often hotly contested.

So, work is caught between Genesis 1 and Genesis 3, with echoes of heaven but often laced with the pain of hell. Sometimes job, sometimes calling, **always work**. The key is to draw even the “jobs”, with all of their pain, into a sense of vocation. The magic isn’t in an ideal career, job or profession – the magic is in our motivation.

So, work, profession, job, vocation, occupation, career or calling? Well, that depends if it’s raining, and which umbrella you choose to pull out for the day.