

Business as a Calling and Profession

A Historical Review

Part B

Having surveyed the relatively positive biblical view of material work and clarified the difference between status wealth then and now and productive wealth, it is important to examine some of the Greek philosophical and historical factors disparaging work and business, against which Protestant notions of vocation [subsequently](#) reacted.

Contemplation over Action - The Early and Medieval Church

a. Greek Dualism's Disparagement of Business

Lewis Mumford argued that the Greek city-states failed to 'moralize trade' by bringing it within the realm of 'legitimate human enterprise' (Graham, 116). Trade, to Aristotle, was 'essentially suspicious' (Malina, 93, citing Aristotle 1932, III, 12-20, 1257a-58a) absorbing and perverting body and mind. As Aristotle said: 'Anybody who does anything for pay is by nature not truly a free person' (Forell, 84-85). In the Greek world, free men engaged in politics and philosophy - only slaves worked. From the second century B.C., after Aristotle's student Alexander the Great conquered the Mediterranean world, Greek influence penetrated Israel and is felt in the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus.

This unbiblical Greek hierarchy of contemplation over action and commerce foreshadows the Early and Medieval Church's exaltation of contemplative Mary over active Martha (Luke 10:38-42). This hierarchy was adapted by Saint Augustine, whose ecclesiology was central to Medieval Christendom, and whose doctrine of grace was central to the Protestant Reformers. Augustine established three key pillars of a Christian view of economic life:

1. The goodness of creation, work, productivity and private property.
2. A utilitarian distinction between use and enjoyment, meeting needs not wants.
3. A high spiritual esteem for monastic poverty as the only calling over relative riches (Schneider, 32).

b. The Restriction of Calling to Monks

New Testament calling language refers first to God's universal call to conversion and/or corresponding conduct (Ephesians 1:18, 4:1; II Peter 1:10), and second to particular social roles in the classic Protestant vocation text, 1 Cor. 7:20: 'stay in the calling [social role] in which you were called

[converted]' (KJV). This second particular sense was largely ignored in the Early Church in favor of the first general sense of discipleship. However, with the easing of persecution, Emperor Constantine's conversion (312 A.D.), infant baptism, and rising nominalism, “calling” referred to those leaving ordinary work and wealth for monastic poverty, prayer, and perfection.

The seizure of the title *vocatio* by monasticism prevented for a long time in the West the development of a proper religious evaluation of secular occupations and made it impossible for the word *vocatio* to become customary for them. I Cor 7:20, just as in the East, remained essentially without influence in this direction.... There is no passage in ... the early Fathers where *vocatio* means anything like occupation (Holl, 136-37).

Parallel is the fact that Clement of Alexandria (150-215 A.D.) appears to be the sole church father who takes a positive view of entrepreneurialism and capital (Gordon, 87).

Second, the slow development of the doctrine of universal vocation was partly because of the Early Church's economic environment having fewer occupational distinctions than the later Middle Ages and modernity. Thus, there was 'no stimulus which might eventually give birth to the idea of a stable, well arranged system of "callings" and the division of labour' which became the vocational ideal for several centuries (Troeltsch, 121-22).

Third, most monastic rules mixed prayer, reading, and manual labour (in that order). Protestants may have generalized on their restricted approval of labour (Sommerville, 72). Later, Brother Lawrence expressed his Carmelite spirituality through work – while polishing pots and pans and scrubbing the floors of the monastery kitchen—as recorded in *The Practice of the Presence of God* (1975/1692). But while work was seen as worship or prayer - *laboure et orare*, work was a mere material or disciplinary means to intellectual and spiritual ends, to eradicate self. The more mundane the work, the easier to turn the mind to prayer (*Rule of Benedict* ch.57; Holl, 136-37). However, indirectly, this strictly timed monastic discipline influenced 'the basic structures of centralized and rationalized control that have characterized Western society ever since' (Ovitt, 196), thus contributing towards the development of the Protestant Work Ethic and modern business (Weber, 118-19, 158, 174; Sommerville, 81).

Fourth, Walter Hilton (1988, 229-35), a fourteenth century Augustinian canon, took a step towards a more balanced biblical and ultimately Protestant view of work. He wrote letters to an English layman,

important in commercial and political life, who had a profound spiritual experience and wanted to enter a contemplative community, abandoning family and business. Hilton wisely counselled a third way, a 'mixed life' combining Martha's activity with Mary's reflectiveness. However, none broke with the priority of contemplation as much as Martin Luther (1483-1546).

Protestant Vocationalization of Work and its Later Secularization

a. Luther and Calvin's Expansion of Vocation

The great Protestant contribution toward business was its universalizing of calling. From our secularized perspective equating vocation with a job, it is difficult to understand the revolution Luther achieved in taking a term monopolized by the spiritual elite of monks and applying it to 'secular' work. Such secular work included not just one's 'job' but domestic/economic, political and ecclesiastical work of all believers (*LW* 37: 364, 41: 177; 3: 217) - a whole range of relational responsibilities through which people love and serve God and others (*LW* 46: 246; Althaus, 36, Wingren, 5, Schwarz, 6-9). Luther was the first to regard all works, not just religious works, and thus all (non-sinful) vocations as fundamentally equal (Holl, 142-43), just as all believers are equally priests and saints before God (Hart, 37-40).¹

Since Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis, Luther and especially Calvin have often been portrayed as forerunners of modern capitalism, but this is **truer** of Calvin. Both stressed the almost universal applicability of vocation to material labour as equal to 'spiritual' tasks lauded in the more elitist and dualist theologies of Medieval Catholicism and Anabaptism. But Calvin's reading of the parable of the talents (Matthew 25) in a more literal sense of economic stewardship and his distinguishing "between lending for consumption at interest - a crime akin to murder - and lending for production and enterprise" had a liberating economic effect (Graham, 124).

Although Geneva was only a small city and haven for French refugees, like Calvin, he organized the deacons to put them all, from low to high, to work, in what became a hive of entrepreneurial activity. A French aristocrat was shocked at seeing a fellow noble degraded into making buttons, illustrating the difference between 'the old French aristocracy and the new Genevan entrepreneurs'. 'Work ... was the great Genevan leveller' (McGrath, 232-33). Professional education for youth, temporary employment, the creation of new trades in the weaving industry, and laws against gambling led to a 'peaceful

revolution' or war on poverty (Buckley, 12). Calvin not only affirmed business, but also held it accountable to the common good and God's glory.

b. *The Secularization of Vocation*

A century after Luther and Calvin, English Puritans created substitutes for the Medieval 'Chain of Being' with its hierarchical and organic patterns. Their voluntary covenants, dependent on commitment to one's vocation, made people dependable and had democratic implications by opening up political callings to commoners (Walzer, 198-99, 213). Along with rising economic and educational mobility, these covenants led to greater possibilities of choice and change of vocation.

However, the drawback of this tide of mobility was the loss of the New Testament and early Puritan distinction between general and particular vocation. William Perkins' 1603 classic *A Treatise of the Vocations or Callings of Men* (1970) subordinated particular callings (family, citizenship, and work) to the end of a Christian's general calling to God's glory, salvation and the common good (Michaelson, 1953). The later Puritans and Deists like Ben Franklin forgot this and became the prime examples of Weber's Protestant Ethic thesis.

Puritan spiritual discipline and inner worldly asceticism became a secularized rationalization of time and money during the accumulation phase of early capitalism. Vocation was equated with occupation and became a secularized end in itself (Weber, 78, cf. 108, 181, Troeltsch, 645-46; Marshall, 1996, 45-49 135 n. 12). Work became increasingly a mere means to these ends: a) efficient production, profit, and potential consumption, and b) possibly proving one's predestination (McGrath, 238-39) by one's worldly success and wealth. The Caller was increasingly forgotten in the calling.

With the collapse of the Puritan Commonwealth after the English Civil War, their sanctification of work and economic life was undermined by war, wealth, 'possessive individualism' (McPherson 1962; Marshall 1979, 73-96) and the separation of technical from moral economics (Marshall 1996, 48-53, 91-96). This change led to the progressive privatization and moralization of Puritan reform instincts for which their name has become famous. Capitalism thus lost much of the spiritual and moral motivation and restraint displayed in Richard Steele's (1629-92) *The Religious Tradesman*. Steele affirmed business as a calling for Christians if '[h]is devotion disposes him for business, and his business makes

¹ Scholars debate whether Luther's attitude to business was more modern or medieval. For more of this discussion, consult

his devotion welcome' (1823, 66). He provides a model for how principles of justice and the recently rediscovered ethics of virtue can be applied to business as a vocation today (Lambert, 82-83).

Surprisingly, from Steele until the Social Gospel movement of the turn of the 20th century we hear a deafening silence on business as vocation. John Wesley, **though** advised his Methodist followers, so named because of their methodical spiritual and economic disciplines, to 'get all you can, save all you can, give all you can'. **However**, he foresaw a danger in this originally working class movement becoming more middle class and forgetting the original spiritual and moral motivations that had forged their status.

At the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, with its increasing division of labour, possibilities of generating great wealth, and greater alienation at work, the two great competing theorists of emerging capitalism, Adam Smith and Karl Marx, ignored the religious concept of calling (though the title of Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, was taken from Isaiah 60).

Both Adam Smith in the eighteenth and Karl Marx in the nineteenth century believed that economics and its laws could be disembedded from the ethical and religious traditions.... Smith accented the relationships of supply, demand, market, and division of labour; Marx accented the relationships of classes, the ownership of the means of production, and political power. Both saw material interests as the clue to human motivation and social history (Stackhouse, 110).

Smith secularized the theology of vocation in terms of the prodigiously productive division of labour. Yet, his belated warning of the alienating, and de-vocationalizing, effects of monotonous mass production is forgotten: 'The understandings of the greater part of men are necessarily formed in their employments. The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations ... generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become' (Smith, 734; Heilbroner, 66).

Sadly, without seeing work as part of a vocation to serve God and others as well as self, Smith has no answer to the problem of dehumanization and alienation, apart from government prevention and the

compensation of consumption (Volf, 53-55). Work thus becomes a means, not an end in itself. Despite its economic effectiveness, the combined influence of Smith's economic determinism and Darwin's "survival of the fittest" needed state regulation to moderate its impact upon the weak. But state regulation could not provide the spiritual spontaneity and motivation that the concept of providential calling could. Nor could it encourage the virtues Smith affirmed earlier in *The Theory Moral Sentiments* (1759).

c. *Vocation, Advocacy, and Business Ethics*

During the twentieth century, some rediscovered the significance of vocation for the laity, although emphases on political advocacy and business ethics have often overshadowed it. Between the Depression and World War II, as a key precursor to the World Council of Churches (WCC - founded in 1948), Anglican layman J.H. Oldham and Archbishop William Temple helped found the *Faith and Work* program to develop the laity's vocational role in the world (Smith 1990). Though respecting the relative empirical and policy expertise of economists, Oldham (1950) and Temple (1942, 7-10) held that religion nonetheless can subject economics to moral criteria, as it had done before the rise of purely 'technical' economics in the seventeenth century. They sought bridging principles or 'middle axioms' between basic theological, anthropological, and social principles and specific economic and political policies such as unemployment policy. Such 'middle axioms' were that every willing worker should have a job and have a voice in their business or industry and know that their work serves the common good. Temple distinguished these axioms from more specific policy proposals or political programs (e.g. industry policy, paid holidays, etc.) by relegating these lesser policies to an appendix. Sadly, in their keenness as political advocates for the poor, some church social responsibility committees and welfare groups have forgotten Temple's distinction and the vocation of the laity in business.

Many have questioned the dominance of advocacy over vocation, arguing that its clerical and radical agenda often forgets the church's central task and expertise in proclaiming Christ, oversimplifies complex economic and technical questions and obscures the role of lay vocational and ethical expertise and influence (Benne 1995; Boggs 1961; Lambert 1997, 59-61). The indirect and persuasive role of the laity living out their calling as salt, light and leaven in the working world is overshadowed by this emphasis on political power and direct action. Paul Ramsey's *Who Speaks for the Church?* calls this the 'church and society syndrome' whereby a 'social action curia' assumes expertise in every area of life (Ramsey, 13, 15). This often embarrasses and disenfranchises Christians with wisdom or expertise in

economics and business. It implies there is one Christian position on complex, ambiguous issues when there should be liberty to disagree. Revolutionary Christianity takes over from the quiet but revolutionary doctrine of vocation.

Vocation is also somewhat marginalized by the new growth industry of business ethics. This has had some success as an antidote to the excesses of the 'Greed is good' decade of the 80s, stereotyped most starkly in Oliver Stone's film *Wall Street*. Business ethics institutes, courses, gurus and corporate codes of ethics have proliferated as universities and others have jumped on this profitable bandwagon. The danger however, is the creation of a new group of academic experts still distanced from lay practitioners. Further, ethics gets treated as another expertly and externally imposed technique based on dilemmas and codes relatively divorced from character, identity, ethos, and spirituality.

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