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Cody Warren

I love tax season. Maybe most people dread that time of year when they add up their wages and other income, subtract deductions and personal exemptions, take advantage of tax credits, and—well—the list goes on. Maybe most people

find taxes burdensome, confusing, and just plain annoying. But, I LOVE THEM. So while others are rejoicing that April 15 has finally come and gone, I am mourning.

I remember with great fondness the first time I filed my 1040-EZ. I telefiled—no longer an option. As soon as I received all the required documents, I sharpened my pencil, completed the forms, pulled my chair up to the phone, entered the numbers, and like magic, the computerized voice confirmed my initial calculations—I would be receiving a refund. What joy! I was getting money from the government! Today, I am much wiser and understand more of the intricacies of the IRC (or Internal Revenue Code, for non-tax-junkies), but the power of a refund is still magical for those who live in poverty.

My fascination with the tax code deepened when I volunteered with AccountAbility Minnesota, a non-profit organization that prepares tax returns for low-income individuals at no cost. I was amazed at the impact a simple tax return could have on a family. Many of the people I assisted received a refund of almost a third of their annual income. They desperately needed this money to pay for housing, health care, and food. It was like manna from heaven—by way of the Earned Income Tax Credit. This experience made me want to learn more so that I could continue to assist others.

But, at the same time, this new interest plunged me into personal crisis. You see, I am an eternal planner. I make to-do lists. I construct timetables. I develop hypothetical budgets (fully researching ALL the variables, of course). I always seem to find myself with one foot in the future. During my first semester at Augsburg I encountered the v-word—vocation. As you can imagine, this concept only intensified my planning efforts. Not only was I planning my academic program and my social life, I was planning my VOCATION, too. But I was sure that would be no problem because when I started college, I was 110% sure that I knew my call—to be a pastor.

So, fast forward to AccountAbility Minnesota and enter panic mode for Cody Warren. Could it be? Could my vocation

actually change? Was I really called to be a pastor? Or maybe a tax accountant? I was lost, confused, and disheartened. Luckily, I discovered the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and now I am saved. I am exaggerating a little.

For the past year I have been reading, analyzing, and practically breathing Bonhoeffer. Through my research I have come to appreciate the broader, more dynamic understanding of vocation that Bonhoeffer speaks about in his manuscripts. He sees vocation as one's place of responsibility in the world. As Christians, we have a responsibility to serve our earthly roles, such as career and family. But we also have an ethical responsibility to serve our neighbor and take up the cross of Christ. When, liberated by grace, we bring these responsibilities together, we find our vocation. In other words, Bonhoeffer sees God as relational **and** this-worldly. The transcendent is found not in some other world, but in **this** world. Not only do we find the neighbor in vocation, but we also find God. Our vocations may be dynamic, forever changing, and continually shaped by the call of Christ to serve because nothing in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is Jesus Christ.

For me, these insights were life-changing. Not only would I be able to fulfill my purpose if I were a tax accountant, but my vocation could change many more times in my life. My original understanding of vocation was too limited—it did not take into account the dynamic nature of faith or vocation. Maybe one day I will be a pastor, or a professor, or even a dad. Vocation is not about creating Excel spreadsheets, it is about faith.

This deeper search for meaning that led me to study Bonhoeffer began when I participated in the Lilly Scholar seminar, a project of Augsburg's Lilly grant program that is facilitated by Professor Mark Tranvik of the Religion Department. Each year, a group of ten students who have an interest in exploring ministry attend monthly meetings to discuss current affairs, theology, and vocation. Little did I know that these gatherings would often be the highlight my month. I looked forward to the rigorous debate on various theological ideas and thinkers—from Bonhoeffer to Luther, Augustine to Aquinas, Barth to Day, and more. We read their original works as well as critiques by others, and we reflected deeply on the practical implications in our lives and the broader societal implications.

To be honest, I am not sure I would have dived into Bonhoeffer if it had not been for the Lilly Scholars program and the prompting of my professors. It was their encouragement

and the safe environment of the group of Scholars that allowed me to contemplate ideas and engage in dialogue with others. It became more and more clear to me that theology cannot exist in a vacuum. Instead, theology must be explored in the public sphere through conversations between people with different backgrounds and unique viewpoints. And the same is true for vocation. My discussions with my fellow Scholars made me realize that they struggled as much as I did to understand their life purpose. As I changed and developed as a college student, my understanding of my calling also expanded and developed with me. If the world around us is constantly changing, we must have faith that our vocations may also change, take different directions, and impact others and us in ways that we may have never

imagined. As a Lilly Scholar I realized that vocation is an act of faith and that I should hold fast to my faith.

As I acknowledge my love of tax and wave my nerd flag, I also throw myself completely into the arms of God, knowing that through faith, my vocation is in the here and now, not two steps into the future and not solely expressed in one form. So, with great joy, I proclaim: Here I am, Lord.

—Cody Warren graduated from Augsburg College in May 2009 with a double major in religion and public accounting and a minor in business administration. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in business taxation at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management.

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