

# **How College Students' Faith Impacts Their Career Decision-Making**

by

Meryl Herr, Ph.D.

Adjunct Professor

Cornerstone University

## **Introduction**

In 2014, an evangelical campus ministry with national reach received a Campus Ministry Theological Exploration of Vocation grant through the Lilly Endowment, Inc - Religion Division. With these funds, the campus ministry developed conference track curriculum to help students understand the concepts of calling and vocation and discern ways that they could partner with God's work in the world. I worked with a task force comprised of ministry staff to create and evaluate this curriculum.

In 2015 and 2016, hundreds of college students participated in the track at their regional fall conferences. As part of 2017 curriculum revisions, I conducted a learning needs and resource assessment to discover what students knew about calling and vocation. With the permission of the campus ministry, I gathered this data as part of a research study.

Researchers have explored the spiritual lives of young adults (C. Smith, 2011) as well as how they view work and approach career decision-making (Arnett, 2014). Yet little empirical research focuses on faith-work integration among Christian young adults. The purpose of this study was to understand how Christian college students make career decisions. This study was guided by two research questions: (1) What factors influence Christian college students' career decision-making? and (2) To what extent does faith influence their career decision-making?

The data suggest three primary influences on students' career decision-making: people, experiences, and feeling a fit or alignment between one's gifts, skills, and career choice. Faith-related themes appeared within each of those categories.

The findings also indicated two frameworks from which Christian college students conceptualize calling and integrate faith into career decision-making. This paper elaborates on those two frameworks and their implications for discipleship and future research.

### **Methodology**

This study was exploratory in nature and followed a grounded theory approach in that I did not conduct a substantial literature review prior to designing the study and collecting data. To collect data, I developed a qualitative questionnaire to be completed online via SurveyMonkey. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval from Cornerstone University, I recruited college student participants from the campus ministry in two Midwestern states. I sent a link to the questionnaire to ministry staff who then forwarded the link to their chapters' participants via email or social media. Students provided informed consent prior to answering any of the questions on the questionnaire.

Students responded to the questionnaire between March and April 2017. Seventy-four students submitted questionnaire responses. Three submitted blank questionnaires and six answered only demographic questions. Those nine questionnaires were excluded from the sample.

### **Sample**

The sample consisted of 65 self-identified Christian college students ranging in age from 18 to 29 years. The median age was 20. The sample consisted of 12 freshmen, 15 sophomores, 16 juniors, 16 seniors, 3 super seniors, and 3 graduate students.

Twenty-nine of the participants attended a private, four-year college/university at the time of the study. Thirty-three of the participants attended a public, four-year college/university. Four attended a community college, and three participants noted being enrolled at two schools. At the time of the study, 46 of the students had decided upon a career path and 29 had not.

The questionnaire did not ask students to specify their gender, race, or ethnic identity. However, the questionnaire did ask them to indicate the length of time they had been a Christian. All participants indicated that they were Christians at the time of the study. As to the length of time they were a Christian, four of the students' answers were unclear. (For example, one such student answered "4," and it was unclear as to whether the student meant "four years" or "since age four.") Twenty-five students indicated they had been a Christian their "whole life." Included in this category were students who responded, "since I can remember" and "since childhood." The remaining 36 responses indicated the students' awareness of a particular point of conversion. Seventeen had been a Christian for 11 years or longer. Eight had been a Christian two years or less at the time of the study.

### **Data Analysis**

Questionnaire data was downloaded from SurveyMonkey. An administrative assistant copied participant responses from a spreadsheet into a single word document for each participant. I coded the questionnaires by hand and using HyperResearch. Themes were extracted and analyzed.

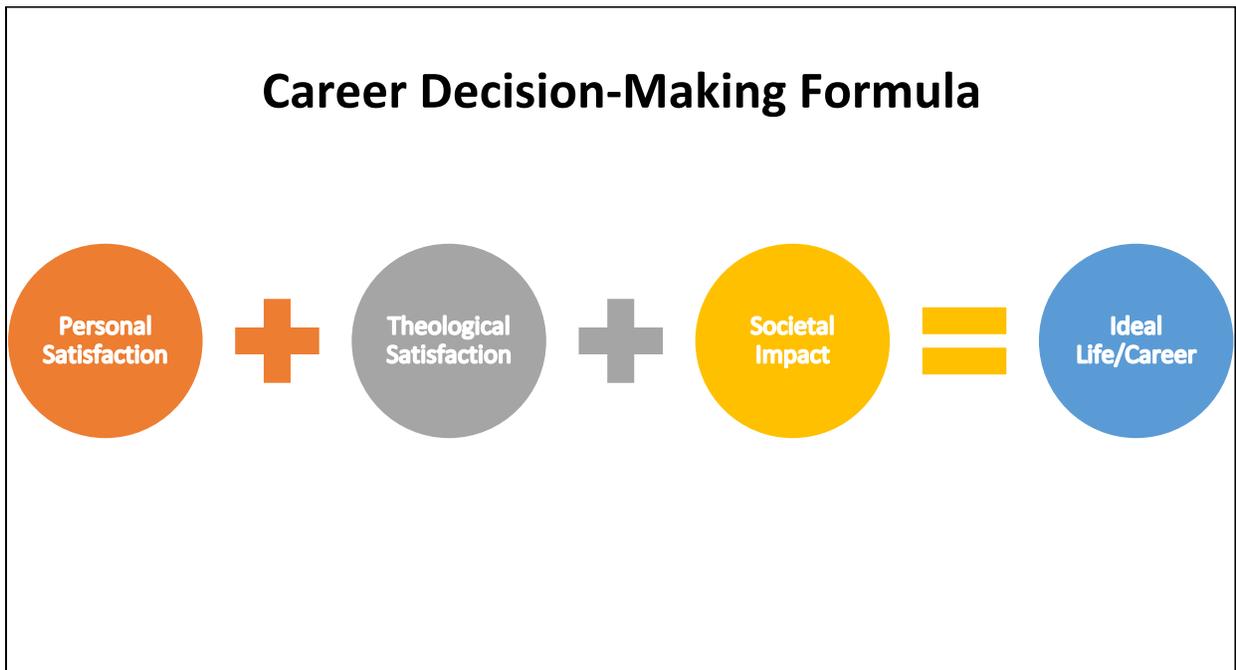
### **Findings**

Faith influenced the career decision-making process for participants to varying degrees. Clues as to how faith influenced their career decision-making process were discerned through 1) how participants discovered their calling/purpose, 2) how they defined calling, 3) how they

described the role of faith in their career decision-making process, 4) The extent to which their career decision-making process aligned with their beliefs about calling, and 5) How recently converted participants explained the role faith has played in their career decision-making. From the data, five themes emerged.

### **Faith Is Part of the Formula**

The data revealed that, for many students, faith was part of the formula for deciding on a career path. In other words, students' responses indicated they had numerous motivations influencing their career decision. Each of these motivations worked like a variable in a mathematical formula designed to yield a certain type of life. The chart below offers a visual representation of this career decision-making formula. Below, I describe each of the motivations (variables) and then describe how participants combined them in making their career decisions.



**Personal satisfaction (“I owe it to myself”).** Participants hoped to feel personally satisfied by their work. This sense of satisfaction could come from feeling like their jobs fit with their personality, skills, and gifts. Enjoying one’s job also leads to personal satisfaction as does

having passion for the work. Jobs that provide financially and fit certain geographic requirements like “close to my family” were also believed to be personally satisfying.

**Theological satisfaction (“I owe it to God”).** Many of the student participants hoped their career fulfills certain theological requirements. They sought a job that would glorify God or allow them to share their faith. Others believed a job that would help them steward their education and gifts would fulfill these theological requirements, as would jobs that are morally upright or align with God’s values.

**Societal impact (“I owe it to society/the world”).** Students also hope their careers allow them to make a societal impact. They want to “make a difference” or “help others.” However, their motivations for wanting to make an impact through their careers vary. I identified three types of students motivated to make a societal impact: natural helpers, difference makers, and kingdom builders.

Some students were wired to be natural helpers. Seven of the participants described wanting to help people or animals. They feel wired to help, and their career paths (nurse, teacher, veterinarian, medical missionary) are primarily in helping professions. Although undecided on a career and yet considering options in health care, counseling, and ministry, Participant 57 knew, “I have always had the desire to help people and do good.”

Some students simply wanted to be difference makers. They are less explicit about their motivation to do so. One student questioned, “Will my day-to-day-actions contribute to a greater good or make a difference in the world? I would have a difficult time doing something that didn’t seem to be making a positive difference” (Participant 53).

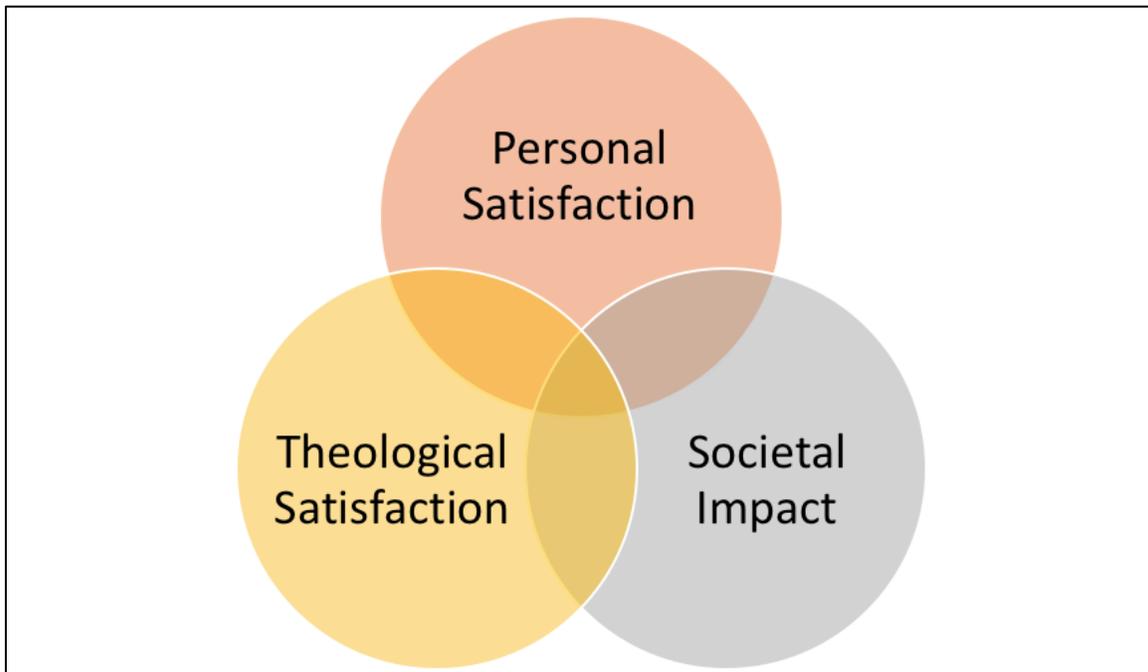
Some students wanted to be kingdom builders. Their faith motivated them to make an impact. They hope to “serve God” or “glorify God” or “bring shalom.” Participant 63 described

the Biblical motivation to make an impact in this way: “The Bible tells us to love and take care of the poor and those suffering from injustice, and I am so passionate about this, and that is exactly what social work [does].”

Within this subset of kingdom builders was a group of students who view their work as instrumental. In other words, they view work as a means for sharing the gospel with non-believers. One student wrote, “Faith has reinforced my idea of the need for engineers who want to share the gospel as well as [have] the ability to help people. I will be in a career field that is very secular” (Participant 41).

**Students’ formulas.** A closer look at students’ formulas for career decision-making reveals what they prioritized. Students combined variables important to them and their goal pursuits for their career. Although Participant 39, a senior, had not decided on a career path, his goals appear in his statement: “I want to stay in the area because my family is here, I feel pressure to do something that makes money, but I want to do something that really matters, we only get one shot at life.” For this student, proximity to family, ability to earn, and potential to make an impact factored into his career decision-making process.

For Participant 57, being successful, stewarding one’s education, and having parental support all came into play. Other participants wanted their job to feel like a fit—matching their gifts, talents, and personalities. Some wanted to be sure that their career would glorify God. Many wanted a career that would help others. Most participants wanted a combination of these variables. The variables in students’ formulas came from three primary categories: personal satisfaction, theological satisfaction, and societal impact. The chart below depicts the three categories and their potential for overlap.



**Summary.** Faith was a motivating factor for a career decision for many students. Not only did some seek to find a job that would satisfy certain theological requirements. For some, that meant attempting to live out their faith in their work.

### **Faith Gives Practices for Discernment**

Students' descriptions of how they discovered their calling or purpose reveal the role faith played in their career decision-making. In fact, almost two-thirds of students mentioned at least one aspect of Christian discipleship as a means whereby they discovered their calling. Answers ranged from "seeking God" to "following Jesus" and included spiritual practices such as prayer, Bible reading, and listening to the voice of the Spirit. Attending Christian events and conferences were also important for a few students. Spiritual practices such as Scripture engagement, prayer, and fellowship with other believers were among the most popular responses.

Other students were less explicit about the role faith played in discerning their callings. The means through which they discovered their calling or purpose included intuition, reflection,

and advice from others. Those who intuited their calling talked about it as a lifelong dream or an awareness that was always there. Those who engaged reflection listened to themselves and the world.

For many students, though, discovering their calling or purpose came through a combination of experiences: They sought God, prayed, read the Bible, talked to others, and reflected on their gifts and passions. In short, their faith informed their discernment practices.

### **Faith Is Not Necessarily the Classical Christian Faith**

Students' definitions of calling revealed that, although all participants claimed to be Christians, only half defined calling in a way that aligned with the classical Christian understanding. Bunderson and Thompson (2009) distinguished between three different views on calling: classical, neoclassical, and modern. These three views on calling provided an interpretive lens through which I analyzed students' definitions of calling. I will define the three views below and then describe to what extent the three views—and a fourth hybrid view—appeared in the data.

Under the classical view, calling is “the place in the world of productive work that one was created, designed, or destined to fill by virtue of God-given gifts and talents and the opportunities presented by one’s station in life” (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009, p. 33). Under the modern view, calling focuses on “self-actualization and personal passion” and does not have this sense of duty or destiny. The focus is “finding work in which one can thrive and be fulfilled, about finding one’s bliss at work” (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009, p. 51). Under the modern view, societal impact “is more a benefit than a duty” and “calling is simply a life choice...not...meant to be” (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009, p. 51). Based on the themes from those interviews among zookeepers, they developed a definition of a neoclassical view of calling

- “one’s calling is that place in the occupational division of labor in society that one feels destined to fill by virtue of particular gifts, talents, and/or idiosyncratic life opportunities” (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009, p. 38). When compared to the classical view, the neoclassical view has taken God out of the equation. The table below highlights the major elements of each view.

	Classical	Neoclassical	Modern
Sense of Destiny	X	X	
Using Gifts/Talents	X	X	
Life’s Opportunities	X	X	
God’s Involvement	X		
Personal Fulfillment			X

When analyzed through the lens of classical, neoclassical and modern understandings of calling, nearly half of the participants were able to articulate a classical view of calling.

Participant 9 defined calling, “It’s what you were meant to do in life. What God has put you on the planet for.” Participant 33 described how calling related to the career decision-making process in the case of pursuing one’s childhood dream: “Honestly, this question [to what extent has your faith impacted your career decision-making process thus far?] really threw me off because I don’t really pray about my career or in this case my college major because it’s just always been the plan. God created me with the compassion and moral compass He did. It’s honestly been a struggle sometimes and has caused me a lot of hurt, but in the end, it all seemed worth it to know I was molded for this specific field of work.” In these definitions, we see the intentionality of God, a destined type of work, and the use of God-given gifts and attributes in the definition of calling.

About one in six articulated a neoclassical view of calling. These definitions of calling were often vague and had no religious terminology. One student defined calling, “A sense of purpose or direction that pushes one into a future moment” (Participant 41).

About one in six articulated a modern view of calling. One relatively new Christian defined calling, “I think it's something that just feels right for you. A job that you don't feel depressed going to, and something that teaches you something new every day” (Participant 69). Another student said calling was “something you feel inclined to do just because it is right for you.”

A few students articulated a hybrid between classical and modern views. Participant 47 offered a classical definition of calling: “Something that God has set on one's heart that furthers His love and message.” However, in describing how that calling was discerned, the student said, “basically if it feels right and it is not against the Bible that is usually what I try to do.” The “what feels right” language is more in line with a modern view. For this student, the Bible seemed to impose moral limits but did not impose any other frameworks or offer other guidance. Another student presented a classical definition of calling but a “what’s best for me” narrative overshadowed the desire to pursue and follow God’s guidance. The student stated, “I always pray about my career decisions and paths and that God will give me the wisdom and the guidance that I need to make the decision that is *best for me*” (Participant 70, emphasis added).

### **Faith Is a Source of Angst**

For several students, their faith adds doubt and even decision-paralysis in career decision-making. In their minds, their careers must satisfy a theological requirement, namely that their choice be what God wants, desires, or wills for their lives. Nearly one-third of the participants in this study sought assurance that their career aligned with this divine “ought.” In

other words, they wondered if their college, major, and career choices were what they were “supposed to do,” if they were the “right decision,” and aligned with “what God wants.”

Participant 26, a community college freshman with an undecided major and no determined career path wrote, “I try to have all my life guided by Christ, but as of right now, I haven’t discovered His purpose for a career for me.” The student’s biggest questions about career decision-making? “Is this what God wants me to do? I don’t want to pick the wrong career.”

Participant 65, a sophomore psychology major with no career decision, Participant 65 used the phrase “what I should be doing” twice in completing the questionnaire. This moral “ought” pervades this student’s biggest questions about career decision-making: “Is this what God wants me to do? Is this the right thing to do?”

Participant 60 perfectly summarized the angst of several students. Although this student had a strong sense of calling to be an elementary school teacher, shades of doubt appeared in their responses. When asked to list some of the biggest questions they had about deciding upon a career, this student wrote, “I think one of the biggest questions I had concerned whether or not God’s will means that you have to follow a specific plan that He has for you in terms of career. I think we put too much pressure on ourselves to figure out what we think He wants for us.”

### **Faith Can Be Potentially Transformative**

Eight students had recently become Christians at the time of the study. Four of those indicated that they had become Christians after deciding a major or career path. Three of the four described how faith changed their perspective on their work. One participant’s responses represent this transformation well.

At the time of the study, Participant 40 was a senior nursing major. Participant 40 decided on nursing as a career path through “trial and error—mainly just guessing at that I would be good at and educating myself on what [those careers] actually look like.” Participant 40’s life has been “somewhat” guided by a sense of purpose or calling. Participant 40 described wanting to “[choose] a career path that places me in the direct path of others and allows me to serve others well.”

Participant 40 had only been a Christian for six months at the time of the study and chose nursing as a career path before deciding to follow Jesus. Participant 40 wrote, “I chose this path before I became a Christian, but since becoming a Christian, it has become more rewarding/reinforced the idea that this is a job where God can and will be glorified.” Even in the early stages of faith, Participant 40 believes that Christians can do Christ’s work in many careers: “I was not a Christian when I decided on this career path, but I have been reassured that the work I am doing and will do is the work of Christ (as are many other careers). Faith in Christ has given Participant 40 a sense of assurance in career decision-making: “I can somewhat confidently say that this is the career that Christ will use me best in (at least at this current time).” And following Jesus has also brought a sense of purpose that did not exist before: “Faith has made this process easier and has made it easier to go to work/school/clinical because there is purpose there” (Participant 40).

### **Discussion**

At first glance, the findings appear optimistic. Nearly half of participants espoused a classical view of calling. Many engaged in Christian practices as a means of vocational discernment. For many, satisfying certain theological tenets of their faith motivated their career decision-making to a degree. Plus, faith gave newer Christians a new perspective on their work.

However, closer inspection reveals three theological problems with career decision-making among these Christian college students. First, for many, their theology brought considerable angst to the career decision-making process. Second, some students' beliefs about calling and their own sense of calling or purpose was incongruent with their career decision-making process. Third, instead of Christian faith, some students could be integrating Moral Therapeutic Deism into their career decision-making. I will discuss each of these below along with their implications.

### **From Angst to Freedom**

Finding a career that is the perfect fit was not the biggest worry for some of the participants in this study. Rather, their biggest worry was finding the career that perfectly aligned with God's will. The angst that some participants described left them with decision paralysis or lingering doubts such that they could not make the career decisions with confidence. It seems like these students do not know how to balance freedom in Christ with responsible stewardship when it comes to making career decisions. Plus, their decision paralysis about the future could prevent them from participating in God's redemptive work in the present.

Future research could explore participants' understanding of God's will and God's plan, their practices for discerning it, and how they make decisions with or without it. The findings of this study could be analyzed using theological positions on God's will and God's plan. For example, do participants' understandings align with the moderately Calvinistic position described by Millard Erickson (1998).

### **From Belief to Action**

Holding a classical view of calling and engaging in Christian practices as a means of vocational discernment do not necessarily lead to wise integration of faith into the career

decision-making process. In my analysis, I compared students' descriptions of their career decision-making process to how they defined calling and their sense of a calling or purpose. In some instances, students defined calling well and yet their career decision-making process did not demonstrate any evidence of faith-integration. In other words, their beliefs had not translated into action.

For example, a junior majoring in network security defined calling as "a hobby/job/task that God wants you to do" (Participant 10). Yet this student, who had decided on a career path, wrote "not sure" when asked to what extent their life was guided by a sense of calling or purpose and said their faith has played virtually no role in their career decision-making process. Instead, this student confessed, "I've mainly considered what I want to do for the rest of my life."

These Christian college students needed more instruction and practice in translating their beliefs about calling into action. In other words, they need theologically informed models for vocational discernment. Suggested resources include Smith's (2011) *Courage and Calling: Embracing Your God-Given Potential* as well as Nouwen's (2015) *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life*.

### **From Moral Therapeutic Deism to Christian Discipleship**

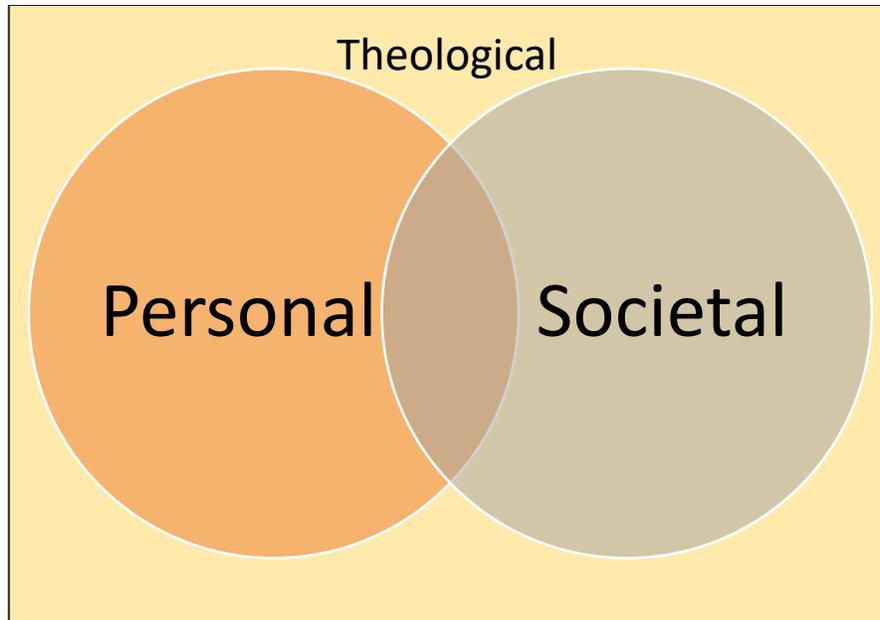
Christian Smith and Patricia Snell (2009) found that most American teenagers' faith could be described as Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD). Smith and Snell describe MTD as consisting of the following five beliefs: "First, a God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth. Second, God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. Third, the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem. Fifth, good people go to heaven when they die" (2009, p. 154). In subsequent research among

emerging adults, Smith and Snell found that MTD was quite prevalent among them, but it was “diluted” as emerging adults’ development and life experience shaped their religious commitments (p. 154-55).

The findings indicated that Christian college students use a formula of sorts—a combination of personal satisfaction, theological satisfaction, and societal impact goals—to make their career decisions. When analyzed against the backdrop of MTD, some students’ theological satisfaction goals seem Christian but really are not. When theological satisfaction is governed more by MTD than classical Christian faith, personal and societal satisfaction dominate the students’ narratives.

Consider the student who said, “I want to be a teacher. I hope God will run with that.” This student’s God is the God of MTD, a God who will serve her needs and make her happy. Consider also the student who chose a career path based on the money first, then the potential enjoyment. This student said their life has not been guided very much by a sense of calling or purpose. The student added, “I know what I might do for a career but not what God wants me to be doing for Him in the future. I try to be helpful to people in the meantime” (Participant 30).

When theological satisfaction is governed more by MTD than classical Christian faith, students’ views of calling align more with the neoclassical, modern, or hybrid classical-modern views than the classical view. Under the classical view, Christian theology provides the framework and boundaries for choosing a career. Personal satisfaction and societal impact merit insofar as they prioritize love for and service to God. The chart below represents motivations for career decision-making under the classical view.



Christian college students need to know that MTD is not classical Christian faith.

Classical Christian faith invites students into whole-life discipleship in which they seek to follow Jesus and cultivate a personal relationship with him. Classical Christian faith offers meaning and purpose in life and work even when life and work may not be personally satisfying or make one happy.

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