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Vocation: What Does it Mean to be Called or Led into a Profession, Career, or Life Project?

by Jeff Rasley
November 24, 2002

After enjoying a buffet dinner, board member Jeff Rasley, AB'75, opened the event by thanking Sally Cook, AB'66, for her service as president of the club. Jeff introduced the speaker, Matthew Boulton, PhD'03, who became president of Christian Theological Seminary (CTS) in 2011.

To begin the program, Boulton asked all attendees to introduce themselves and say something, or pose a question, about vocation. He then gave a brief history of CTS and Butler University and proposed that educational institutions, like individuals, have vocations.

He proceeded to provide a brilliant, far reaching, and elucidating exposition of the meaning of vocation and its relationship to calling, occupation, and living a meaningful life. His remarks ranged through the centuries from early church monasticism to John Calvin's Geneva to contemporary writers and theologians in unpacking the meaning of vocation. A popular definition of vocation from the theologian Frederick Buechner is "the place where your deep gladness (or joy or meaning) and the world's needs meet." Boulton proposed an alternative: Where our gifts meet the world's needs. He suggested two ways to help discern one's vocation: (1) engage in regular prayer, e.g., spend time deeply considering your gifts and how you are able to give; (2) follow the Quaker practice of "clearance committee," which uses a small group of friends/peers to engage in questioning and mutual support.

Many questions and much discussion followed Boulton's presentation. Members shared that, even in their 80s, they were still seeking meaningful vocations. Others commented on the financial pressure college students face and how they struggle to determine what they should do after graduation. It was noted that the freedom modern Western culture provides also comes with the burden of choosing. And a mini debate broke out as to what extent employers should pressure or encourage employees to donate time or money to worthy causes.