

**“Wisdom at Work: Glorifying God on the Job”
Quotations on Work and Vocation**

Martin Luther:

If you ask an insignificant maid-servant why she scours a dish or milks the cow, she can say: I know that the thing I do pleases God, for I have God’s Word and commandment...God does not look at the insignificance of the acts but at the heart that serves Him in such little things.

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What you do in your house is worth as much as if you did it up in heaven for our Lord God.

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It is pure invention that pope, bishops, priests and monks are to be called the "spiritual estate"; princes, lords, artisans and farmers the "temporal estate." That is indeed a fine bit of lying and hypocrisy. . . . All Christians are truly of the "spiritual estate," and there is among them no difference at all but that of office. . . . To make it still clearer. If a little group of pious Christian laymen were taken captive and set down in a wilderness, and had among them no priest consecrated by a bishop, and if there in the wilderness they were to agree in choosing one of themselves, married or unmarried, and were to charge him with the office of baptizing, saying mass, absolving and preaching, such a man would be as truly a priest as though all bishops and popes had consecrated him. . . . There is really no difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, "spirituals" and "temporals," as they call them, except that of office and work. . . . A cobbler, a smith, a farmer, each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops, and everyone by means of his own work or office must benefit and serve every other, that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, even as all the members of the body serve one another.

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To serve God simply means to do what God has commanded and not to do what God has forbidden. And if only we would accustom ourselves properly to this view, the entire world would be full of service to God [German: “gottesdienst”], not only the churches but also the home, the kitchen, the cellar, the workshop, and the field of townsfolk and farmers. For it is certain that God would have not only the church and world order but also the house order established and upheld. All, therefore, who serve the latter purpose—father and mother first, then the children, and finally the servants and neighbors—are jointly serving God; for so He wills and commands.

In the light of this view of the matter a poor maid should have the joy in her heart of being able to say: Now I am cooking, making the bed, sweeping the house. Who has commanded me to do these things? My master and mistress have. What has given them authority over me? God has. Very well, then it must be true that I am serving not them alone but also God in heaven and that God must be pleased with my service. How could I not possibly be more blessed? Why, my service is equal to cooking for God in heaven!

In this way a man could be happy and of good cheer in all his trouble and labor; and if he accustomed himself to look at his service and calling in this way, nothing would be distasteful to him. But the devil opposes this point of view tooth and nail, to keep one from coming to this joy and to cause everybody to have a special dislike for what he should do and

is commanded to do. So the devil operates in order to make sure that people do not love their work and no service be rendered to God.

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All our work in the field, in the garden, in the city, in the home, in struggle, in government-to what does it all amount before God except child's play, by means of which God is pleased to give his gifts in the field, at home, and everywhere? These are the masks of our Lord God, behind which he wants to be hidden and to do all things...

But the true holy orders and pious foundations established by God are these three: the priestly office, the family and the civil government...

All those who are engaged in the pastoral office or the ministry of the Word, are in a good, honest, holy order and station, that is well pleasing to God, as they preach, administer the Sacraments, preside over the poor funds and direct the sextons and other servants who assist in such labors, etc. These are all holy works in God's sight....

Likewise, those who are fathers or mothers, who rule their households well and who beget children for the service of God are also in a truly holy estate, doing a holy work, and members of a holy order. In the same way when children or servants are obedient to their parents or masters, this also is true holiness and those living in such estate are true saints on earth...

Similarly princes and overlords, judges, officials and chancellors, clerks, men servants and maids, and all other retainers, as well as all who render the service that is their due, are all in a state of holiness and are living holy lives before God, because these three estates or orders are all included in God's Word and commandment. Whatever is included in God's order must be holy, for God's Word is holy and hallows all it touches and all it includes.

Above these three estates and orders is the common order of Christian love, by which we minister not only to those of these three orders but in general to everyone who is in need, as when we feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty, etc., forgive enemies, pray for all men on earth, suffer all kinds of evil in our earthly life, etc.

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Luther on "give us this day our daily bread":

Here, now, we consider the poor bread basket, the necessities of our body and of the temporal life. It is a brief and simple word, but it has a very wide scope. For when you mention and pray for daily bread, you pray for everything that is necessary in order to have and enjoy daily bread and, on the other hand, against everything which interferes with it. Therefore you must open wide and extend your thoughts not only to the oven or the flour-bin, but to the distant field and the entire land, which bears and brings to us daily bread and every sort of sustenance. For if God did not cause it to grow, and bless and preserve it in the field, we could never take bread from the oven or have any to set upon the table.

[73](#)] To comprise it briefly, this petition includes everything that belongs to our entire life in the world, because on that account alone do we need daily bread. Now for our life it is not only necessary that our body have food and covering and other necessities, but also that we spend our days in peace and quiet among the people with whom we live and have intercourse in daily business and conversation and all sorts of doings, in short, whatever pertains both to the domestic and to the neighborly or civil relation and government. For where these two things are hindered [intercepted and disturbed] that they do not prosper as they ought, the necessities of life also are impeded, so that ultimately life cannot be maintained. [74](#)] And there is, indeed, the greatest need to pray for temporal authority and government, as that by which most of all God preserves to us our daily bread and all the comforts of this life. For though we have received of

God all good things in abundance, we are not able to retain any of them or use them in security and happiness, if He did not give us a permanent and peaceful government. For where there are dissension, strife, and war, there the daily bread is already taken away, or at least checked.

[75](#)] Therefore it would be very proper to place in the coat-of-arms of every pious prince a loaf of bread instead of a lion, or a wreath of rue, or to stamp it upon the coin, to remind both them and their subjects that by their office we have protection and peace, and that without them we could not eat and retain our daily bread. Therefore they are also worthy of all honor, that we give to them for their office what we ought and can, as to those through whom we enjoy in peace and quietness what we have, because otherwise we would not keep a farthing; and that, in addition, we also pray for them that through them God may bestow on us the more blessing and good.

[76](#)] Let this be a very brief explanation and sketch, showing how far this petition extends through all conditions on earth. Of this any one might indeed make a long prayer, and with many words enumerate all the things that are included therein, as that we pray God to give us food and drink, clothing, house, and home, and health of body; also that He cause the grain and fruits of the field to grow and mature well; furthermore, that He help us at home towards good housekeeping, that He give and preserve to us a godly wife, children, and servants, that He cause our work, trade, or whatever we are engaged in to prosper and succeed, favor us with faithful neighbors and good friends, etc. [77](#)] Likewise, that He give to emperors, kings, and all estates, and especially to the rulers of our country and to all counselors, magistrates, and officers, wisdom, strength, and success that they may govern well and vanquish the Turks and all enemies; to subjects and the common people, obedience, peace, and harmony in their life with one another; [78](#)] and on the other hand, that He would preserve us from all sorts of calamity to body and livelihood, as lightning, hail, fire, flood, poison, pestilence, cattle-plague, war and bloodshed, famine, destructive beasts, wicked men, etc. [79](#)] All this it is well to impress upon the simple, namely, that these things come from God, and must be prayed for by us.

[80](#)] But this petition is especially directed also against our chief enemy, the devil. For all his thought and desire is to deprive us of all that we have from God, or to hinder it; and he is not satisfied to obstruct and destroy spiritual government in leading souls astray by his lies and bringing them under his power, but he also prevents and hinders the stability of all government and honorable, peaceable relations on earth. There he causes so much contention, murder, sedition, and war, also lightning and hail to destroy grain and cattle, to poison the air, etc. [81](#)] In short, he is sorry that any one has a morsel of bread from God and eats it in peace; and if it were in his power, and our prayer (next to God) did not prevent him, we would not keep a straw in the field, a farthing in the house, yea, not even our life for an hour, especially those who have the Word of God and would like to be Christians.

[82](#)] Behold, thus God wishes to indicate to us how He cares for us in all our need, and faithfully provides also for our temporal support. [83](#)] And although He abundantly grants and preserves these things even to the wicked and knaves, yet He wishes that we pray for them, in order that we may recognize that we receive them from His hand, and may feel His paternal goodness toward us therein. For when He withdraws His hand, nothing can prosper nor be maintained in the end, as, indeed, we daily see and experience. [84](#)] How much trouble there is now in the world only on account of bad coin, yea, on account of daily oppression and raising of prices in common trade, bargaining and labor on the part of those who wantonly oppress the poor and deprive them of their daily bread! This we must suffer indeed; but let them take care that they do not lose the common intercession, and beware lest this petition in the Lord's Prayer be against them.

Gustav Wingren on Luther's doctrine of vocation:

In his vocation man does works which effect the well-being of others; for so God has made all offices. Through this work in man's offices, God's creative work goes forward, and that

creative work is love, a profusion of good gifts. With persons as his "hands" or "coworkers," God gives his gifts through the earthly vocations, toward man's life on earth (food through farmers, fishermen and hunters; external peace through princes, judges, and orderly powers; knowledge and education through teachers and parents, etc., etc.). Through the preacher's vocation, God gives the forgiveness of sins. Thus love comes from God, flowing down to human beings on earth through all vocations, through both spiritual and earthly governments.

If you find yourself in a work by which you accomplish something good for God, or the holy, or yourself, but not for your neighbor alone, then you should know that that work is not a good work. For each one ought to live, speak, act, hear, suffer, and die in love and service for another, even for one's enemies, a husband for his wife and children, a wife for her husband, children for their parents, servants for their masters, masters for their servants, rulers for their subjects and subjects for their rulers, so that one's hand, mouth, eye, foot, heart and desire is for others; these are Christian works, good in nature...

God does not need our works. But our neighbor does.

Gene Veith summarizes Luther's view:

When I go into a restaurant, the waitress who brings me my meal, the cook in the back who prepared it, the delivery men, the wholesalers, the workers in the food-processing factories, the butchers, the farmers, the ranchers, and everyone else in the economic food chain are all being used by God to "give me this day my daily bread."
This is the doctrine of vocation. God works through people, in their ordinary stations of life to which He has called them, to care for His creation. In this way, He cares for everyone Christian and non-Christian whom He has given life.
[As Luther puts it,] vocations are "masks of God." On the surface, we see an ordinary human face, our mother, the doctor, the teacher, the waitress, our pastor, but, beneath the appearances, God is ministering to us through them. God is hidden in human vocations. The other side of the coin is that God is hidden in us. When we live out our callings as spouses, parents, children, employers, employees, citizens, and the rest, God is working through us. Even when we do not realize it, when we fulfill our callings, we too are masks of God.

Again, Veith on Luther:

Vocation is nothing less than the theology of the Christian life. It provides the blueprint for how Christians are to live in the world and to influence their cultures. It is the key to strong marriages and effective parenting. According to the classic Protestant theologians, our multiple vocations—in the family, the culture, and the workplace—are where sanctification and discipleship happen.

Today many Christians have become disillusioned with political involvement and are floundering for ways to engage the culture. Christians struggle as much as non-Christians with broken marriages and troubled families. The stumbling economy and the pursuit of prosperity seem like materialistic treadmills.

Rediscovering the doctrine of vocation could energize contemporary Christianity and show Christians how once again they can be the world's salt and light....

Perhaps the best summation of the concept is in 1 Corinthians 7:17: "Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him."

God “assigns” different kinds and places of service for each Christian and then “calls” each Christian to that assignment. The Reformation theologians fleshed out this concept with other biblical teachings about God’s workings in society and the Christian’s life in the world (e.g., Ephesians 5-6, Romans 12-13, 1 Corinthians 7).

The great theologian of vocation was Martin Luther, who developed the teaching in his battles with monasticism—the view that the spiritual life requires withdrawal from secular life—and in defining “the priesthood of all believers.”

For Luther, vocation, like justification, is ultimately God’s work. God gives us our daily bread through the vocations of the farmer, the miller, and the baker. God creates new human beings through the vocations of fathers and mothers. God protects us through lawful magistrates.

Vocation is, first of all, about how God works through human beings. In His providential care and governing of His creation, God chooses to distribute His gifts by means of ordinary people exercising their talents, which themselves are gifts of God.

Thus, God heals by means of doctors, nurses, and other medical vocations. He makes our lives easier by means of inventors, scientists, and engineers. He creates beauty by means of artists, authors, and musicians. He gives us clothing, shelter, and other things we need by means of factory workers, construction contractors, and others who work with their hands. He cleans up after us by means of janitors and garbage collectors.

God thus looms behind everyone who provides us with the goods or services that we need. In one of Luther’s many memorable lines, God milks the cows through the hands of the milkmaid. This means that all work and all workers deserve honor. Whereas the world might look down on milkmaids and garbage collectors, they actually bear the sacred presence of God, who works in and through them.

God created us to be dependent on others—meat processors, manufacturers, journalists, lawyers, bankers, teachers, parents—and, through them, we are ultimately dependent upon God Himself.

Just as God is working through the vocation of others to bless us, He is working through us to bless others. In our vocations, we work side-by-side with God, as it were, taking part in His ceaseless creative activity and laboring with Him as He providentially cares for His creation.

Today the word vocation has become no more than a synonym for “job.” The theological term includes the work that we do, but it includes much more than that. God calls us to many different tasks and relationships. The unemployed still have vocations from God. Every Christian has multiple vocations.

Luther sorted them out into four “estates,” or spheres of life that God has established: the church, the household, the state, and what he called “the common order of Christian love.”

Every Christian has been “called” through the gospel into the life of faith (Romans 8:30), becoming a member of Christ’s body, the church. While God providentially works through nonbelievers as well as believers in their labors, “vocation,” strictly speaking, applies to Christians, those who hear themselves addressed in God’s Word.

In response to that Word, Christians recognize their other callings as works of faith. But God also calls people to tasks in His church. Pastors speak rightly of being “called” into the ministry, whereupon God works through them to teach His Word, preside at His sacraments, and give spiritual care to His people. Laypeople too are called to do tasks in the local congregation, singing in the choir, serving on committees, serving meals, and in other ways blessing their fellow members.

Being in a family is also a calling. God established marriage, and being a husband or a wife is a vocation. Being a father or a mother is also a vocation. So is being a son or a daughter. So are being a brother or sister, a nephew or uncle, a grandmother or grandfather. (Notice how one person holds multiple vocations within a family: A woman may be the wife of her husband, the mother of her children, the daughter of her mother, the sister of her brother, and more, with each vocation having its particular dimensions of service.)

For Luther the estate of the “household” includes both the family and the activities by which it supports itself. He had in mind the concept expressed in the Greek word *oikonomia*, the laws of

the household, from which we derive our word economy. For Luther, in his day of family-based labor, economic life is connected with family life.

We also have vocations in the state. We were each born into a particular time, place, and society. The cultural context in which we find ourselves is thus part of the life that God has assigned us. We thus have responsibilities to our government and to our culture as a whole. Some Christians are called to positions of authority in the government. Americans have the unusual calling of being both subjects and rulers at the same time, since our democratic republic places the governing authorities themselves under the authority of the people who elect them. Christians thus have the vocation of citizenship, which means that politics, civic involvement, and cultural engagement are all realms of Christian service.

Our formal positions in the family, the workplace, the church, and the culture are not the only spheres of service to which God assigns us and to which He calls us. Journalists like to refer to themselves as “the fourth estate,” but Luther’s fourth estate is the “common order of Christian love.” This is the realm where people of different vocations interact informally. In Christ’s parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite were on the way to serve in their vocations, but they ignored the man bleeding by the side of the road. In the ordinary course of everyday life and in our relationships with our friends and neighbors, God also calls us to service.

In stressing the spiritual significance of these so-called “secular” estates, Luther was challenging the Roman Catholic practice of reserving the terms vocation and calling for religious orders, to an individual’s calling from God to become a priest, a monk, or a nun. To enter into these “spiritual” offices required taking a vow of celibacy (thereby rejecting marriage and parenthood), poverty (thereby rejecting full participation in the economic life of the workplace), and obedience (which involved substituting the authority of the church for that of the state).

The Reformers insisted that the Christian life requires not withdrawal from the world but rather engagement in the world. The Christian faith is to be lived out not primarily in “church work” but in vocation.

What this meant in practice is that the “spiritual disciplines” moved out of the monastery into secular life. Celibacy became faithfulness in marriage. Poverty became thrift and hard work. Obedience became submission to the law. Most importantly, prayer, meditation, and worship—while still central to every Christian’s vocation in the church—also moved into the family and the workplace.

Today even Protestant Christians have often slipped into the assumption that serving God is a matter of “church work” or spiritual exercises. Churches set up programs that can take up every night of the week. Some Christians are so busy doing church activities, making evangelism calls, or going to Bible studies that they neglect their spouses and children. Some Christians are preoccupied with “the Lord’s work” while letting their marriages fall apart, ignoring the needs of their children, and otherwise sinning against the actual responsibilities to which God has called them.

But according to the doctrine of vocation, the church is the place where Christians meet every week to find the forgiveness of Christ, feed on God’s Word, and grow in their faith. Whereupon they are sent out into their vocations—to their spouses, children, jobs, and culture—for that faith to bear fruit. Faith bears fruit in love (Galatians 5:6; 1 Timothy 1:5). **The purpose of every vocation is to love and serve our neighbors. God doesn’t need our good works, Luther said, but our neighbor does. Our relationship with Him is based completely on His work for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. But just as God is hidden in vocation, Christ is hidden in our neighbors. “As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers”—feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, visiting the sick and imprisoned—“you did it to Me” (Matthew 25:40). We love and serve God in our vocations by loving and serving the actual human beings He places into our lives.**

Every vocation has its particular neighbors. Members of a congregation are called to love and serve each other. In marriage, husbands are to love and serve their wives, and wives are to

love and serve their husbands. Parents love and serve their children, who, in turn, love and serve their parents. Rulers love and serve their subjects. Workers love and serve their customers.

Certain vocations exercise authority. But authority itself is not just a matter of exercising power over others. "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them," said Jesus. "But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant. . . . For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45).

Of course, we often sin in and against vocation. Instead of serving, we want to be served. Instead of loving our neighbor, we often use our neighbor for our own selfish purposes.

Vocation clarifies moral issues. Mothers are called to love and serve their children, not abort them or abuse them. Doctors are called to heal their patients, not kill them. Leaders are called to love and serve those under their authority, not exploit and tyrannize them.

Some actions are sinful when done outside of vocation but good works when done within vocation. We have no calling from God that would authorize having sex with someone to whom we are not married. But within the vocation of marriage, sex is not only authorized, it becomes the means by which God creates a one-flesh union, engenders new life, and builds a family.

Vocation has to do with the priesthood of all believers. A priest is someone who performs a sacrifice. We no longer need sacrifices for our sins, since Christ, our great High Priest, offered Himself as our sacrifice once and for all (Hebrews 9:26). But, in light of that sacrifice, God calls us "to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1).

Loving and serving involves an act of self-denial for the sake of someone else. That is, it involves a sacrifice. Again, Mark 10 says that rulers are to serve as Christ did, giving His life as a ransom. Today's "Gentiles" not only seek to "lord it over" others, they are obsessed with self-fulfillment and self-assertion. Vocation focuses on self-sacrifice.

The Bible instructs wives to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ. At the same time, though, the Bible instructs husbands to love their wives "as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25). The husband is not to receive the wife's submission in domination or in "lording it over" her, since that was not how Christ loved the church. Rather, he is to emulate Christ precisely in "giving himself up" for his wife. Thus, both the wife and the husband are called to sacrifice themselves for each other. Both are presenting themselves as living sacrifices.

The father, coming home from work dead tired, has presented his body as a living sacrifice for his family. So has the mother who drives her kids to soccer practice when she has many other things she would rather do. So has the worker who has put in long hours to do the best job possible for the company's customers.

Christ, who is in vocation and in the neighbor, takes up all of these sacrifices, small or great, into His sacrifice. And He loves and serves His creation by means of our love and service in our vocations.

In all our religious and ethical life," says Einar Billing in his classic work on vocation, *Our Calling*, "we are given to an incredible overestimation of the extraordinary at the expense of the ordinary." We look for miracles, spectacular events, and mountain top experiences. Meanwhile, the spiritual significance of everyday life gets overlooked. Vocation, though, transfigures our ordinary, mundane existence, charging it with spiritual significance and with the very presence of God.

Luther said that changing a baby's diaper is a holy work. A child doing his chores is outperforming the Carthusian monks in works of holiness. By extension, we can see the office desk, the factory machinery, the computer screen—likewise the voting booth, the marriage bed, the dining room table—as altars upon which we exercise our royal priesthood.

Vocation is where sanctification happens, as Christians grow spiritually in good works and in their relationships. Vocation is where evangelism happens, as Christians teach their children

and interact with nonbelievers. Vocation is where cultural influence happens, as Christians take their places and live out their faith in every niche of society.

Vocation changes the quality of what we do. An artist with a sense of vocation will create not just to express himself or to advance his career but to love and serve—not corrupt or ridicule—his audience. A businessman who sees his customers as the objects of his Christian love will serve them with his very best work.

From the outside, the economy has to do with the division of labor, individuals pursuing their own self-interests, laws of supply and demand, and other impersonal forces. And so it is, as part of God’s created order. From the inside, however, the economy can become transfigured into a vast network of mutual dependence and mutual service, and economic activity can become an expression of love.

John Calvin (*Institutes*, III, x, vi):

The Lord commands every one of us, in all the actions of life, to regard his vocation. For he knows with what great unrest the human mind is inflamed, with what desultory levity it is hurried hither and thither, and how insatiable is its ambition to grasp different things at once. Therefore, to prevent universal confusion being produced by our folly and temerity, he has appointed to all their particular duties in different spheres of life. And that no one might rashly transgress the limits prescribed, he has styled such spheres of life vocations or callings. Every individual’s line of life, therefore, is, as it were, a post assigned him by the Lord, that he may not wander about in uncertainty all his days. And so necessary is this distinction, that in his sight all our actions are estimated according to it, and often very differently from the sentence of human reason and philosophy.

There is no exploit esteemed more honorable, even among philosophers, than to deliver our country from tyranny; but the voice of the celestial Judge openly condemns the private man who lays violent hands on a tyrant. It is not my design, however, to pause to list examples. It is sufficient if we know that the principle and foundation of right conduct in every case is the vocation of the Lord, and that he who disregards it will never keep the right way in the duties of his station.

He that is in obscurity will lead a private life without discontent, so as not to desert the station in which God has placed him. It will also be no small alleviation of his cares, labors, troubles, and other burdens, when a man owns that in all these things he has God for his guide.

The magistrate will execute his office with greater pleasure, the father of a family will confine himself to his duty with more satisfaction, and all, in their respective spheres of life, will bear and surmount the inconveniences, cares, disappointments, and anxieties which befall them, when they shall be persuaded that every individual has his burden laid upon him by God. Hence also will arise peculiar consolation, since there will be no employment so mean and sordid (provided we follow our vocation) as not to appear truly respectable, and be deemed highly important in the sight of God.

Teresa of Avila:

God walks among the pots and pans.

Lester DeKoster:

The difference between life in a wilderness and here is work. In the wilderness, you must do everything for yourself. But civilization is sharing in the work of others. Look at the chair you sit in. Imagine making it yourself — even if you had the skills, you'd need the tools. Do you have the skill to make the tools? And even if you had the skills for that, could you mine the ore to get the metal? And if you had the skills to do that, how would you get the ore down from the mountain? Would you make the truck? In other words, to simply make a chair from scratch is, in a sense, a lifetime of work for one person. But through the work of others, you can buy it with the fruit of a few hours of labor. Civilization is sharing in work of others. Your paycheck, whatever it is, can buy you the use of far more than you could possibly make for yourself in the time it took to earn the check. Work makes us interdependent. Work is cultivating the resources of the material and human universe. Work plants the seed; civilization reaps the harvest. Work is the form in which we make ourselves useful to others; civilization is the form in which others make themselves useful to us. Work unifies the human race and carries out the will of God.

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The basic form of stewardship is daily work. No matter what that work may be. No matter if you have never before looked on your job as other than a drudge, a bore, or a fearful trial. Know that the harder it is for you to face each working day, the more your will to persevere schools the soul. Work is the fundamental form of stewardship because:

God himself works: "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working" (John 5:17), the Lord says. It is not recounted that God plays, but he works. That is to say, God is ever-busy making provision for our existence. Work is that which serves another. Play is that which serves ourselves.

Work knits the fabric of civilization. We take for granted all the possibilities which work alone provides. And we become aware of how work sustains the order which makes life possible when that order is rent by lightning flashes of riot or war, and the necessities which work normally provides become difficult to come by.

Man's history begins in a garden and mounts to a city. A garden is what God the Holy Spirit does, without man, with a wilderness. A city is what God the Holy Spirit does through man's work.

It is of the nature of work to serve the community. Whether work is done in the home, on the land, or in the countless forms of enterprise developed across the centuries, work is doubly blessed: (1) it provides for the family of man, and (2) it matures the worker.

Work matures the worker because it requires ethical decision. Merely to rise to one's daily tasks requires an act of will, a decision to serve the community, however reluctantly, however unaware the worker may be that such is the case. Such willed acts of service not only make and sustain the fabric of civilization and culture, but also develop the soul. And, while the object of work is destined to perish, the soul formed by daily decision to do work carries over into eternity.

This perspective on work, as a maturing of the soul, liberates the believer from undue concern over the monotony of the assembly line, the threat of technology, or the reduction of the worker to but an easily replaceable cog in the industrial machine. One's job may be done by another. But each doer is himself unique, and what carries over beyond life and time is not the work but the worker. What doing the job does for each of us is not repeated in anyone else. What the exercise of will, of

tenacity, of courage, of foresight, of triumph over temptations to get by, does for you is uniquely your own. One worker may replace another on the assembly line, but what each worker carries away from meeting the challenge of doing the day's shift will ever be his own. The lasting and creative consequence of daily work happens to the worker. God so arranges that civilization grows out of the same effort that develops the soul.

The forms of work are countless, but the typical one is work with the hands. The Bible has reference to the sower, to the making of tents and of things out of clay, to tilling the fields and tending the vine. Handwork makes visible the plan in the mind, just as the deed makes visible the love in the heart. While the classic Greek mind tended to scorn work with the hands, the Bible suggests that something about it structures the soul.

The results of one's work can never be fully known. What will become of the produce raised, of the machine built, of the person fed? No one can foretell what will be the final consequence of today's effort. Nor does the paycheck really measure the value, nor the effort, of the work for which it is given. Wages are set by the market, and the results of work are hidden in the mists of tomorrow. What endures is what happens to the worker who bravely makes it through the day.

Seen in this light, which is the light shed by the Bible on work, it is easy to understand why work is the primary form of stewardship. To work, most of us give the largest unit of our lives. By work, we together raise the level of our culture, keep its order, supply its needs, and point to its promise of better living for more of the world's peoples.

For the believer then, stewardship begins with the day's work. Done well, as unto God, in the full knowledge that by work the world lives, work serves God and man and the self.

Dorothy Sayers:

The habit of thinking about work as something one does to make money is so ingrained in us that we can scarcely imagine what a revolutionary change it would be to think about it instead in terms of the work done. To do so would mean taking the attitude of mind we reserve for our unpaid work – our hobbies, our leisure interests, the things we make and do for pleasure – and making that the standard of all our judgments about things and people. We should ask of an enterprise, not “will it pay?” but “is it good?”; of a man, not “what does he make?” but “what is his work worth?”; of goods, not “Can we induce people to buy them?” but “are they useful things well made?”; of employment, not “how much a week?” but “will it exercise my faculties to the utmost?” And shareholders in – let us say – brewing companies, would astonish the directorate by arising at shareholders' meeting and demanding to know, not merely where the profits go or what dividends are to be paid, not even merely whether the workers' wages are sufficient and the conditions of labor satisfactory, but loudly and with a proper sense of personal responsibility: “What goes into the beer?”

The first [proposition], stated quite briefly, is that work is not, primarily, a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do. It is, or it should be, the full expression of the worker's faculties, the thing in which he finds spiritual, mental and bodily satisfaction, and the medium in which he offers himself to God.

...

A very able surgeon put it to me like this: 'What is happening is that nobody works for the sake of getting the thing done. The actual result of the work is a by-product; the aim of the work is to make money to do something else. Doctors practice medicine, not primarily to relieve suffering, but to make a living—the cure of the patient is something that happens on the way. Lawyers accept briefs, not because they have a passion for justice, but because the law is the profession which enables them to live. The reason why men often find themselves happy and satisfied in the army is that for the first time in their lives they find themselves doing something, not for the sake of the pay, which is miserable, but for the sake of getting the thing done.'

...

The Church's approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him not to be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours, and to come to church on Sundays. What the Church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables.

Church by all means, and decent forms of amusement, certainly – but what use is all that if in the very center of his life and occupation he is insulting God with bad carpentry? No crooked table legs or ill-fitting drawers ever, I dare swear, came out of the carpenter's shop at Nazareth. Nor, if they did, could anyone believe that they were made by the same hand that made Heaven and earth. No piety in the worker will compensate for work that is not true to itself; for any work that is untrue to its own technique is a living lie.

...

[The Church] has lost all sense of the fact that the living and eternal truth is expressed in work only so far as that work is true in itself, to itself, to the standards of its own technique. She has forgotten that the secular vocation is sacred. Forgotten that a building must be good architecture before it can be a good church; that a painting must be well painted before it can be a good sacred picture; that work must be good work before it can call itself God's work.

The Kingdom Work of the Corporate World

DICK DOSTER, ISSUE NUMBER 11, OCTOBER 2006

Scanning the church directory you couldn't help but notice: in almost every household, someone was, or had been, involved in business. Which means, if this church is typical, that God has called all but a handful of His people to some form of commercial enterprise. He hasn't called them to missions or the pastorate or to any other "full-time Christian work," but to profit-driven, money making, dog-eat-dog, secular business.

What, we might be tempted to ask, is God thinking? Christians are "not to conform any longer to the pattern of this world" (Romans 2:2), and yet business is relentless in its temporal demands. It's a zero sum game: When one salesman wins, others lose. For lawyers to succeed, they must cause others to fail. If I work for Chevrolet, it's my duty to steal customers, market share, and profits away from Toyota. Hardly a picture of a caring community.

Christians are commanded to do nothing out of selfish ambition (Philippians 2:3), but business, at its essence, is striving and acquisitive. It grows or dies. Microsoft, Google, ExxonMobil, and Wal-Mart swallow up weaker competitors. They expand across the globe, their profits unfathomable, as the value of their stock continues to soar — almost always at the expense of weaker, more vulnerable competitors. This is raw, naked, unvarnished ambition, and it makes business, at best, an awkward environment for humble souls who "consider others better than themselves" (Philippians 2:3).

We most easily spot the “pattern of this world” in man’s reverence for wealth. And the singular goal of nearly every business ever mentioned on the pages of *Forbes* or *Fortune* is to earn as much profit as humanly possible. When they evaluate corporate performance, Wall Street analysts, the press, and investors all join in Jerry Maguire’s once-famous chorus: “Show me the money!”

And the evidence from the church directory is indisputable: God’s people willingly — and even gladly — join forces with these worldly, ambitious, profit-hungry organizations who, they hope, will share the wealth ... with them. And they do so knowing that it is impossible to love God and money (Matthew 6:24), and knowing, as surely as they know the chief end of man, that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10).

Certainly, business is no place for those who have “set their minds on things above, not on earthly things” (Colossians 3:2). And yet, that is precisely where God has put them. And that can only mean one of two things: either most Christians need to find new work, or they need a new perspective on the institution of business.

There are, when we look closer, hundreds of biblical and godly reasons for Christians to be in business. And many of them fall into one of these three categories.

Business and Our First Responsibility

In Genesis 1:26, God lays out His plan for the human race: "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule" Two verses later, He commissions Adam and Eve: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it."

That cultural commission, writer/theologian Paul Marshall argues, is more than a set of commands or instructions. Its emphasis is not on what God tells the man and woman; but on why He created them in the first place. As His consummate act of creation, God forms a creature “to be our image and rule” over the Earth. “Ruling” Marshall says, is “built into our very being If we do not take up our responsibility for God’s world, we defy not only His command, but also our very nature and the very purpose for which we have been created.”

Stamped with God’s image, Adam and Eve were to continue God’s creative work in the world. They were to take the raw materials God left behind and continue shaping, molding, and improving His creation. As Michael Wittmer, a professor at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary, notes, “God’s world was flawless, but it wasn’t finished.”

He didn’t create computers, but they were here waiting for His image bearers — working together and combining their diverse skills and talents — to put the pieces together. He didn’t create phonograph records, 8-tracks, audiocassettes, CDs, or iPods, but the raw materials existed from the beginning, waiting for man to make one discovery, then another, each generation building and improving on the work that had come before. God didn’t create television, telephones, or microwave ovens, but the elements were all here, awaiting the creative prowess of His image bearers — engineers, scientists, and industrial designers, working in concert with one another — to call them into existence.

Man invents, produces, and improves products, writer Nathan Bierma says, “because we’re following our mission. ... We do this out of instinct, obeying God’s command to fill the Earth and subdue it.”

In the August 2006 issue of *byFaith*, readers discussed the importance of the arts. As God's image-bearers, many said, we are meant to create, and the arts are the vehicle for our imaginative expression. But have you ever thought about the creative power of business?

Consider the things that make your life richer, more comfortable, more convenient, and more productive. Think about all the things that make you safer, healthier, and wiser. They are all products of business innovation. There is no more creative force in the world than business, and God has placed most of His people there, not to pursue money or power, nor to satisfy their selfish ambition — but to create, rule, fill, and subdue the Earth. Christians go to work each day to transform God's world, to make it better than it was the day before. And they do it in obedience to God's first command — as an act of worship, and for the sake of His glory.

Business Is How We Love Our Neighbors

The Pharisees wanted to test Jesus, and so they asked Him for the single greatest commandment. He replied with two. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ... And 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 27: 37-40). Here, essentially, is every believer's duty: love God, love others, and love yourself. The rest takes care of itself.

God has placed most of His people in business because it is there, working with others in a common purpose, that is how we fulfill these duties. In *The Fabric of this World*, Lee Hardy discusses Luther's concept of vocation. Hardy summarizes Luther, saying, "Vocation is the specific call to love one's neighbor, which comes to us through the duties which attach to our social place or 'station.'" (Calvin, in response to a freer labor market, would emphasize "gifts" rather than "station.")

"The call to love one's neighbor goes out to all," Luther believed, "but what this call requires of me in particular is discovered in those vocations which I presently occupy." In the 21st century, as much as when Luther said it, "It is 'through the human pursuit of vocation ... that the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the sick are healed, the ignorant are enlightened, and the weak are protected.'"

Luther saw the connection between the cultural commission and the great commandments. He understood that God continues his creative work in this world through those who bear His image, explaining that: "God even milks the cows through those called to that work." In the 21st century it is business, blending the skills of diverse people, that brings the human race under God's providential care.

In *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, Gene Edward Veith also cites Luther: "**When we pray the Lord's Prayer we ask God to give us this day our daily bread. And He ... does it by means of the farmer [think Cargill, Inc. or Archer Daniels Midland] who planted and harvested the grain, the baker [who, while working for Sara Lee, Pepperidge Farm, or Flowers Bakeries] made the flour into bread, we might today add the truck drivers who hauled the produce, the factory workers in the food processing plant, the warehouse men, the wholesale distributors, the stock boys, the lady at the checkout counter. Also playing their part are the bankers, futures investors, advertisers, lawyers All of these were instrumental in enabling you to eat your morning bread.**"

Calvin affirmed much of Luther's thinking. In his *Commentary on the Harmony of the Gospels*, he criticized the common interpretation of the Mary / Martha conflict found in Luke 10 ("Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself?") He refused a dualistic understanding of that passage, writing: "We know that men were created for the

express purpose of being employed in labor of various kinds, and that no sacrifice is more pleasing to God than when every man applies diligently to his own calling, and endeavors to contribute to the general advantage."

Zwingli also concurred. In *Of the Education of the Youth*, he added: "...[it is] those who exercise themselves in righteousness that they may serve the Christian community, the common good, the state, and individuals that are 'the most like to God.'"

Business Is How We Care for the Poor

Business is the means by which we rule and subdue the Earth. It is an instrument through which we love our neighbors. And it is, in an ultimate sense, the only solution to poverty.

At the most fundamental level, business provides wealth to share. Psalm 37: 25, 26 says, "I have been young, and now I am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, or his descendants begging bread. All day long he is gracious and lends; and his descendants are a blessing." When God's people prosper, they're generous and take care of the poor. There's a related idea in Ephesians 4:28: "Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need." Paul seeks more than a transformed heart (let him steal no longer); he understands that for-profit work in the secular world is how we care for those in need.

But there's far more to business, as an institution, than that. In his book, *Business as a Calling*, Catholic theologian **Michael Novak argues that "capitalism makes it possible for the vast majority of the poor to break out of the prison of poverty — to find opportunity — to discover full scope for their own personal economic initiative; and to rise into the middle class and higher."** Those who live in democratic, capitalistic societies, Novak says, "walk the walk of the free — erect and purposeful and quick."

The Scriptures remind us often of God's concern for the poor. They command us to respect them, to have compassion for them, and to seek justice on their behalf. And that is surely one reason God has called His people to business, the only institution that can have a permanent effect on their poverty.

Some might argue that it is technology and science — and not business — that have improved life for the poor and made living conditions more bearable. But, Novak rhetorically asks, "Whence came the drive to advance technology — and not only through gaining knowledge about it, but by bringing it to markets that carry it to billions of individuals — if not from an enterprising, dynamic market system?" He pushes the rhetorical argument further, asking, "How many pharmaceuticals do you have in your home that were developed in communist countries or for that matter, in Third World countries?"

The former Soviet Union, Novak points out, trained more scientist and technical experts than any country in the history of the world. Yet they accomplished little for the greater good of mankind. Why? They had no moral or economic incentive. And even if one had existed, there was no market system — no vehicle — for moving knowledge out of the lab and into people's lives.

Management guru Peter Drucker once said, "The greatest need in underdeveloped countries is people who build ... an effective organization of skilled and trained people exercising judgment and making responsible decisions." The poor, Drucker was saying, need business if they're to have a chance of changing their circumstances.

As we think about “kingdom work” and jobs that have value, it’s helpful to remember that only business — not the Church, not government, not ministry, nor non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—creates new wealth. And wealth is the only cure for poverty. We must, therefore, encourage believers to go into business, to create new products and wider distribution (in obedience to the cultural commission) in order to create new wealth (good stewardship), which creates more jobs (loving our neighbor, caring for the poor). Adam Smith, the 18th century economist and philosopher, once said that new wealth is the road to “universal opulence,” which he defined as “the condition in which the real wages of workers keep growing over time, until the poor live at a level that in 1776 even kings and dukes did not enjoy.”

A realistic hope for a better (economic) future, Michael Novak says, “is essential to the poor” And that is why God’s people must build profitable businesses.

Transforming Business for the Kingdom

Suzy Schultz and Mako Fujimura are talented artists. Their Christian worldview informs and inspires their work, and both are critically acclaimed by Christians and non-Christians alike. Novelists Marilynne Robinson and Bret Lott are believers who sculpt words into beautiful stories that enrich millions of lives. Musicians from Bach to U2 have, in response to God’s call, created the world’s best music.

Christian artists add beauty and complexity to God’s creation, transforming the raw materials of paint, language, and sound into finished products that proclaim God’s glory.

Where are their business counterparts — the entrepreneurs and corporate executives who, with the same passion, reshape the world through business? And who, intentionally and for the sake of God’s glory, manage the power of free markets to make the world more productive? Where are the Christians who are propelling the world’s best corporations?

God’s people can, as agents of His redemptive plan, transform business, stripping it of selfish ambition and pursuing instead what’s best for their neighbors. Through business, God’s people can harness mankind’s creativity, and with it nurture His creation, developing products that make the world more satisfying. Through the economic power of commerce, Christians can make the world safer and healthier. The members of Christ’s Church, distributed in offices around the world, can transform greed into good stewardship, showing the world that business has a biblical responsibility to create new wealth and provide a fair return to investors (Matthew 25:14-28). But, with an eye toward the consummation of Christ’s kingdom, we also create wealth in order to create new and satisfying jobs, which offer the hope (and perhaps a glimpse) of a coming world where there is no poverty.

God has placed His people in business so that they can — in humility, and making full use of the talents and resources He’s given — serve customers, employees, suppliers, and the world at large, looking out for the interests of others and providing for their needs.

On their deathbeds, many Christians will regret that they didn’t love their neighbors, care for the poor, or advance Christ’s kingdom as they should have. They might therefore, with their final breath, gasp: “I wish I’d spent more time at the office.”