

## The static imagery of vocation

Dr. Hermen Kroesbergen  
postdoctoral fellow University of Pretoria (South Africa)  
lecturer Justo Mwale University (Zambia)  
P.O. Box 310199  
15301, Lusaka  
Zambia

### *Abstract*

This article deals with the question whether it is a problem to use a static imagery of vocation. Four relatively recent systematic theological monographs by Volf, Badcock, Schuurman and Hahnenberg on the topic of vocation criticize the idea that God in heaven has a blueprint for every individual life. This static imagery is assumed to be too uniform, too passive and too conservative to suit the modern way of life. It will be shown, however, that these consequences do not necessarily follow. A static imagery of vocation may be applied in a pluralist, active, transformative world; and the proposed alternative of a dynamic imagery of gifts may lead to uniform, passive and conservative living. Therefore, theologians should distinguish between a picture and how it is used. In the final paragraph it will be argued that the imagery of vocation does not need to be salvaged from its static nature, since, the more static features our concept of vocation has, the more dynamic its use may be.

### *Zusammenfassung*

Dieser Artikel handelt um der Frage, ob es ein Problem gibt, wenn man statische Vorstellungen für Berufung verwendet. Vier relativ neue systematische theologische Monographien zum Thema Berufung kritisieren die Idee, dass Gott im Himmel eine Blaupause für jedes einzelne Leben hätte. Volf, Badcock, Schuurman und Hahnenberg identifizieren drei Probleme mit dieser statischen Vorstellung: es wäre zu uniform, zu passiv und zu konservativ, um die moderne Welt zu entsprechen. Aber, ich zeige dass statische Vorstellungen für Berufung in einer pluralistischen, aktive, transformative Weise angewandt werden können; andererseits, alternative dynamische Vorstellungen können uniform, passive und konservativ gebraucht werden. Daher sollten Theologen unterscheiden zwischen den Vorstellungen, und wie diese genutzt werden. Im letzten Absatz wird argumentiert, dass gerade die Verwendung statischen Vorstellungen sehr dynamisch sein kann.

In recent years a number of theologians have been critical of a particular kind of imagery of vocation. If someone desperately looks for her vocation, is she looking for what God has already planned for her? If someone finally discovers his true calling, is he discovering something that God had in store for him all along? Does God in heaven have a blueprint of every individual life, or is that imagery of vocation too static? Leaving aside the popular, self-help type of books on vocation, I will focus on the critique found in a four relatively recent systematic theological monographs on the topic. Of course the books that I will address here, all have their own emphases and backgrounds – which I will mention when relevant – however, with respect to the question what the problem is about the concept of vocation their approaches are remarkably similar. First, I

will identify what aspect it is criticized. Second, I will elaborate why theologians have deemed this aspect to be problematic. Third, I will investigate whether this aspect really has the problematic implications that these theologians suggest. And, having answered this question in the negative, fourth, I will suggest how this side of the imagery of vocation can be interpreted differently.

## I. A static imagery of vocation

The recent critique of vocation started with Miroslav Volf in 1991. Volf is a Protestant from Croatia, currently serving as professor of theology at Yale Divinity School. In 1991 he published his groundbreaking study *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*. In this book Volf states that it is "clear to me that the dead hand of 'vocation' needed to be lifted from the Christian idea of work. It is both inapplicable to modern societies and theologically inadequate."<sup>1</sup> He argues that "The vocational understanding of work was developed [...] on the basis of a static theological concept of *vocatio*. Modern societies, however, are dynamic [*italics in original*]."<sup>2</sup> The imagery of vocation as God having a blueprint of individual lives, is seen as not fitting our current world, it is "too static (it sees a person as having only one lifelong calling), it is inapplicable to modern mobile, dynamic societies."<sup>3</sup>

Volf argues for a shift "from the vocational understanding of work developed within the framework of the doctrine of creation to a pneumatological one developed within the framework of the doctrine of the last things."<sup>4</sup> He builds upon Paul's "very dynamic concept, *charisma* [*italics in original*]."<sup>5</sup> Talking about God in heaven having prepared a blueprint for every individual life, is static, he argues, compared to talking about charisma's as gifts from God. The latter leaves it to every individual to do with these gifts as they consider right. Volf states that there is only a "general calling to enter the kingdom of God" and that the accompanying "calling to live in accordance with the kingdom branches out in the multiple gifts of the Spirit to each individual."<sup>6</sup> The imagery of charisma's is presented as a less static alternative compared to the imagery of God having planned every detail of our lives in advance.

Volf's critique of a static imagery of vocation is developed further by Gary D. Badcock, a lecturer in Dogmatic Theology at the University of

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1 Miroslav VOLF, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), vii.

2 VOLF (see above, n. 1), vii.

3 VOLF (see above, n. 1), 190.

4 VOLF (see above, n. 1), ix.

5 VOLF (see above, n. 1), viii.

6 VOLF (see above, n. 1), 113.

Edinburgh, Scotland, who, in 1998, wrote *The Way of Life: A Theology of Christian Vocation*. Unlike Volf, he wants to maintain the concept of vocation, but, following Volf, he regards imagery of vocation as the "belief that God had a plan for each life, a plan that a given individual might miss if he or she was not attentive to God's call and obedient to his voice," as "extremely unhelpful."<sup>7</sup> He describes his childhood belief concerning vocation "It was as if I were waiting for a bus, or a 'streetcar named vocation,' " and presents his study on vocation as a way to get rid of that way of speaking about vocation.<sup>8</sup> Badcock proposes to look for other, more dynamic ways to talk about vocation. Badcock argues that God does not have "a tailor-made will for each individual," but, rather, "the fundamental structure of the Christian calling is the same in each case: the call is to the love of God, and because God is love, to the love of one's neighbor."<sup>9</sup> Believers should speak of vocation as general contours, leaving room for change, surprise, and individual freedom and initiative. This kind of space is not available in the static imagery of God with a blueprint of individual lives in heaven that, according to Badcock, Volf justly criticizes.

In 2004 Volf's criticism of this particular imagery of vocation is also endorsed by Douglas J. Schuurman, a professor of religion at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, USA, writing *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life*. Schuurman observes a widespread critique of the concept of vocation: "Critics argue that the doctrine of vocation promotes conservative conformity to the coercive powers of this evil age and selfish constrictions of Christian love. Protestant vocation thus contributes to the loss of genuine Christian witness and discipleship. [...] these criticisms are numerous, serious, and trenchant."<sup>10</sup> Schuurman agrees with this critique, but, like Badcock, he wants to adapt the way people speak about vocation, rather than give it up altogether. Schuurman contrasts God's vocation with God's commands: God may give specific commands, but "the Christian tradition throughout the ages has associated vocation with gifts, and used it to refer aspects of Christian existence that are in some sense 'optional.' "<sup>11</sup> To provide an alternative, Schuurman has started "the process of rearticulation of vocation."<sup>12</sup>

Schuurman regards it as the most important misconception today's Christians have "that God has a rigid, highly detailed blueprint for each life."<sup>13</sup> According to Schuurman: "Vocation's relation to particularity ought not be seen

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7 Gary D. BADCOCK, *The Way of Life: A Theology of Christian Vocation* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 141.

8 BADCOCK (see above, n. 7), 141.

9 BADCOCK (see above, n. 7), 81 & 123.

10 Douglas J. SCHUURMAN, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 87.

11 SCHUURMAN (see above, n. 10), 46.

12 SCHUURMAN (see above, n. 10), 180.

13 SCHUURMAN (see above, n. 10), 125.

in terms of an inflexible 'blueprint' in which God predetermines every detail of life, such that we 'miss our calling' by failing to find the *right* spouse or the *right* career [italics in original]."<sup>14</sup> The blueprint model is inflexible and static, and should be replaced by a more dynamic imagery of vocation "in the realm of Christian freedom," according to Schuurman.<sup>15</sup> Instead of a particular, specific call for everyone, Schuurman speaks, in a similar vein as Volf and Badcock, about "the general call of God in Christ," which then afterwards "is to take specific form in one's life."<sup>16</sup>

In 2010, from a Roman Catholic point of view, Edward P. Hahnenberg, lecturing at Xavier University in Ohio, USA, published *Awakening Vocation: A Theology of Christian Call*. Just like Volf, Badcock and Schuurman, Hahnenberg wants to free us from the "mistaken view [...] that assumes God prepares a detailed blueprint for every individual life ahead of time – assigning our vocations without ever consulting us."<sup>17</sup> Hahnenberg holds that "vocation as a detailed blueprint [...] might obscure the freedom of the individual."<sup>18</sup> He argues that "God's call – my vocation – cannot be reduced to some static state of life or secret voice," rather, it is God's "invitation to the fullness of life."<sup>19</sup> Vocation should be seen as an open invitation, rather than a detailed blueprint.

If God in heaven has a detailed blueprint of every individual life, then the course of our lives is determined already, and there is no room for change or flexibility, for consultation or freedom. This imagery of vocation is inflexible and static. Volf proposes to give up talking about vocation altogether; Badcock, Schuurman and Hahnenberg recommend to change the imagery which people use while maintaining the concept of vocation.

It is undeniable that the blueprint-imagery of vocation is static, especially compared to the alternatives that these theologians propose, such as talking about charisma's, a general call setting out only general contours, and an open invitation. If someone desperately looks for her vocation, and she is looking for what God has already planned for her, then she is looking for something which is there, given, statically. If someone finally discovers his true calling, and, doing so, is discovering something that God had in store for him all along, then he discovers something basic and unchanging in how God has created him. This imagery of vocation is static, but why is this seen as so problematic? What is really at stake here?

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14 SCHUURMAN (see above, n. 10), 46.

15 SCHUURMAN (see above, n. 10), 126.

16 SCHUURMAN (see above, n. 10), 47.

17 Edward P. HAHNENBERG, *Awakening Vocation: A Theology of Christian Call* (Collegeville, Mi.: Liturgical, 2010), xvi.

18 HAHNENBERG (see above, n. 17), 126.

19 HAHNENBERG (see above, n. 17), 230.

## II. Too uniform, passive and conservative

Why is it wrong if the imagery of vocation is static? In the critique of Volf, Badcock, Schuurman and Hahnenberg three problems can be identified.

### *Too uniform*

The theologians who point out the static nature of the imagery of vocation of God having a blueprint of every individual life, are worried that this imagery does not fit the plurality present in our current society. Volf argues that it does not fit the diachronic and synchronic plurality of employments and jobs of people nowadays.<sup>20</sup> Nowadays people do different jobs, both during their lives and at any given moment. Work in our society is not singular and uniform. Volf contrasts this with work in the time of Martin Luther, a major pioneer in applying the concept of vocation to everybody's lives, arguing: "Luther's understanding of external vocation corresponds necessarily to the singleness and permanence of spiritual calling," and, "strictly speaking, one may take work to be *vocatio* only if one assumes that a Christian should have just one employment or job [*italics in original*]."<sup>21</sup> The alternative imagery of charisma's allows, so argues Volf, for our current plurality in employments.

Badcock agrees that the static imagery of vocation is "totally foreign to modern culture."<sup>22</sup> In contrast, Badcock sets out "to develop an alternative vision, one that allows a certain freedom to the creature before God to make its own choices and way, but one within which the general contours of living uprightly and seeking the good of the neighbor are given by God."<sup>23</sup> Badcock describes other Christian paths that he himself could have taken in his life, and asks: "Which of the three paths 'ought' I to have taken? There is no clear answer to such a question," since each "was *equally* open to me [*italics in original*]."<sup>24</sup> Concerning a friend who claims that God called him to be a fireman, Badcock describes how he finds himself "unable to agree with his claim that God called him to be a *fireman*. [...] It would be more accurate [...] to speak of the calling that his work as a fireman allowed him to fulfill: to show love, to do good."<sup>25</sup> God has not prepared a specific, singular, uniform route for each individual, but He has just set out the general direction. God's vocation for us should include room for our human responses, and should therefore not be too specific and

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20 VOLF (see above, n. 1), 107–109.

21 VOLF (see above, n. 1), 108–109.

22 BADCOCK (see above, n. 7), 44.

23 BADCOCK (see above, n. 7), 106.

24 BADCOCK (see above, n. 7), 139.

25 BADCOCK (see above, n. 7), 106.

uniform, as the static imagery of vocation is, according to Volf, Badcock and the other theologians under discussion.

### *Too passive*

Related to this is the second problem that these theologians identify: if God has a blueprint already, this seems to make the individual passive. In a static imagery of vocation believers are simply following God's plans in dutiful obedience. In the alternative, dynamic images, people make their own choices. People are not just passively following a uniform duty imposed upon them, but they try to responsibly make the right decisions in line with God's general call, participating in bringing about the new creation. As Volf puts it: "the sense of duty gives way to the sense of inspiration."<sup>26</sup>

Badcock adds: "Whatever the heavenly blueprint may contain, the decision whether to do the shopping in the morning or in the afternoon is unlikely to be among its features. Perhaps, then, we ought to say the same of the decision between becoming a mechanic and becoming a postal worker."<sup>27</sup> The picture that God has prepared a blueprint for every individual, and he or she just needs to follow it, according to Badcock, leaves out all human response, and, Badcock argues, "any denial of a human response in theology does violence to the whole point of God's own saving work as understood in the Christian faith," since for reconciliation two sides need to be active.<sup>28</sup>

Schuurman describes a student who breaks off his relationship based on what God told him. He suspects that this student was deceiving himself by the concept of vocation: "In my view there was a good chance that this student was using the idea of calling to evade his responsibility."<sup>29</sup> The student assumed that God had a completely prepared plan for him, which simply did not include marrying this girl. However, instead of presupposing that God had a complete plan prepared for him, the student should "think honestly and accurately about themselves and their opportunities," says Schuurman.<sup>30</sup> And elsewhere: "A person's gifts form one important indicator of directions in which God may be calling that person."<sup>31</sup> Instead of just praying to God and expecting Him to tell him what to do, the student should have contemplated on his own gifts, his limitations and fears, taking full responsibility for his decision.

Schuurman adds that this concept of vocation may fail to do justice to God's sovereignty and power. Schuurman relates this to the story of Joseph noticing that "God's providence can triumph over the evil actions of Joseph's

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26 VOLF (see above, n. 1), 125.

27 BADCOCK (see above, n. 7), 9.

28 BADCOCK (see above, n. 7), 30.

29 SCHUURMAN (see above, n. 10), 126.

30 SCHUURMAN (see above, n. 10), 125.

31 SCHUURMAN (see above, n. 10), 144.

brothers to save the world from a famine."<sup>32</sup> God does not need passive human beings, since He can improvise. The static imagery of vocation is not biblical, according to Schuurman: "The New Testament pattern is much more relaxed about specifics than the blueprint view suggests."<sup>33</sup> The Bible presupposes more active role for human beings, which is ignored when it is assumed that God has a detailed vocation prepared for everyone.

### *Too conservative*

Thirdly, the vocational theology is often developed within the doctrine of creation – protological, Volf calls it – with a focus on preserving that what God has created. The static imagery of vocation is assumed to make it impossible to be surprised, or for something really new to happen, since everything was already there in the blueprint that God drafted up in heaven. The alternative theology of charisma's which is developed by Volf, is developed within an eschatological framework, not focused on conserving the present order of things, but rather on a transformation of the world towards the realization of God's kingdom.

Hahnenberg does not want to give up the imagery of vocation, but follows Rahner here, "who places the discovery of one's vocation within an eschatological context."<sup>34</sup> In the Protestant tradition vocation is conforming to the given social order, in the Roman Catholic tradition vocation is buried deep in someone's soul, but, according to Hahnenberg: "God's plan is neither so secret nor so obvious. Somewhere in between we find God drawing us toward the meaning of our lives."<sup>35</sup> Hahnenberg holds: "The conversion called for at this present moment is the transformation that comes through an openness to the interruption of 'the other.' "<sup>36</sup> People should open themselves for God who calls them through others for others.

In Hahnenberg's view, instead of speaking of vocation as "the place *from which* we respond [italics in original]," people should speak of it as "the place *to which* God calls [italics in original]."<sup>37</sup> Vocation as already prepared by God in advance, from creation onwards, invites searching within the given – someone's inner self or someone's creational circumstances. It misses the focus on the future, the new better world for everyone. The static imagery of vocation restricts vocation to conservation of the given. This conservative aspect is what makes it problematic, according to the theologians discussed above.

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32 SCHUURMAN (see above, n. 10), 46.

33 SCHUURMAN (see above, n. 10), 126.

34 HAHNENBERG (see above, n. 17), 152.

35 HAHNENBERG (see above, n. 17), 122.

36 HAHNENBERG (see above, n. 17), 191.

37 HAHNENBERG (see above, n. 17), 231.

Volf, Badcock, Schuurman and Hahnenberg criticize the idea of vocation as God having a specific plan for every individual. The static character of this imagery of vocation is seen as too uniform. There is not one path, but God in his vocation offers us different paths, different possibilities for us to choose from. It is seen as leaving individual believers too passive. God has given people gifts, but they should responsibly make their own choices in using those. And, thirdly, the static imagery of vocation is supposed to be too conservative. Viewing vocation as already given in either creation or the self, is problematic in that it fails to allow for interruptions by others, for something really surprising and new to happen. The problem with the static imagery of vocation, according to Volf, Badcock, Schuurman and Hahnenberg, is that it makes vocation uniform, passive and conservative, instead of plural, active and transformative.

### III. Evaluation

Is a static imagery of vocation really problematic? In this paragraph I will look at each of the three problems that the theologians above identified, and compare it to their the supposed more dynamic alternative.

#### *Too uniform?*

Volf traces the idea that God has prepared one, uniform track in life for every individual back to Martin Luther. Luther sees a close connection between the spiritual calling to be a follower of Christ, and the external, practical calling of the job in which someone is a Christian. Volf concludes: "Luther's understanding of external vocation corresponds necessarily to the singleness and permanence of spiritual calling. As there is one irrevocable spiritual calling, so there must be one irrevocable external calling."<sup>38</sup> However, whether or not this exegesis of Luther is correct, the singleness and permanence in the static imagery of vocation do not necessarily correspond to singleness and permanence in the lives that are informed by this imagery. Neither are the more pluralistic alternatives proposed by the theologians discussed above necessarily better suited for a pluralistic and dynamic way of life.

This can be shown using a legend about the same Martin Luther as an example. At a crucial moment on the way to the Reformation, Martin Luther was asked by the imperial court to renounce his revolutionary criticisms of the church. He refused. He felt he had to remain faithful to his beliefs and is said to have expressed his opinion saying: "Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise." For him standing firm was the only thing he could do. The dramatic change of the Reformation had not been possible, if Luther had not felt that there was only one single thing he could do: he had to remain persisting – permanently – in his

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38 VOLF (see above, n. 1), 108.



opinions. Here, the "singleness and permanence," that Volf refers to, of his calling were instrumental in very dynamic developments.

On the other hand, if Luther had quietly considered all the different possibilities open to him, all the different responsibilities he could have taken into account, all the different possible consequences to which his actions might lead, it is hard to imagine that he ever could have been so unyielding. Contrary to Volf's suggestion, the uniform character of a static imagery of vocation opens up new ways that had not been available within his framework of charisma's with a plurality of options. The imagery of a plurality of paths to choose from may lead to more uniform results, than the static imagery of vocation does.

The theologians discussed above fear that the status quo is baptized by being called "vocation," and in a sense that is true, but this does not necessarily imply that there are less paths available in life. Weigart and Blasi state in *Vocation and Social Context*: "Vocations are not the total explanation for history – i.e., for change and resistance to change; [...] but vocations surely fill out a major part of the picture."<sup>39</sup> The status quo that is baptized by vocation may just as well be a status quo of resistance to change, as of change and new paths – as in the case of the Reformation caused by Luther. If one follows Weigart and Blasi in allocating to vocation a major part in the total explanation for history, it could be said that a static imagery of vocation accepts the world as it is, including all of its evolution, conservatism and revolution. It explains both resistance to change and change. When someone has found her vocation, that implies that she knows what to do whatever the circumstances may be. It is not the imagery of vocation itself, nor the fact that it in a way baptizes the status quo, but it is nature of the status quo that may or may not be static or dynamic. If a dynamic imagery of vocation forces someone to consider all different paths as serious possibilities, he will never find the zeal and single-mindedness needed for a surprisingly new path, for a revolution. A static imagery of vocation, on the other hand, opens up such radically new paths, exactly because of its uniformity. Paradoxically, the uniformity of a static imagery of vocation makes the world less predictable and less uniform.

Within the static imagery of vocation, when someone looks for his vocation, he is not looking for a plurality of options. Rather, the fact that there seem to be more options, rather, is the problem: "Should I stay in this job, or should I leave?" for example. If it did not matter to him which option he chose, there had been no problem. However, this person is looking for that one single thing that he should do. If he says "My vocation is to stay," or "My vocation is to leave," who could challenge him? It is his and ultimately only his responsibility to find his vocation. So, the solution that he is looking for, seems

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39 Andrew J. WEIGERT and Anthony J. BLASI, "Vocation," in *Vocation and Social Context*, ed. by Giuseppe GIORDAN (Religion and the Social Order 14; Leiden: Brill, 2007) 13–34, here: 13.

to be just up for grabs out of a plurality of options open to him. Nonetheless, the question "What is my vocation?" haunts him. The answer does not feel up for grabs. He does not need to see all the options available to him, but he wants to find what is really his single vocation.

There is not something waiting for him already, which he only needs to uncover, but, nonetheless, he looks for the truth, in a way comparable to aesthetic truth. Compare that whatever the artist Damien Hirst will create, will be "a real Damien Hirst," but, nonetheless to himself it will not be indifferent what he creates. Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura interviewed eminent creative people and found that: "in most cases creative individuals recognize a specific talent or strength they possess, and if they take this advantage seriously, they react to it in a way that is not unlike the acceptance of a vocation... They feel they have a responsibility to do their best to use the special tools that genes, family, or sheer luck has given them... internalizing the highest standards."<sup>40</sup> An artist looks for the single right answer: what is the best he can make? Once Hirst or the person looking for his vocation, has found what he is looking for, that will be what it is – whatever the deficiencies and irregularities of the state it is in: the status quo.

Contrary to Volf's and Badcock's assumptions, the singleness of vocation – and even "to baptize the status quo" – may be very dynamic and revolutionary. The zeal and single-mindedness that a static imagery of vocation facilitates in those who are called, may be uniform in a sense, but it makes the world less uniform. The static imagery of vocation does not need to be at odds with the pluralism of our current world at all. The theologians discussed above argue that the singleness of a static imagery of vocation is only suited for static ways of life, in contrast to vocation as some broad contours within which there is a plurality of possibilities. However, the uniformity within one's imagery of vocation can in fact be used in a dynamic, revolutionary way, and a plurality of options in someone's imagery of vocation, on the other hand, may be paralyzing and static: it shows that someone is not yet ready to act decisively. A static imagery of vocation may open up a wide variety of life-paths, whereas a dynamic, plural imagery of vocation may yield a lot of uniformity in the world. Therefore, the static imagery of vocation may not have the devastating consequences that the theologians above fear, and that their dynamic alternative is not necessarily better in these respects. This can also be seen looking at the contrast between active and passive.

*Too passive?*

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40 Mihaly CSIKSZENTMIHALYI and Jeanne NAKAMURA, "Creativity and Responsibility," in *Responsibility at Work: How Leading Professionals Act (or Don't Act) Responsibly*, ed. by Howard GARDNER (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 64-80, here: 68.

Volf recognizes something passive in the idea that God has a plan for everyone from the beginning. He describes the idea as follows: "In that human beings 'go forth to their work' [...] , they fulfill the original plan of the Creator for their lives."<sup>41</sup> If a believer just has to follow God's plan Volf fears that there is no room for freedom and creativity, someone just has to follow orders passively. The vocational "understanding of work is too static (it sees a person as having a lifelong calling), it is inapplicable to modern mobile, dynamic societies," Volf holds.<sup>42</sup> In his alternative framework God's Spirit gives people gifts and talents to empower them to work for the advancement of God's kingdom in their own way, in freedom and dynamic creativity. Only the goal is set – the common good – and believers are given gifts to actively attempt to contribute to that goal, using their gifts in different occupations, both throughout their life and at any given time.

Now, is to conceive of a plan by God from the beginning – the static imagery of vocation – really irreconcilable with our modern synchronic and diachronic plurality of jobs or employments, as Volf assumes? It does not need to be: God may have organized it in such a way that someone is a carpenter first, before he becomes a preacher, maybe he can use skills from the former profession in the latter. Or God may in his providential care have assigned someone else to be both tentmaker and preacher at the same time. That God has already prepared a path for people in advance, does not in any way contradict that this path can be active and diverse and involve a synchronic and diachronic plurality of occupations. God's blueprint of someone's life may involve him actively pursuing different jobs and employments, during his lifetime or at any given moment.

Moreover, the focus on someone's gifts and talents can be very passive and restrictive. If in a country the government decides which kind of academic program a person is allowed to follow, based on what the government officials have assessed to be her gifts or talents. Obviously, in a way this is the case everywhere by way of admission requirements, however, if the state chooses for someone that seems like a major impairment of people's freedom, based on someone's gifts! Gifts are factually given, anyone could assess them, therefore, deciding what is the best way to use these gifts does not need to involve active role of the person himself at all.

How a focus on God's plan – the static imagery of vocation – can invite active participation of human beings, and a focus on the Spirit's gifts can be rather passive, can also be brought out by looking at the different types of responsibility that can be identified. Following one's calling for Volf and the other theologians discussed, is a matter of taking responsibility in the sense of doing what everyone in someone's specific circumstances had done. Given these

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41 VOLF (see above, n. 1), 128.

42 VOLF (see above, n. 1), 190.

particularities and talents, and given this general goal, what should someone like him or her do? The end result is a static set of casuistic rules: "If you have these talents and are in these circumstances, this is what you should do." In their attempt to do justice to personal freedom and gifts these theologians have fallen into the trap of – what Jacques Derrida calls: "ethics as 'irresponsibilization.'"<sup>43</sup> In a way it only looks like taking responsibility. Reflecting on Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* Derrida pointed out that in the case of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, on the other hand, there is a special kind of "taking responsibility."<sup>44</sup> If "responsibility" means to be able to explain why everyone in someone's specific circumstances could, should and would have done the same – as it is in Volf's approach, then a person hides her own choice behind what everyone should have done. Abraham, on the other hand, has nowhere to hide. If he were asked, he cannot point to the abstract "everyone" to defend himself. In a way every believer finds herself in a similar situation when she looks for God's vocation in her life. The believer cannot hide behind her context, but has to venture out, actively take a leap, freely determining God's plan in fear and trembling. Focusing too much on the Spirit's gifts can leave us passive by blocking this radical type of freedom.

Volf and his fellow theologians argue that a talking about God's plan damages our responsibility, and talking about the spiritual gifts entails an active participatory role; however, I have shown that talking about God's plan as our vocation can be used in an active way, and that a focus on spiritual gifts can be used rather passively. The static imagery of vocation does not really need to imply denying an active, responsible role for individual believers. And the alternative imagery focusing on gifts, does not necessarily avoid a passive attitude among believers. It may very well lead to a form of irresponsibilization and passivity.

Now, what about the last problem that the theologians above identified in using a static imagery of vocation?

*Too conservative?*

Volf holds that the concept of vocation is conservative, because it is developed within the framework of creation, instead of in the assumedly more dynamic and transformative framework of eschatology. Therefore, according to Volf, one "reason for preferring the eschatological to the protological framework is the conceptual inadequacy of 'protological' theologies of work for interpreting modern work."<sup>45</sup> Modern work is not preserving a given creation, but dynamically transforms it, and is thereby directed towards the future. And Volf

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43 Jacques DERRIDA, *The Gift of Death; Second Edition & Literature in Secret*, transl. by David WILLS (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) 62.

44 DERRIDA (see above, n. 44), 54–81.

45 VOLF (see above, n. 1), 101.

holds: "The static framework of preservation cannot adequately incorporate this dynamic nature of human work."<sup>46</sup> But is a static imagery of vocation which builds on preserving God's original creation necessarily conservative?

Theologian Robert W. Jenson argues that creation should be read as follows: "The world God creates is not a thing, a 'cosmos,' but is rather a history. God does not create a world that thereupon has a history; he creates a history that is a world, in that it is purposive and so makes a whole."<sup>47</sup> If creation is not a finished act after day seven, but is the creation of a developing, dynamic history, then turning toward creation might itself be dynamic and transformative as well. Instead of conservatively maintaining a once created given thing named "world," the protological framework may serve to preserve God's dynamic, creative energy from the beginning. The imagery of creation does not need to be conservative.

On the other hand, an eschatological framework directed towards the goal of the new creation does not necessarily need to be dynamic and transformative. Rather, if the goal is already set, living within this universe becomes quite conservative. For example, theologian Luco J. van den Brom discusses his colleague Wolfhart Pannenberg's "conception of creation as a timeless block universe, seen from God's transcendent future."<sup>48</sup> In Pannenberg's conception God acts from the future, therefore in a sense the future must already be there – so to say, on the other side of the block. If the future is already there, there is no room for really new things, for real change and transformation. As Van den Brom concludes: "Hence, from the point of view of the creatures these experiences of the Son and the Spirit are really changes, but from God's external perspective they are only Cambridge changes."<sup>49</sup> An eschatological framework does not need to be dynamic, but can be used very conservatively indeed.

The same holds for the opposition of preservation and transformation. If someone preserves a direction, for example "Go west!," this may be very dynamic: always urging people to move on. If someone transforms regularly, for example from "Go to Ohio!" to "Go to Missouri!" to "Go to Utah!," this may remain very static in structure. Contrary to Volf's assumptions, a protological framework which aims at preservation may be very dynamic and revolutionary, and an eschatological framework, which he proposes as an alternative, may be conservative and unable to allow real changes. The static of imagery of vocation can be used in a dynamic way preserving God's creative energy. There is plenty

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46 VOLF (see above, n. 1), 101.

47 Robert W. JENSON, *Systematic Theology: Volume 2: The Works of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 14.

48 Luco J. VAN DEN BROM, "Eschatology and Time: Reversal of the Time Direction?" in *Future as God's Gift: Explorations in Christian Eschatology*, ed. by David FERGUSSON/Marcel SAROT (The Society for the Study of Religion: Explorations in Contemporary Theology; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000) 159–168, here: 165.

49 VAN DEN BROM (see above, n. 50), 166.

of room for surprises and new things. The assumption that the theological concepts and frameworks connected to the static imagery of vocation would not allow this, does not hold; neither the corresponding statement that the proposed alternative necessarily avoids conservatism.

In conclusion, life informed by a static imagery of vocation is not necessarily uniform, passive and conservative; neither is the alternative proposed Volf, Badcock, Schuurman and Hahnenberg necessarily connected to a plural, active and transformative way of life. The critique that the static imagery of vocation is conservative and restraining development and plurality, as launched by systematic theologian Miroslav Volf and others in his wake, misses the point. A static concept of vocation can be applied in dynamic lives, and the imagery of charisma's can entail static ways of life instead of dynamic ones. The problem is not whether the imagery is static or dynamic. The difference is not in the concept in itself, but in how it is used. What consequences should be drawn from this?

#### IV. Another interpretation

The same representations – a static imagery of vocation or a dynamic picture of charisma's – can be used both statically and dynamically. The concept of vocation shows that the representational approach to meaning does not work. How else can a static imagery of vocation be interpreted? In this case, there is need to look for the meaning in the use, as Ludwig Wittgenstein suggested.<sup>50</sup> According to his student Rush Rhees, Wittgenstein said about the concept of predestination: "here most people fail to distinguish between the picture and what is done with it."<sup>51</sup> This applies to the static imagery of vocation as well. What the authors discussed above fail to do, is to distinguish between the picture and its use. The use to which Christians put the static pictures of vocation may be rather surprising.

Instead of proposing a change from using one kind of imagery to another, theologians should describe how to use it, and once they do that, it is no longer necessary to change. Theologians should not assume that one mode of theological imagery is static and the other dynamic, but describe how such

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50 See Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophische Untersuchungen – Philosophical Investigations; Revised fourth edition*, transl. by G. E. M. ANSCOMBE/P. M. S. HACKER/Joachim SCHULTE; ed. by P. M. S. HACKER/Joachim SCHULTE (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004) #43.

51 Rush RHEES, "Election and judgement," in *Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy*, ed. by D.Z. PHILLIPS/Mario VON DER RUHR (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 238–255, here: 242.

imagery can be used. Now, how is the static imagery of vocation used in a way that is neither too uniform, nor too passive, nor too conservative?

To find out how a concept is used, an important clue is to be found in when it is used. In what circumstances do people talk about something like vocation? And in what circumstances do they not? It falls outside the scope of this article to discuss all the possible circumstances in which people use the imagery of vocation. However, in contrast to the theologians discussed in this article, there is a use of the concept of vocation, in which particularly the static features of the picture may, in fact, contribute to a dynamic use of this concept. To elucidate that, I will build on Rhees's and Wittgenstein's suggestions concerning predestination.

Rhees suggests that people who present elaborate pictures of how every detail of life is planned by God, "clearly do *not* mean anything like 'The script which the actors are following is all written down.' The actors, or the prompters, can *consult* the script [*italics in original*]."<sup>52</sup> What is done with the picture, instead, shows that "the point about God's plan is that it *cannot* be consulted, cannot be seen. *If it could, then it would lose entirely the point which it has in their thinking.* It would make no sense to speak of checking to see whether things really are going according to God's plan or not, or as accurately as they should [*italics in original*]."<sup>53</sup> Rhees does not make explicit what, according to him or Wittgenstein, the point *is* which predestination has in the thinking of believers. But, in the passage from the letter from which this passage is taken, he continues asking: "When people speak of predestination, is it part of what they mean that I move blindly, I wonder?"<sup>54</sup> And he explains how people often are not aware of the true nature of their own actions: does someone genuinely act from good intentions, or is he deceiving himself? Rhees's remarks apply to the concept of vocation as well.

Looking at the circumstances in which the concept of vocation is used, it can be seen that this is often used in cases where people are "moving blindly." For example, people are said to be looking for their vocation. When people wonder what is their vocation, they are in the dark over what is the right way to go. They may know, or be pretty sure of, what job will bring in the most money or status, what is strategically and verifiably the best option, but what is their vocation, what is it that they actually should do? Saying that God has a specifically outlined vocation ready for her, may be a way of saying that she does not know herself right now what is the best way to go. Looking for one's vocation, is one context in which the concept vocation is used to express that people move blindly, reflecting on one's past life is another one.

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52 RHEES (see above, n. 53), 242.

53 RHEES (see above, n. 53), 242.

54 RHEES (see above, n. 53), 242.

When someone looks back at his life, someone may say that God, by His calling, took him to his destination. This may be a way of saying that at the time this person was in the dark as to where his decisions would take him. Recognizing God's call in his life, he acknowledges that he could not have predicted that the way his life did take, was the right way. God knew it, but he did not: at the time he was moving blindly.

In these two contexts in which the static imagery of vocation is used, it is important to notice the huge difference between saying that God knows which way someone should go, and saying that another person knows which way he should go. If, for example, someone's father or teacher has a detailed plan for what someone should do with his life – however well intended this may be, this is restricting. If people say that God has a detailed plan, it is not, since saying that God knows implies that no human being knows. In its use "God knows exactly which way I should go; He has my vocation prepared for me," often is very similar to "No one knows what is the right way for me." The pictures are very different, but the use can be the same. To compare, if a distinction is made between the picture and its use, there is, for example, little difference if the song "God only knows what I would be without you" reads "Not even God knows what I would be without you."<sup>55</sup> The pictures are opposite, but what is done with it, is the same: it expresses that it is unimaginable that the singer and his lover would not be together. In the same way, in the two contexts that were considered for the concept of vocation above, there is a close connection between saying that God has a detailed plan for what someone should do, and saying that no human being knows for sure what she should do. In their use of the concept of the concept of vocation, people express that they move blindly.

In the two contexts under consideration, people acknowledge that they are in the dark with respect to something they say that God knows. People may know what is strategically, verifiably or hypothetically the best option, but only God knows one's vocation. Of course, God knows all things that humans know as well – God knows what is strategically, verifiably or hypothetically the best option, but people say that God knows something, when they contrast it with what humans can know, they say it, when human beings move blindly. Referring to all the uniform, static details that are ascribed to God's knowledge of the direction one should take, is a way to acknowledge that for humans, in fact, that knowledge is not available: for human beings options are plural and dynamic and open. Here there is a use of the imagery of vocation, in which particularly the static features of the picture, in fact, contribute to a dynamic use of this concept, in contrast to what the theologians discussed above suggest. This throws a different light on a number of their own statements as well.

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55 For a discussion of this parallel see Hendrik Tijmen KROESBERGEN, *De relatie tussen systematische theologie en gewone geloofstaal; Naar een alternatieve systematische theologie* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2012), 52.



Badcock says he imagines two other routes he might have taken in his life and assumes that all three were equally open to him. However, he also says that he was "drawn more and more" into the direction that he in fact chose.<sup>56</sup> Talking in a static way about vocation may be a way to talk about the fact that he realizes that, later on, he will see that the three options are no longer open, but that he will have been drawn to this particular one of them. At the moment itself, however, only God knows, that is to say: no human being knows. He could have used the concept of vocation to express both that to him all three options seem open, and that he knows that God, nonetheless, has prepared one uniform path for him.

Looking back, Badcock says "it has been a surprising journey for me, going against my own plans at a number of crucial junctures."<sup>57</sup> Often it felt like it was not he himself who made the choices, but he was taken there to that single destination. He looked for the single right option, his vocation, but at the time of his choosing he was in the dark as to where it would take him. Any choice he made, would have been his choice, his route, but like Damien Hirst mentioned above, he looked for the single, right one. As Derrida says in the same chapter in which he discusses responsibility and "irresponsibilization": "No one can make a decision, what we call 'a decision,' in my place."<sup>58</sup> "In the end no one knows what choice you should make," and "Only God knows what choice you should make" – in their use, these two expressions are the same. And afterwards, looking back, one sees that God had prepared his vocation in advance: it was in the air, creation was in labor for the birth of this completely new and unpredictable beginning. From his creation onwards, God's plan has led Badcock to that one future, but that does not restrict his freedom in any way. In fact, to say that God had prepared it, God knew, is to say that no human being could predict it.

The whole imagery of the static track of God's vocation, is a way to acknowledge that for us, at the time, our future was not static at all: for us options were plural and dynamic and open. Schuurman mentions how God used the evil actions of Joseph's brothers, but in the text Joseph himself takes it one step further: he says that God sent him using the brothers.<sup>59</sup> According to Joseph, God had a plan all along. This does not mean that Joseph thinks life is static, rather, on the contrary. Rhees suggested that the point of talking about God's plan is that it cannot be consulted. Saying that it was God's plan back then already, means to say that it was no human being's plan at the time: no one could have thought that this action of his brothers would take him to become the savior of his family. Only looking back, Joseph hears God telling him, as the well-

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56 BADCOCK (see above, n. 7), 138.

57 BADCOCK (see above, n. 7), 138.

58 DERRIDA (see above, n. 44), 60.

59 See SCHUURMAN (see above, n. 10), 46 & Genesis 45:5.

known poem 'Footprints in the sand' says: "That is when I carried you."<sup>60</sup> Reflecting on his life Joseph recognizes this, but, at the time, he was moving blindly. The static imagery of vocation reflects an open, active, transformative life.

"We walk in the dark," as Hahnenberg says near the end of his theology of vocation, "and within this darkness, we come to hear more clearly what it is that God is calling us toward."<sup>61</sup> Instead of proposing to change the imagery of vocation, Hahnenberg could also have observed that this static imagery of vocation is already used to express this: asking God to show someone her vocation, is admitting that no one knows for sure what is the right way to go; looking back, seeing that God has put her on the track of her vocation, is acknowledging that no one could have known that this was the right track – human beings walk in the dark. Distinguishing between the picture and what is done with it, it is clear that the static concept of vocation is used to express just that. Here, in fact, there is a dynamic use of a static picture, which makes attempts to salvage this kind of imagery superfluous.

## Conclusion

In this article I have dealt with the widespread criticism of a particular imagery of vocation. It is regarded as problematic to assume that God has a detailed plan for each individual life, since this implies a static picture of vocation. Indeed, this imagery of vocation is static, but is it therefore problematic? Volf, Badcock, Schuurman and Hahnenberg identified three problems with this static imagery: it is assumed to be too uniform, too passive and too conservative to suit the modern way of life. I found, however, that these consequences do not necessarily follow. A static imagery of vocation may be applied in a pluralist, active, transformative world; and a dynamic imagery of charisma's may lead to uniform, passive and conservative living. Therefore, theologians should distinguish between a picture and how it is used. In the final paragraph I applied this to the static imagery of vocation, and I discovered that in a way the more static features our concept of vocation has, the more dynamic its use may be. The concept implied by the static picture of vocation does not need to be salvaged from its static nature, since, distinguishing between the picture and what is done with it, it is clear that the use of such static imagery may in fact be very dynamic.

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<sup>60</sup> See for a discussion of this poem KROESBERGEN (see above, n. 57), 134–154.

<sup>61</sup> HAHNENBERG (see above, n. 17), 229.