

Books Young People Read: Vocational Discernment Themes in Popular Christian Literature

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### Abstract

Formally, vocational themes have been studied in psychological literature for years, however, there appears to be little research on the connection between formal psychological understandings and popular Christian approaches to vocational discernment. The larger study, of which this paper is a part, looked at major theories of vocational psychology in comparison with major themes from popular Christian literature on vocation and calling. We read five popular Christian books selected on four criteria: the book (1) is presented as a practical, “how to” guide, (2) is directed toward young adults in their twenties, (3) has vocational discernment as a core theme, and (4) is from an explicitly Christian perspective. We then analyze themes from these books with a qualitative content analysis methodology informed by a grounded theory descriptive approach. For the purposes of this Faith @ Work paper, we will present the themes we found in the popular Christian literature along with potential implications for research and practice.

*Keywords:* vocation, calling, discernment

## Introduction

Philosophers and academics from nearly every discipline have questioned the meaning of life and more specifically in light of what is meaningful, how should one use his or her time. Answering these two questions: What is the purpose of life? And What is my purpose? is central to life. Self-esteem researchers suggest that those who have a consistent worldview and believe they are living in a way that is consistent with that worldview are buffered against life's most difficult challenges (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). Although this discernment process is central to a meaningful life, little research has gone beyond theory to provide clear evidence for all of us as we navigate answering these questions. Without clear evidence, most people go through a vocational discernment process, with a large part of this process occurring in one's twenties, through a process of trial and error. They try on majors, relationships, jobs, and locations in an effort to stumble into a place and identity that fits. This process can be difficult to navigate at times, so additional resources have been developed to assist people, thus allowing them to make decisions with resources other than a gut feeling that one has found their vocational destiny. Given the volume of vocational discernment resources, and the variety of theoretical perspectives that underpin vocational advice, there needs to be a way of identifying the most useful resources. This study looked at major vocational discernment themes of Christian literatures.

### **Christianity and Vocation**

A large aspect of one's life that can be related to one's vocational discernment process is one's spirituality or religion. For individuals who identify as Christian, and who place an emphasis on the role that religion plays in their life, may identify that their sense of calling, or their motivation surrounding their career choice, is originating from God as their external

summons. It is possible that the topic of vocational calling is a main area where Christians have found points of contact with vocational psychology, and is potentially the point of intersection between Christianity and vocational psychology. Research has found that individuals who are religious or spiritual may look to their relationships with God and/or their religious community for guidance during their vocational discernment process (Duffy & Lent, 2008). Many young people who identify as Christian may not only rely on God and their religious community for support and guidance during this process, but they also may seek out guidance from the many books that have been written on this exact topic for their age group from Christian authors.

### **Present Study**

The objective for our study was to explore main vocational discernment themes from popular Christian books. Our overall research questions included:

1. What are the main themes in popular Christian books surrounding calling?
2. Does the advice given in Christian books to young people undergoing a vocational discernment process align with empirically supported vocational psychology research?

### **Method**

In order to generate a sample of popular Christian literature for review we adhered to the following process. First, we conducted two broad searches on Amazon and googlebooks, using the keywords “Christian + Vocation” and the second search using keywords “Christian + Calling.” We sorted the results by Most Popular/Best Sellers/Most Relevant, and reviewed the first 20 pages of results from each search. We screened out books that were clearly irrelevant. Using the results from these searches, we compiled a comprehensive list of books that offer a Christian perspective on vocational discernment, which can be obtained through contacting the authors. We then applied the following fourfold criteria to arrive at our final list of books for

review: First, the book needed to be written in a practical, how-to register, signaled to us by Amazon rankings under “Christian Living”, “Leadership” and other, similar categories. Second, the book needed to be directed towards twenty-somethings, signaled to us by the title of the book; we selected books with titles such as 101 Secrets for your Twenties and Everything Twenties: Designing Your Best Decade. Third, the book needed to incorporate vocational discernment as a theme, signaled to us with a review of the table of contents with chapters such as *What Is Your Calling? Discerning Your Calling*, and *A Faith that Works: Adjusting to our Jobs, Connecting them to Christ*. Fourth, the book needed to be published by a Christian press, thus indicating a certain presumed Christian perspective and a Christian audience in general. By applying these criteria to our list, we arrived at the following five books which we consider to be reasonably representative of contemporary, evangelical literature on vocational discernment, pitched toward Christians in their twenties:

- 101 Secrets for Your Twenties by Paul Angone
- TwentySomeone: Finding Yourself in a Decade of Transition by: Craig Dunham & Doug Serven
- Everything Twentys: Designing Your Best Decade by: David Edwards, Margaret Feinberg, Janella Griggs, and Matthew Paul Turner
- After College: Navigating Transitions, Relationships and Faith by Erica Young Reitz
- Quarter-Life Calling: Pursuing Your God-Given Purpose in Your Twenties by Paul Sohn

We read all five books to identify vocational themes present within and across these books. Corbin and Strauss’s (2008) Grounded Theory methodology guided our coding process. Analysis of themes included using a process of open coding, where numerous observations and themes emerge organically from multiple readings of the books. These themes were then organized and synthesized into conceptual categories, using a process known as axial coding. We synthesized and combined similar codes, giving some greater weight than others vis a vis their

quantity of occurrences throughout the books. We also organized our codes into a thematic taxonomy.

Before summarizing our data, we profile each of the five books below.

### 101 Secrets for Your Twenties by Paul Angone

Paul Angone, a speaker and author addressing the challenges faced by Millennials, is the creator of an online community dedicated to helping young adults (particularly those in their twenties) live their lives with purpose and intentionality (the url for his website is [allgroanup.com](http://allgroanup.com)). Motivated to create a community focused on helping those in their twenties find purpose and meaning after his own experience of his twenties, having felt like a failure and being confused about his passions in his twenties, Mr. Angone designed his program to help individuals find their “Signature Sauce,” which is “where their passion, purpose, and career collide.” Published by Moody Publishers, a Christian nonprofit based in Chicago, Illinois, in 2013, 101 Secrets for Your Twenties is geared towards helping young adults navigate the years their twenties, providing young adults with “secrets” which amount to a collection of observations and different pieces of advice on topics ranging from social media use to bad bosses to romantic relationships to becoming a professional. This book relies heavily on the experiences of the author and his acquaintances. It is an informal book, often utilizing humor and slang to set a casual tone as if the reader were hanging out with the author as a friend (probably in a hip coffee shop, drinking pour overs).

When this research was conducted, this book was ranked #12,181 in all books on Amazon.com. It was ranked #52 in Books → Humor and Entertainment → Humor → Self-Help & Psychology, #116 in Books → Christian Books & Bibles → Christian Living → Self Help, and #146 in Books → Christian Books & Bibles → Christian Living → Personal Growth.

TwentySomeone: Finding Yourself in a Decade of Transition by: Craig Dunham & Doug Serven

Craig Dunham is the director of programs and marketing for the Glen Eyrie Group, the camping and conference ministry of The Navigators. Doug Serven is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and currently the senior pastor at City Presbyterian Church in Oklahoma City having served as the Reformed University Fellowship (RUF) campus minister at the University of Oklahoma previously. Their first book, TwentySomeone is geared towards helping their readers (who are in their twenties) to focus on the question: *Who am I?* as an alternative to the plethora of other questions pushed their way such as *What will I do? Who will I love? Where will I live?* Focusing on answering this question will help twenty-somethings come to terms with their identity and their sense of life meaning and purpose, and will help them to make decisions with this bigger picture in mind. The authors use their own personal experiences, as well as Biblical support as they develop their arguments. As the authors put their purpose in writing: “In this book we want to provide a survey of the twenties- a real survey, no cornfield mock-ups- to help you discover yourself in the midst of this decade and make the most of your time there. Our ideas come from our own experiences and those of others, as well as some good old-fashioned observation, interpretation, and application of lessons.” Each chapter ends with an “Ideas of Things to Do” section, providing practical next steps to readers for how to apply the information learned in the book to their daily lives.

TwentySomeone is published by WaterBrook, a Christian publishing company founded in 1996, focusing books about the Christian life, including practical life, inspiration and encouragement. “We seek messages that draw on the Bible, experiential learning, story, practical guidance, and inspiration to help readers thrive in their faith (About WaterBrook & Multnomah).” This book is geared towards Christian twenty-somethings, and as of the date of

this research, ranks at #862,492 in all books on Amazon.com. It is ranked #545 in Books → Christian Books & Bibles → Ministry & Evangelism → Youth Ministry, #1171 in Books → Christian Books & Bibles → Christian Living → Business & Professional Growth, and #1794 in Books → Christian Books & Bibles → Christian Living → Social Issues.

Everything Twentys: Designing Your Best Decade by: David Edwards, Margaret Feinberg, Janella Griggs, and Matthew Paul Turner

David Edwards is a speaker, and travels full-time to speak to young adults in various contexts. David focuses on helping young adults to focus on living a life that is Christ-centered. He has written five books, including The God of Yes: Living the Life You Were Promised and The Challenge. Margaret Feinberg is a speaker, author and teacher. She speaks at conferences across the country, and has written several books, including The Organic God and Scouting the Divine. She also has created several faith-based adult coloring books. She was recently named one of 50 women most shaping culture and the church by Christianity Today. Janella Griggs is a writer and former missionary. She is the vice president of Twentys an organization dedicated to helping young adults navigate the many changes that occur during these years, including spiritual, emotional, mental, physical, and financial changes. Matthew Paul Turner is a writer, speaker, and blogger whose work has been featured on The New York Times, USA Today, The Colbert Report, and more. He is the former editor of *CCM* magazine, a prominent Christian entertainment publication.

Everything Twentys feels like a magazine, heavy on its use of glossy images and its magazine-like layout. The book divides into six main sections: Image, Relationships, Work, Faith, Money, and Culture and uses a healthy dose of quotes from celebrity figures such as Bob Marley, Bill Clinton, and Nelson Mandela and from mainstream movies and songs. The book

also includes references to scripture regularly as a basis for its arguments. Additionally, the authors occasionally refer to “a recent study...” or “according to a recent article in the Wall Street Journal...” but fail to include citations or bibliographic information.

Everything Twentys was published in 2005 by Tyndale House, a publisher based in Carol Stream, Illinois, founded in 1962 by Dr. Kenneth N. Taylor. Tyndale publishes Christian fiction, nonfiction, and Bibles. Tyndale House Publishers purpose is to: “Minister to the spiritual needs of people, primarily through literature consistent with biblical principles (Tyndale).” As of the date of this research this book is ranked #2,808,168 in all books on Amazon.com. It is ranked #113984 in Books → Christian Books & Bibles → Christian Living and #505576 in Books → Religion & Spirituality.

After College: Navigating Transitions, Relationships and Faith by Erica Young Reitz

Erica Young Reitz works for the Coalition for Christian Outreach at Calvary Church, engaging directly with students at Penn State University. She directs Senior EXIT, a program helping prepare graduating seniors for the transition from college to the next phase of life. Erica has her MA in higher education from Geneva College, with a research focus on the senior year transition. After College extends the author’s expertise in helping students transition from college, to a reading public beyond Penn State University. Erica writes from her own personal experiences, and also shares the experiences of the students that she works with. She also uses Biblical support, as well as support from other sources, with end notes and citations at the end of each chapter. Erica ends each chapter with several sections: going deeper (questions to help young people think critically about the information given in the chapter, and their own next steps), scripture study (Bible verses), and recommended reading.

After College was published in 2016 by InterVarsity Press (IVP), an extension of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship whose mission is described as “serving those in the university, the church, and the world by publishing resources that equip and encourage people to follow Jesus as Savior and Lord in all of life (About InterVarsity Press).” This book is geared towards Christian twenty-somethings, and according to Amazon Best Sellers Rankings, the book is ranked #96, 722 in all Books. It is ranked #31 in Books → Education & Teaching → Schools & Teaching → Counseling → Career Development, #35 in Books → Business & Money → Job Hunting & Careers → Vocational Guidance, and #738 in Books → Christian Books & Bible → Christian Living → Self Help.

Quarter-Life Calling: Pursuing Your God-Given Purpose in Your Twenties by Paul Sohn

An author and speaker seeking to empower people to influence the world around them, Paul Sohn is a leadership transformation consultant. Having worked for a Fortune 50 company, and having become unhappy in his role, he quit his job to pursue his current work, which he considers to be his calling. Christianity Today magazine named Paul as one of the “Top 33 Under 33 Christian Millennials to Watch.” Quarter-Life Calling emerged from the author’s vocational experiences of failure and discovery of calling, and is designed to help other twenty-somethings pursue a meaningful life through discerning and pursuing their own callings. Throughout the book, Paul relies heavily on his experiences as support for his advice, but also uses Biblical references as well as other materials, and includes end notes and citations at the end of the book. He includes many exercises during the book, so that his readers can take practical steps to reflect on the points that he is making throughout the book, and think about how to implement the points in their own lives. Paul also ends each chapter with Questions for Reflection and Discussion.

Quarter-Life Calling was published by FaithWords, a division of Hachette Book Group, based near Nashville, Tennessee, founded in 2001, a publisher of Christian inspirational books and resources. Other authors published through FaithWords include Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, Joseph Prince, John C. Maxwell, T.D. Jakes, and Brian Houston. FaithWords has sold over 60 million books. This book is geared towards Christian twenty-somethings, and according to Amazon Best Sellers Rankings, the book is ranked #81,890 in all Books. It is ranked #67 in Books → Christian Books & Bibles → Christian Living → Leadership, #87 in Books → Religion & Spirituality → Religious Studies → Leadership, and #145 in Books → Christian Books & Bibles → Christian Living → Business & Professional Growth.

All five pieces of contemporary popular Christian literature were mostly experience-based and advice-centered. The authors of these books have careers based on speaking and “empowering” others, and for the most part, appeared to take a perspective based in empowerment when writing their books geared towards young adults in their twenties. This all impacted the main themes that were present in these books.

### Results

After reading all five books, and analyzing the content for themes, the themes that emerged in several books, or that were emphasized strongly by the authors, were focused on. A concrete, exhaustive treatment of these themes can be provided if the reader contacts the authors. Below, there is a table that includes the main themes of the popular Christian literature.

Theme	Popular Christian Books:
Suitability	Job anxiety concerning finding the right, God-sanctioned job (potential rephrase = “Right job based on God’s plan and purposes for individual”)

Experimentation	Conduct job experimentation to eliminate unsuitable jobs
Discernment Process	happens through community and practicing of spiritual disciplines
General Calling/ Primary Calling	the primary calling is to love God and love one's neighbor
Specific Calling/ Secondary Calling	One's career, Based on uniqueness and individual gifts
Continuum	
Variability of Calling	Calling is not limited to occupation: includes our relationship with God and others.
Benefits of seeing one's career as a calling	
Barriers and Influencers on Calling	Barriers: Not Having Discerned one's specific occupational calling yet
Hope in Personal Doubt, Failure, etc.	God's purpose gives us hope in the face of personal doubt
Service	All work should be considered Christian service
Faithful to job	Emphasis on remaining faithful to job for God and for job experience
Priorities	God's purpose and personal character is more important than money or success
View of work	Need for a biblical view regarding work. This influences our motivations behind work.
Work Ethic	An Excellent work ethic gives glory to God

*Comparison themes from vocation psychology literature are removed for this paper*

### **Research Question 1**

*What are the main themes in popular Christian books surrounding calling? We find emphases throughout popular Christian literature on the idea that calling is not the same thing as job/career but rather addresses every aspect of one's life. This literature includes the idea that a calling is derived from an external source, a summons outside of oneself, specifically identifying the 'caller' as God. From a Christian perspective, everyone has a primary calling, as well as a secondary calling. Present is the idea that a calling is derived from an external source, a summons that comes from God to the self. Christians have a primary calling to be disciples of*

Jesus, as well as secondary callings that will differ from person to person. These books tend to highlight the importance of each believer finding their “center” in their relationship with God (primary calling) and out of this relationship various life trajectories will emerge such as career tracks and family decisions (secondary callings). The scholarly literature has researched and published the positive impacts of having a sense of calling towards one’s work (Duffy, Allan, Bott, & Dik, 2014), which Christian literature could potentially glean in their own publishing on the topic.

Popular Christian literature does mention barriers to one’s calling (in regards to career), but seems to mention these barriers as being related to having not figured out one’s particular occupational calling yet, with only one book mentioning privilege associated with calling. Scholarly literature emphasizes barriers to one’s calling that may be based in one’s social class or race. Christian literature generally fails to address barriers one may be facing due to one’s race, gender, or social class.

### **Research Question 2**

*Does the advice given in Christian books to young people undergoing a vocational discernment process align with empirically supported vocational psychology research? C*

Christian literature recommends to young people to use personality and strength assessments, such as MBTI, DISC, and StrengthsQuest, when going through one’s vocational discernment process. Scholarly literature as a whole does not emphasize the use of these assessments, at least without assessing the psychometrics of such assessments.

The popular Christian literature emphasized the use of spiritual disciplines during one’s vocational discernment process. Christian authors highlighted the importance of Christians using prayer and Bible reading when discerning one’s vocation and calling. This literature emphasizes

how God made each individual for a purpose, and this purpose includes one's job, and being able to use one's job to help others. Popular Christian literature urges young Christians to spend time in prayer and in the Bible in order to get to know God (their 'caller') more, and that through the use of these spiritual disciplines, they will gain more clarity about their own discernment process. Through engaging in spiritual disciplines faithfully, young Christians will be able to strive to live purposefully where they are now (including their current job), while also seeking out God's will for their next steps. Scholarly literature sees the "ultimate ends" of vocation as meaningful, significant work one feels passionate about, that lines up with one's personality, in a workplace that lines up with one's needs, and is other-oriented. Popular Christian literature highlights the "ultimate ends" of vocation as bringing glory to God and His purposes, participating in God's mission of redemption, and pursuing the love commandment- love your neighbor as yourself.

Both popular Christian literature and scholarly literature address one's personality when talking about the vocational discernment process. In scholarly literature, Holland's theory links personality types to certain types of careers. Scholarly literature also connects one's personality to one's workplace environment (Betz, 2008; Juntunen & Even, 2012). Popular Christian literature encourages young Christians to look at one's own personality when engaging the vocational discernment process, and this is where Christian literature encourages the use of certain personality assessments, in order to help one gain more insight into his or her personality, and how that may be connected to one's career. Both popular Christian literature and scholarly literature address the developmental issues that are present during one's twenties, and connect that to one's career.

### **Discussion**

Popular Christian books place emphasis on Biblical writings and themes, bolstered by knowledge gained from individual experiences, which can lead to a large variety in the advice given on the topic of the vocational discernment process. This can cause differing advice due to the emphasis placed on individual experiences. Some of the popular Christian literature has the view that the idea of calling in mainstream culture has made it about simply finding our career, and that it has robbed calling of any sense of a caller (Young Reitz, 2016). It may be helpful for writers of popular Christian literature to become more familiar with psychological literature on calling, and it may potentially be beneficial for psychological scholars and Christian authors to conduct research on calling together.

Christian literature generally fails to address barriers one may be facing due to one's race, gender, or social class. This is a huge oversight in popular Christian literature. This literature is written as if everyone has the same starting point, but this is not the case. Christian literature emphasizes the idea that God is in control and that one's calling related to one's career will be fulfilled due to God's plan. However, it does not emphasize differences due to one's various identities and the intersectionality of these identities. Popular Christian literature could potentially benefit from adopting a greater emphasis on multiculturalism and social justice.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study is not without its limitations. This study only analyzed a limited amount of the popular Christian literature that is present today, and only analyzed Christian ideas found in books. We are unsure of the reach that these books have on today's young people, and it may be that not many young adults are looking to these books for advice surrounding their vocational discernment process. Future research is needed to better understand the Christian literature that is present and is being read by Christians seeking answers for questions they may have surrounding

vocation and occupation. Future research can expand and analyze Christian literature that is not just geared towards those in their twenties. Future research can also expand and analyze Christian ideas toward vocation found in other sources, including sermons, blog posts, and magazines. Future research could potentially include interviews with Christians on their take-aways from Christian literature on occupation and vocation. The findings from our content analysis were exploratory and preliminary in nature, calling for much more extensive research.

### **Implications**

There are several implications from the findings in this study, which highlight the need to use a holistic approach when providing advice and guidance surrounding one's search surrounding vocation. Popular Christian literature tends to frame barriers to successful actualization of calling in spiritualized terms with only one book addressing cultural privilege as a factor. While our scholarly literature emphasizes barriers to one's calling that may be rooted in social conditions, our Christian literature generally fails to address barriers related to race, class, and gender. This literature is written as if readers are "generic," and start with the same socio-economic conditions. So while Christian literature emphasizes the idea that God is in control and that calling emerges from God's divine plan, it loses sight of the importance of social identities and the intersectionality of these identities.

We also find a general lack of discussion about the role of early socialization, family of birth, and immediate communities in vocational discernment. Popular Christian literature tends to assume an individual frame of reference and can even slide into a consumerist orientation. It may be helpful for writers in this genre to become more familiar with psychological literature on calling and to revisit historical Church teaching on the role of the community in identity and vocation formation.

This study has implications for career counselors, pastors, professors, parents, and the many other figures who find themselves doling out vocational advice to emerging adults. Our sample literature tends to be based on anecdotal knowledge gained from individual experiences, which can lead to diverse and sometimes even conflicting advice giving. It will be helpful for these mentors to become aware of the potential for conflicting voices that Christians (especially those in their twenties) are hearing. It would be helpful, for example, for these mentors to be sensitive to the use of key terms surrounding vocation themes, especially the word ‘calling.’ Individuals may be hearing this term being used in both secular and Christian settings and may experience greater confusion surrounding how this may be related to their occupational choices.

### **Conclusions**

Given that the search for purpose and meaning is of central importance to the trajectory of a person’s life, there needs to be more attention given to research that can support current theories of vocational psychology while recognizing both the theoretical and religious underpinnings that may be relevant. Additionally, in order to best help those conducting a vocational search, the research needs to be included in popular literature and authors should clearly distinguish theoretical perspectives that have empirical support from those that are more rooted in personal experience or theories that have not yet been rigorously tested. Readers of this literature would benefit from more transparency regarding the sources of and empirical support for ideas in vocational psychology and Christian literature. All of us aspire to living purposefully and meaningfully, and our obligation as researchers and authors is to communicate best practices clearly.

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