

A Christian View Of Vocation

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A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF VOCATION

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THE GLORY OF THE MUNDANE

How is it that the pursuit of such a mundane thing as working for a living with the added goal of making a profit can actually qualify as a calling?

My goal is to convince you that it is specifically because what we undertake is mundane, “or characteristic of this earth or man’s life on earth,” that what we do as business people rises to the level of a calling. The value of our calling derives specifically from its relationship to earthy ventures and needs, “if the goal of the Christian life is a neoplatonic flight from this world, then pietism has effectively undermined the doctrine of non-ecclesiastical callings,”¹ and that thought must be resisted, if we believe that only the clergy and clerical office are callings, then most of life is meaningless, for perhaps only one in several hundred is serving in those offices.

Each Christian should perceive and acknowledge that his vocation is nothing other than a calling from God; therefore, his thinking should be reflected in the way he lives life and conducts business. My goal isn’t just to make a theological statement, which is necessary, but to set forth a practical, Biblical approach for us to follow.

To engage in business activity, for the Christian, is to be immersed in ministry. This was the Puritan understanding as they came to this country and developed what would come to be known as the “Puritan work ethic,” which has been stripped of all theological ramifications and is now simply called the “American work ethic,” or “work ethic.” Puritans believed that while there were different callings in life and varying stations, everything was to be “done as unto the Lord.”

Leland Ryken, in his book, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were*, does an excellent job of documenting this understanding of work and business that existed in Puritan theology. He writes:

William Tyndale said that if we look externally “there is difference betwixt washing dishes and preaching of the word of God; but as touching to please Gad; none at all,” William Perkins agreed; “The action of a shepherd in keeping sheep... is as good a work before God as is the action of a judge in giving sentence, or a magistrate in ruling, or a minister in preaching,” This Puritan rejection of the dichotomy between sacred and secular work had far-reaching implications.

For one thing, it renders every task of intrinsic value and integrates every vocation with a Christian’s spiritual life. It makes every job consequential by making it the arena for

glorifying and obeying God and for expressing one's love (through service) to one's neighbor. Thus Hugh Latimer saw in the example of Christ the true dignity of oil work:

This is a wonderful thing, that the Savior of the world, and the King above all kings, was not ashamed to labor; yea, and to use so simple an occupation. Here He did sanctify all manner of occupations.²

The Puritans' view of how Jesus Christ sanctified work by engaging in it Himself as a carpenter and, I might point out, as an independent businessman, is very insightful: "What God has cleansed, you must not call common."³ Quoting Ryken once more:

For the Puritans, all of life was God's. Their goal was to integrate their daily work with their religious devotion to God. Richard Steele (a Puritan scholar) asserted that it was in the shop "where you may most confidently expect the presence and blessing of God."⁴

Work is so important in the economy of God's plan — no pun intended — that it is enshrined in the Ten Commandments in a positive way. The Fourth Commandment tells us to observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, but there's no doubt that It also sanctifies work as well: "Six days you shall labor and do all your work," In fact, the bulk of the week is taken up by this very "worldly" activity, and yet it is a worldly activity that God tells us to enter into with energy and expectation. Work is good. It's commanded, and it will be blessed when done in accordance with God's Word.

The Jewish writer Meir Tamari notes:

Men's earning of a livelihood and his creation of economic and material assets are seen as the reflections of Divine pleasure. Leafing through the pages of the Bible, one is immediately struck by the fact that the observance of God's commandments leads to an abundance of material goods.... A God-fearing man is characterized as one whose flocks and orchards bear their fruit in season and produce a bounty of goods ... the high priest offered a special prayer in the Temple, the major component of which is a request for a year of bounty, a year in which Jews will not have to be dependent on others for their livelihood.⁵

Of course, one needs only turn to Deuteronomy 28 to see that God's plan is to prosper His people in the material or "mundane" things of life; and one way He does this is through business transactions or commerce, or in "the produce of your ground and the increase of your herds, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks." His promise here is that all their agricultural labor and business dealings will meet with success.

And further. His people were to prosper through banking and commerce with other nations. "You shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow." God promised to bless them in their international banking activities! In today's world, we often curse the international bankers and imply that there is something inherently Immoral about their occupation; but, in reality. God's people should be the ones prosperous enough and wealthy enough to dominate this entire realm

of commerce. It should be a tool of dominion to serve Christ's kingdom, but we have brushed it off as unworthy of the Christian and, indeed, even evil.

It's amazing. We've come to the point in Christianity where we desire to avoid like the plague a career in lending, but we have embraced, with little or no restraint, the desire to be a borrower! The call is to lend so we can evangelize and disciple, but we look upon Christians in the banking business as "ethically challenged."

The Biblical point is this: commerce, when undertaken by Christians, is sanctified and godly work. When a man uses God-given skills and knowledge to provide a service to others, the anticipation is that he will be rewarded financially. In fact, God holds that man accountable specifically in the area of profitability.

PROFIT: A BIBLICAL IMPERATIVE

In Matthew 25:14-30 Jesus gives us this parable:

For (the kingdom of heaven is) as a man traveling into a far country, (who) called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several abilities; and straightway took his Journey. Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same, and made (them) other five talents. And likewise he that (had received) two, he also gained other two. But he that had received one went and digged in the earth, and hid his Lord's money. After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them. And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying. Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more. His lord said unto him, Well done, (thou) good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. He also that had received two talents came and said. Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: behold, I have gained two other talents beside them. His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. Then he which had received the one talent came and said. Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strewed: And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, (there) thou hast (that is) thine. His lord answered and said unto him, (Thou) wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strewed: Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and (then) at my coming I should have received mine own with usury, Take therefore the talent from him, and give (it) unto him which hath ten talents. For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but

from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath. And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The gifts and skills which we have been given by God must be developed and used with a view towards profitability, even if it's just at the minimum end of the scale of letting it draw interest. To not apply or to misapply the resources that we have been appointed stewards over is a grievous sin before God.

BUSINESS AS MINISTRY

I'd like to examine several specific ways a vocation, when understood and undertaken as a calling, serves our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ and, by God's grace and mercy, our culture and society.

First and foremost, our calling provides for the needs of our families. The Bible tells us that if a man doesn't work, he doesn't eat. When we are successfully engaged in business as a calling, we are able to minister directly the required food and shelter to our family. Our family is our primary and most important ministry project, in fact, so important is it to minister to our family properly, that if we cannot do that, we cannot expect to minister anywhere else in the church. Properly providing and caring for my wife and my children through the money I earn in my business means that I am a successful minister in that I am responsibly fulfilling God's most fundamental call on my life.

Second, the Christian businessman provides a financial example to others that they too can provide for their own by utilizing their talents and skills in the marketplace. In other words, we provide the positive Biblical model for those whom the Apostle Paul commands not to steal. Do not steal. Do labor with your hands to provide for yourself and then, because you will make a profit, give to those who are truly in need (Eph. 4:28).

This can be seen in two ways. On the one hand, I am modeling to my children this basic Biblical law. It is educational for them to see me working diligently at my calling. The promise is that God will bless and prosper the work of my hands and, by setting myself to the task God provides, there is no need for me to act in a lawless and criminal manner. Do not steal. Labor.

On the other hand, what I do should inspire other believers. Once again, the Apostle Paul encouraged people to be a follower of him as he followed Christ. We shouldn't dismiss the power of constructing godly role models, nor should we shrink from accepting, dare I say, the calling to live our life as a model for others to emulate. None of us is an island unto ourselves. We should always be looking for opportunities to provide edification and inspiration.

Think of who inspires you. It used to be that John D. Rockefeller was seen as someone to be admired because of his great character and Christian liberality. During his lifetime, Rockefeller gave away more money to Christian causes than anyone had ever earned up to that time. While he was giving away multiple millions of dollars to Christian missions and building Christian

churches and funding Christian schools. Rockefeller was simultaneously producing a higher quality oil, lowering the price around the world and employing tens of thousands in well-paying, satisfying, and life-enhancing jobs.

The John D. Rockefellers of the world challenge me to take what I do seriously and to do it to the very best of my ability — to use my business as a tool in the hands of God just as he did. May God even now raise up and effectually call men of like caliber to conquer their business frontiers for the glory of God and the service of all those they sell to!

AN ANTIDOTE TO LAWLESSNESS

Third, businessmen are an antidote to lawlessness; they hold back anarchy and lessen social upheaval. The business community provides a moderating influence in any culture that is foundationally based on law.

Out of necessity, business people create and uphold law in the midst of a collapsing culture. To be successful, a business must operate on God's principles; it must be honest, keep its covenants, not steal, not falsely defame its competition, etc. if a business breaks God's laws it will collapse — sooner or later, it will fail.

No matter how lawless our political institutions become, no matter how antinomian our popular culture, businesses and businessmen serve as a stronghold against crime and abuse of power.

James Q. Wilson, writing in the Wall Street Journal, states:

Violence in the Middle Ages appears to have been commonplace. The great historian of medieval society, Marc Bloch, concluded that murder and the abuse of power were inevitable when trade was scarce and difficult. With little chance of enriching themselves through commerce, ambitious men turned instead to plunder or oppression.

... England, through widespread property ownership, entered more quickly and less violently into a commercial society, individual property ownership meant that people could buy, sell, bequeath and inherit property. This ownership system permitted market economies as each owner sought to buy or sell land and to trade his goods with somebody else, thereby creating a system of mutual dependence. The courts became more important as they sought to manage this dependency and differences of opinion about transactions. And as the courts became more important, respect for the law grew."⁶

In order for business to flourish, there has to be law. Business activity requires mutual dependence and, as Wilson pointed out, there must be clear and enforceable codes of conduct and laws regarding transactions. If a seller doesn't know whether he will receive payment for his product, he will not part with it. If a buyer doesn't know for certain that if he pays for a product

he'll receive it, he won't participate in the exchange. Because private property owners and, more specifically, business people desire to maximize their resources, they will press for a righteous judicial system, even if they themselves are not righteous.

Now, on top of this, there are laws that are not laws, yet they are just as binding and perhaps more effective. In other words, in the absence of law, the businessman may operate on the basis of a handshake. There is a contract mode, even if a court of law will not uphold it. In the absence of civil law, trust in personal honor becomes the only way to do business — in effect, the business community upholds a Biblical law-standard.

Any businessman who breaks his word under these conditions will never do business in his community again! A shady person may stay in business longer when the rule of law is upheld than when it is absent, because someone will always take a chance that the threat or reality of a lawsuit will recover his investment. Absent a law-abiding court that can be appealed to, no one will take that chance on a man who breaks his word in lawless times. The dishonest and unethical person is effectively excommunicated and put out of business. When there is a breakdown in law, a man's honesty and integrity is his greatest capital and must be diligently guarded at all times.

At the same time, by placing a premium on law and order, the businessman has the opportunity to extend the kingdom of God through his ethical behavior and personal obedience to God's law. The law is beautiful for the converting of the soul and so it is in the business sphere as well. Thus, business law is one of God's schoolmasters in teaching us His laws in a very concrete and real way! The more people there are in business, the more who get taught God's ethical laws. So even when the sphere of civil government and all its "entitled children" are destroying and breaking down God's legal framework, the mature businessman continues to abide by Biblical standards because they work.

Just and honest weights and balances, a day's pay for a day's work, keeping your word even to your own hurt — all these things serve as light in the darkness and provide the Christian businessman an exalted platform to set forth God's laws as the standard for all areas of life, not just for regulating business.

THE BLESSING OF WEALTH

Fourth, businessmen create wealth, not only for themselves and their families, but for their community. Economic life by its nature creates community and is destructive of isolation. Business not only mandates cooperation, recruitment, common goals, team-work, and subordination to others' needs and wants — Wilson's phrase, "system of mutual dependence" once more comes to mind, as does the Biblical concept of servanthood — but the wealth that it creates is absolutely worthless outside of community.

What good is money, land, precious metals, or any form of wealth, if it can't be consumed or put to use? You can't eat Federal Reserve Notes; land not tilled and gardened doesn't produce crops, and so on. Wealth is only of consequence if it can be invested or spent. If wealth is spent to acquire other goods, it is passed on to others who thereby profit from the purchases and the cycle continues, with assets being put to use as productive capital which will benefit owners, workers, customers, vendors, and many others.

Productive capital investment creates even more wealth. This could be through increases in company stock prices and dividend payouts, such as happened with Coca-Cola during the late 80s and through the 90s, and with companies such as Microsoft today. It could also be through producing better products at lower prices — again, Microsoft comes to mind, as does MCI Long Distance. Companies such as Dell Computer have made many investors wealthy and, in the process of making lots of money themselves, they have saved hundreds of millions of people thousands of dollars each by drastically lowering the cost of computers. Even if you don't own a Dell you can thank them because they made IBM, Compaq, Apple, and everyone else lower their prices to compete!

Our company has grown from one plant to five and from 1-1/2 million dollars a year in sales to sales significantly higher than that. Along the way our products have continued to improve in quality and yet we have been able to lower our prices. Our company is more profitable today than 20 years ago, our customers have a better product and a lower price; hence, they are better off than they were 20 years ago. We buy thousands of tons of newsprint from churches, schools, and community groups, along with commercial paper brokers; therefore, because our company continues to operate at a profit, stay in business, and expand, others profit as well. Wealth generation cannot be limited to simply one level or one company or even one community. The Christian businessman is ministering financially to many people he will never meet.

This wealth creation is not widely understood. As Ronald H. Nash has observed, "One of the most serious errors to be found in much recent Christian writing about economics is the mistaken belief that economic exchange or trading creates no value. Many people believe that while an activity like building a house or painting a work of art creates value, the simple act of exchanging something does not."⁷ But every voluntary transaction in the marketplace proves that there is value added in the exchange; otherwise there would be no market to start with, for no one would ever desire a valueless product or service. Businessmen benefit their whole society by every profitable transaction. Were they to try not to, they would have to hoard their wealth — an action which the Bible explicitly says is ungodly and, therefore, if they go this route, their wealth would be dissipated. Wealth can only be kept by being put to use. Wealth in use, of which each business transaction is a very "real symbol," provides economic benefits to many others.

KEEPING BIG BROTHER AT BAY

Fifth, as more businesses are added (or existing ones expand) to a community, they enlarge the domain of property that is under their control; and this serves as a massive restraining wall against an aggressive and oppressive state. Microsoft is able to effectively thwart ungodly Justice Department meddling and attacks because they have earned enough profits through legitimate business practices to combat the unlimited resources of the Federal government. IBM withstood the government pressure 30 years ago because they, too, had the financial resources and property assets in place to counteract destructive Interference.

The examples are countless: Forbes magazine consistently challenges the socialistic propaganda published and broadcast at taxpayer expense. General Motors, Ford, Mobil Oil, and other businesses have demonstrated success in opposing much of the renegade Environmental Protection Agency agenda along with other environmental wackos and United Nations power plays. Western farmers and large land-owning ranchers are now mounting an increasingly effective and powerful counterattack on ungodly federal and state land-confiscation and land use laws.

As the preacher is called to oppose sin and tyranny from the pulpit and to make the case for righteousness, so too the business man is called to oppose sin and tyranny and press for the righteous application of God's law in the realm of private property use, which is the fundamental basis for commerce, as James Q. Wilson so clearly documented in the Wall Street Journal article mentioned earlier.

And as we saw earlier, business is a superb vehicle for teaching God's standards for ethical behavior in quick, sharp ways that are hard to ignore! Consequently, the higher the percentage of businessmen in a culture, the stronger the pressure to base civil law on Biblical standards and the weaker and more restrained the civil government will be.

The more people there are who have property and, hence, business to steward, the more mature and skilled in practical wisdom they will become. This means it will be more difficult for the "unproductive elite" to stir up envy and promulgate statist policies for communal theft.

Let me give you one powerful example of this truth. Oprah Winfrey, not exactly your model of a Christian with a Biblical worldview, has been a successful businesswoman for many years now. With her wealth growing and her years advancing, she finds herself thinking more in terms of the future. In a July 28, 1999 statement in the Wall Street Journal, Oprah makes the case for God's inheritance law to triumph over ungodly statist inheritance laws — and she probably doesn't even know it! She states:

I think it's irritating that once I die, 55% of my money goes to the United States government. You know why that's irritating? Because you have already paid nearly 50% in taxes! When you leave a house or money to people, then they're taxed at 55%, so you've got to leave them enough so that when the government takes another tax, they still have some money.⁸

Can you see why we need more businesspeople! Even successful non-Christians can see the justice and righteousness of God's law.

CONCLUSION

Sixth, by creating a profitable company, many charitable enterprises, including the church, benefit. Christian schools are financed, mission work is underwritten, and other potential Christian businesses are capitalized! I don't know if you've noticed lately, but contractors and building supply companies insist on being paid these days.

Our church plans to build a Christian school and the building alone will cost about a million and a half dollars. That means that the members of our church are going to have to generate over 15 million dollars in profits (the increase) for the tithes to cover it. Operating expenses for the first year will raise that figure another half-million. While all Christians are called to faithfully tithe and give, the Christian businessman, gifted as God has made him in financial matters, has additional responsibilities to be a blessing to those within his covenant community. To whom much is given, much is required. Of course, generous giving with the right motives brings additional blessings, so the foot remains that it is impossible to "out-give" God.

This does not mean that a businessman should give out of guilt or succumb to pressure, because that is not acting as a wise steward. We are to test all things and try all things. Does what we are being asked to underwrite stand in a right relationship to God's Word? Are the people in charge men of integrity and have they demonstrated faithfulness to God's Word in their lives? Yes, there are important qualifiers; nevertheless, the Word of God stands: To whom much is given, much is required. God places wealth, sometimes great wealth, at our disposal to carry out His plans and agendas.

One successful businessman, Andrew Carnegie, built 1,946 libraries in small towns in the United States and 865 in other lands.⁹ He also poured millions upon millions into other charities around the world. That is not to say the man was a saint, nor was Rockefeller, whom I mentioned earlier. I'm not even sure if Carnegie claimed to be a Christian, although there is no doubt that Rockefeller was. They were men just like all men. They could rise to the greatest of heights or foil flat on their faces. But they knew their calling and they accepted the challenge and the responsibility. The interesting thing about Carnegie is that even after he "retired" and occupied himself with nothing other than giving away his wealth, his wealth continued to grow and it was only through a "final burst near the end, he at last succeeded" in doing it.¹⁰

So in conclusion, Christian businessmen have incredible ministry opportunities before them, specifically because they are called to this task, this mission field. To dismiss our vocation as a calling is to dismiss God's sovereign rule over the major aspects of life. My hope and prayer is that God will raise up and our churches will support and pray for Christian businesspeople who "know in whom they believe."

May God richly bless you in every business activity you set your hand ta. May you find success and great profit in the marketplace on two levels: the first being that you are meeting the legitimate needs and desires of your customers; and the second being that God Himself is sending unearned and undeserved blessings which will overtake and overwhelm you as you are obedient to His covenant of life and redemption. Amen.

AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

¹ R. J. Rushdoony, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 1019ff.

² Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were*.

³ Acts 11:9.

⁴ Ryken, *Ibid*.

⁵ Michael Novak, *Business as a Calling*, 41.

⁶ James Q. Wilson, "Capitalism Cuts Crime," *Wall Street Journal*, August 17, 1999.

⁷ Ronald H. Nash, *Poverty And Wealth*, 54.

⁸ Oprah Winfrey, *Wall Street Journal* editorial, July 28, 1999, as quoted in Craig's and Steve's *Very Own Financial Newsletter*,. August 1999.

⁹ Michael Novak, *Business as a Calling*, 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid*. 59.