

***Business as a Calling and Profession***  
***Towards a Protestant Entrepreneurial Ethic***  
***Part A***

By Gordon Preece

Note: adapted from the above title in Samuel Gregg and Gordon Preece, *Christianity and Entrepreneurship; Protestant and Catholic Thoughts*. (St. Leonards NSW: Centre for Independent Studies, 1999) printed here with permission. All Bible references are NRSV unless noted.

**Introduction**

A retired Protestant businessman told me recently how he had once spoken about business at an Anglican church only to be told by two young men that a Christian could not possibly be engaged in such a sordid activity. They would not be alone. A large number of Protestant Christians today would be uneasy with the claim that business can be an avenue of one's Christian calling. Given the bad press that many transnational business corporations get, and some deserve, this feeling is understandable. Yet, I will argue, it is ultimately misguided, representing an amnesia about one of Protestantism's great distinctives, the doctrine of the universal calling or vocation of all believers, in whatever biblically lawful places of service these believers find themselves.

For some, this dis-ease about business is justified rationally, drawing on a range of sources - Scripture, Aristotle, Anabaptism, Marx. Some others simply have a gut reaction that business is only about filthy lucre. Still others "may say that the pastors, teachers, physicians and social workers ... may have callings but not the managers, marketers, financiers and accountants" (Lambert, 1). They are concerned that the title of "calling" may dignify a dirty business or perhaps offer a Christian blank check to a morally murky area. But are the former occupations intrinsically better than the latter? I think not. My aim in this paper is to retrieve the Protestant doctrine of vocation and the related concept of profession in order to affirm contemporary business and guide it in a more ethical and accountable direction.

Some may be skeptical of the relevance of religion in general and Protestantism in particular to a global business environment. Yet Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* argues that the major world conflicts today are increasingly religiously and culturally based. This is even more pertinent post September 11. It is vital therefore to address this more explicit religious dimension in economic affairs and multinational corporations as we move out of our parochial Western, but implicitly religious secularism into regions where religion matters much more publicly, such as Islamic nations (McCann, 3).

Many business people are spiritually rudderless in navigating the sometimes treacherous waters of transnational commerce. Increased secularization in public life has left the Protestant doctrine of vocation unacknowledged, and increasing work mobility has rendered the notion of one vocation for life rare (Volf 1991, 105-9; Preece 1998, 268-69). Yet people hunger for a sense of personal and public coherence in an increasingly fragmentary postmodern society that tears them apart. They want to connect their real, ongoing selves with their changeable working roles. Recovering and revising the doctrine of vocation for a mobile society provides a richer resource for this task than contemporary new age quests for a spirituality of work.

Currently, business people have difficulty connecting Sunday to Monday because they suspect their work is unspiritual and cannot be a calling (Lambert, 2; Preece 1995, 3-5; Diehl, v, vi). Recovering a sense of vocation helps make the Sunday-Monday connection real. In an effort to address this difficulty, I will begin with this article by engaging with our basic text, the Bible, concerning economics and business. In subsequent articles, I will address the development of the idea of vocation throughout church history and apply the concept to contemporary business and corporations.

### **1. The Bible, Wealth and Business**

Protestants are people of the Book. We will therefore look at the Bible for light on business. For

anyone concerned with modern economic life who has not wrestled with the biblical materials that have shaped our society is not yet fully professional. The manager [etc.] who attempts to speak of business matters does not know whence certain of the deepest patterns in modern business derive unless that person knows something about Scripture (Stackhouse, 37).

#### *a. Differences Between Biblical “Wealth” and Contemporary Productive Capital*

Some people make a common assumption, backed by biblical texts, that engagement in wealth creation is not a valid biblical calling. Yet, we should beware of anachronistically reading back our economic structures into Scripture. Biblical anthropologist Bruce J. Malina notes how biblical and Mediterranean economies did not exist in themselves but were embedded in kinship and political contexts of belonging. Wealth and poverty, including the prohibition of interest for loans to Israelites (e.g. Deut. 23:19-20), were evaluated by whether they brought honor or shame in kinship and political terms. Jim Halteman, an Anabaptist economist (a more anti-capitalist Protestant group), notes that:

[A] no-growth subsistence orientation ... leads naturally to strong admonitions against accumulated wealth and to a concentrated focus on income distribution questions rather than production questions ... Not until AD 1000 did capital inventions and innovative processes begin to expand production in ways that caused some to think of continued growth as a possibility (55-58).

Reformed theologian John Schnieder (24) agrees. Ancient economic systems failed to create freedom and wealth for the majority. They were top-down, trickle up, autocratic systems, profitable for a few. Poverty was seen as something always with us. The idea of arming people to eliminate it, rather than merely giving alms to alleviate it, is relatively recent. The new political order of democracy and economic order of capitalism gave many people unprecedented wealth and control of their circumstances, despite continuing deficiencies.

However, as Halteman (62-63) wisely notes western consumer junkies are not let off the hook:

It would be inappropriate to downplay the sharp condemnation of wealth in Scripture simply because productive wealth is now more common than hoarded wealth. The danger of idolatry is present in all times. However, ... it is inappropriate to condemn a wealthy business person today by using the anti-wealth passages of Scripture if his wealth is accumulated in productive tools for socially desirable output and he successfully resists the temptations of being rich ...

In reaction to those who link today's productive wealth to the hoarded wealth of the first century (and thus oppose it), the Christian business person often seeks scriptural texts, usually in Proverbs, to show that Scripture is not anti-wealth. In its extreme forms, this view becomes an individualistic "health and wealth" gospel (God wants you wealthy!) which brings about a consequent reaction from South American and other liberation theologians. Though understandable given their contexts, neither approach understands the whole biblical context in a balanced way. In determining whether we're being productive for the kingdom or hoarding our wealth, a key question is, "What has God called us to?" It must be answered in a corporate not individualistic way, also considering our local and global context and connections.

b. *Genesis - God's Great Risk on Human Dominion Over Creation*

To understand the whole biblical perspective on business and wealth it is best to quickly work our way through its main forms of literature, law, prophets, wisdom, gospels, and epistles from beginning to end. In Genesis God is depicted in personal, relational, almost entrepreneurial terms as "The God Who Risks" (Sanders). God ventures on a partnership with humanity - God bets on humanity, above all the humanity of Jesus. Most of all, God risks by making a distinct creation and a free humanity to rule it, each with its own identity. Genesis 1 depicts God's delight in the sheer extravagance of creation and creativity and his invitation to humanity to exercise "dominion with delight" (Schnieder). As Tolkien says, we are "sub-creators," imaging God by developing and keeping the earth (Gen 1:26-28; ch. 2).

In Genesis, the image of God and dominion is ascribed to all. Without this democratized dominion, modern technologies or economies are inconceivable. The dominion or cultural mandate unleashes the universal creativity and initiative of every man and woman. However, this God-given sense of initiative is soon directed away from creation in a futile quest for infinite, divine prerogatives (Gen 3:1-7). Work and birth both became literally hard labor (Gen 3:16-19). And yet the mandate to develop the earth is renewed, though modified, through Noah (Gen 9:1-17). Humans were made to be enterprising, entrepreneurial beings, in partnership with God and each other, even if fallen.

c. *The Exodus and Jubilee Laws of Economic Liberation*

Unfortunately, unlike Israel, Egyptian rulers believed dominion was only theirs. Like most ancient civilizations, theirs was built on the backs of slaves (in this case Hebrews). God's demonstration of dominion over the Nile and the Red Sea in liberating Israel from Egypt ended their exploitation and opened up the possibility of true dominion over creation again in an Edenic "land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 3:8 NRSV).

Israel's laws are extrapolations of the Exodus, the enshrining of freedom and democratic dominion into the very fabric of its social and economic life. However, forms of economic domination over others' means of production or land soon arose. But the Jubilee laws were developed to counter it. While neither socialistic nor capitalistic, their vision of justice, individual liberty, irrevocable property rights and banking, lending, and productivity probably has more in common with democratic capitalism, at its best, than proposed alternatives. The problem is that capitalism has still to be properly democratized, according to jubilee principles.

God liberated Israel into a life of extravagant productivity. He was the Creator God, but if they forgot God and their less fortunate fellows in their newfound prosperity, and worshipped wealth and other gods, their prosperity would soon

vanish (Deut 8:7-20). This loss happened; they were exiled into landlessness for forgetting God as the source of their salvation and its outward sacrament - land and material blessing.

#### d. *Prophets and Profits*

Many today assume that Israel's prophets were against profits. Numerous texts, especially in Amos, thunder God's wrath at the oppression of the poor. Yet Amos does not condemn delight in the good things of life in themselves, but rather the people's narcissism and callous indifference to the poor (Amos 6:1-7). Instead of practicing Exodus principles of material and social liberation and solidarity, they adopted an Egyptian way of life; thus, they were to be judged and exiled. However, God's people would return, refined, to unprecedented fertility and abundance (Amos 9), and the liberty and justice of the Jubilee laws would be proclaimed (Is 61:1-2).

#### e. *Proverbial Wisdom*

Perhaps the most business-friendly biblical traditions are found in Proverbs. Proverbs provides a strong middle-class ethic of family loyalty, hard work, and honesty grounded in respectful fear of God. Wealth is good, though tempting, while poverty is bad and tempting. "Give me neither poverty nor riches; ... or I shall be full, and deny you, and say, 'Who is the Lord?' or I shall be poor and steal, and profane the name of the Lord my God" (Prov 30:8-9 NRSV).

It is dangerous, however, to develop a rigid retributive scheme which turns generally descriptive proverbs into prescriptions claiming that honesty and hard work always pay. Job's friends pushed this literalistic line - Job's suffering was due to sin. Satan the utilitarian claimed Job only feared God for what he could get. Job, however, held to his integrity and was finally rewarded: first, with a vision of God's transcendence and creative and spontaneous delight in the diversity of creation with all of its inherent riskiness, mystery and freedom to flout rigid rules; and second, with much more than he lost before (Job 38-42). Job's story illustrates God's wholistic, relational covenant with humanity, not a rigid utilitarian contract.

#### f. *Jesus and Wealth*

The common romantic picture of Jesus as a rustic Galilean peasant, possibly even a Che Guevara or Zealot revolutionary, does not fit the evidence. Jesus' birth was not only attended by the poor shepherds but also by the well-off Eastern astrologers bringing expensive gifts (Mt 2:1-12). Jesus belonged to a small business family of builders (Mk 6:3), part of the Galilean middle class of skilled workers (Hengel, 26-27). While not rich, he probably had ample work on the big construction projects at the sophisticated Greco-Roman city of Sepphorus a few kilometers away (Batey). Jesus' middle class-ness probably helped him to move inclusively across classes, to identify with the poor crowds and the rich tax collectors alike.

John Schneider (112-13) highlights the implications of the locus of Jesus' incarnation, unappreciated by many contemporary ethicists and church leaders:

Jesus' chosen place in his society as a tradesman reflects a certain *goodness* on property, on creative, productive work and on the sort of personhood that goes with it. The commercial system is thus, in a way, redeemed through his economic person .... He was a builder and a businessman, and this was apparently part of what expressed his perfection as a human being.

Jesus “benefitted from the stability of peace, legal order, good road systems, stimulated cash flow and building projects ... that improved standards in his own region” (Schneider, 115). But the evil structures of Roman power included totalitarianism, militarism, slavery, extortionate taxation, and occasional genocide. To think that Christians must stand somehow outside the system of sinful economic structures, while taking sin seriously and the West's complicity in such structures, downplays two key facts: we cannot, and Jesus did not, simply slip out of the system; and the Creator God still sustains and blesses the sinful world.

This observation of the life of Jesus discredits a rigid rule of perfectionism or withdrawal as a criterion for Christian economic and vocational life.

Yet having earthed Jesus economically in the Galilean construction industry, it is important to stress that he primarily constructed God's kingdom and his main business was God's business (Lk 2:49). This fact relativizes all earthly activities, entrepreneurial or socially activist, even revolutionary, in the light of what Karl Barth calls “the revolution of God” against all unrighteousness (544-5). Business is good, but it is not God.

#### *g. Jesus' First Followers*

Many assume that Jesus' followers were mainly poor. Though Jesus announced a Jubilee upon the Jewish and Gentile poor (Lk 4:18), his followers came from all walks of life. The first group, the disciples, included middle-class fishermen with their own boats and servants - one of the biggest businesses on the lake - and a wealthy tax collector (Lk 5:29). To follow Jesus they left behind relative wealth and security.

The second group who followed Jesus supported him and his disciples from their relatively well-off positions (Hengel, 27). These include “Peter's mother-in-law, Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha, wealthy men like Joseph of Arimathea, and the wealthy women ‘who provided for them [Jesus and his disciples] out of their resources’” (Lk 8:3).

A third group, the crowds, included poor and rich. The latter, tax collectors like Zaccheus (Lk 19) were people of high status inconsistency -- high in economic but low in social status. This opened them up to Jesus. Jesus took both the relatively privileged and underprivileged and created a rich and vibrant Jubilee community (Mk 10:28-31).

But if Jesus did not condemn the material world as evil, how should we interpret his life of poverty and his blessings upon the poor and woes to the wealthy (Lk 6:20-27)? Catholics distinguish between the counsels of perfection for an elite, like Jesus and the disciples, who take vocational vows (of poverty, chastity and obedience) and ordinary Christians in “secular” jobs with families to support. However, Jesus' commands are to be taught to *all* baptized disciples (Mt 28:20). Protestants often limit Jesus' poverty to the unique circumstances of his mission. His poverty is “not for us to imitate, but to venerate, and more loosely to emulate.” They see Gospel ethics as descriptive then, more than prescriptive now. Liberation theologians working with the poor rightly question these two groups' means of voiding Jesus' demands. Yet they catch themselves in a paradox if the poor are blessed and yet Jesus comes to bring them out of their economic poverty or “blessing” (i.e., if poverty is so blessed why take them out of it?) (Schneider, 129-30).

An alternative reading sees Jesus as the true human who fulfils the dominion mandate to rule creation, now gone wrong, with delight and compassion. He miraculously calms storms, feeds the hungry, heals blind eyes. He spends much of his time feasting. Jesus was crucified even for the way he ate and who he ate with. He was condemned as “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and ‘sinners’” (Luke 7:34 NRSV). While Jesus challenged his followers to disinvest in this world's ways and invest their resources and talents in his reign, we often confuse the means - disinvestment and self-denial -- with the end, an extravagant experience of God's abundance for all (Lk 18:28-30).

Jesus does not deny the principle of “profit”, but radically relocates it in relation to one's whole life and his kingdom. “What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?” (Lk 9:25 NRSV). His reign is the best risk, the best investment, the best bet. The calling to be disciples of Jesus in the business world involves great tension between these different principles of profit, but no more than in any other area of life.

In sum, Jesus called his followers to lives of redemptive sacrifice and celebrative delight. Perhaps the outer ring of followers, especially Zacchaeus, is the best “type” for professional [and business] people ... (Schneider, 143-44).

#### Conclusion

Probing the biblical text for its insights into wealth and business provides the first step toward recovering a sense of vocation. In studying how this sense has travelled through the centuries, and how the church has understood it, we will lay a greater foundation of knowledge and insight from which to present a contemporary case for vocation in the workplace. This is the agenda for the next article I will present in *Vocatio*.

**Editor's Note:** See the August 2001 edition (5:1) of *Vocatio* for more exploration of these themes: Jubilee and economic justice (Ron Sider), wealth in the Old Testament, particularly Proverbs (V. Philips Long), and wealth in the New Testament (R. Paul Stevens).

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