

Introduction

Theology of Work Consultation

Symposium

Christians today urgently need to revive their commitment to whole-life discipleship. Millions of churchgoers are “Christians” for a few hours every week. Christianity is something they practice on Sunday morning rather than a way of life. The withering of discipleship is one of the gravest threats facing the church today.

One of the main causes of the problem is that churches and seminaries have disconnected discipleship from everyday life. Too often, pastors and professors talk about one’s “walk with God” and “stewardship” almost exclusively in terms of formally religious activities such as worship attendance, Bible study, evangelism, and giving. As important as these activities are for every Christian, they will never take up more than a tiny percentage of life for those who are not in full-time ministry.

The largest portion of life—work in the home and in jobs—is excluded from the concepts of discipleship and stewardship. Most churches and seminaries have nothing spiritually powerful to offer for the activities that define most people’s daily lives during the other six days of the week. This leaves the church in particular preaching a faith that is not relevant to the totality of people’s lives.

It is urgent for the future of the church that we recover a whole-life model of discipleship that understands every legitimate human activity as responding to a call from God. Every human being is called to be, in all of life, a steward of God’s creation. Our individual discipleship, our church communities, and our Christian witness to society must recover a holistic theology of stewardship and

calling. The church must reintegrate its model of discipleship with the call to cultivate the world.

The Church and Civilization— The Economic Connection

God intends the church to be distinct from the world (e.g., 1 John 2:15–17). He also intends that the church have a transformative impact on the world and not exclusively through evangelism (e.g., Jer. 29:7; Matt. 15:13–16; Matt. 25:14–46). As the church has lost influence over the last century, our civilization has lost its grounding in the call to serve others with our work.

Economic work is a key connection between the church and the world because it is the engine of all human civilization. Obviously, civilization involves much more than just economics, yet nothing in civilization happens without economic work—just as a car is much more than an engine but does nothing without one.

Because economic work drives civilization, and Christians spend most of their lives doing economic work, the church's potential impact on civilization is enormous. If we integrated our economic lives with our discipleship, Christianity would once again have a transformative effect on the making of civilization.

Without such integration, no model of church and/or world relationship can be stable and successful over time. Within the limits of a faith-work dualism, there is only a choice between isolationism or various inadequate models of engaging the world (such as triumphalism or assimilationism). Integrating economic work and discipleship is the necessary starting point for a sound approach to the church-world problem.

Pastors and Christian business leaders are increasingly alienated from one another as a result of an increasing faith-work dualism among both groups. In the church, Christian business leaders have the most potential for impacting civilization. Their special gift is to organize and direct the civilization-building work of many people at once. They are the fulcrums that create leverage for the gospel to transform not only people's hearts but also civilization. Today, however, the Christians whose full-time job is to preach the word of God and the Christians whose full-time job is to produce civilization typically do not talk much to one other, do not understand one other, and oftentimes do not trust one other.

Efforts to rectify the lack of a biblical and theological perspective on economics—the social sphere of work—have been a hit-or-miss endeavor. Some practitioners who see the need for God's people to engage with economics are rushing in to meet the need without first carefully studying Scripture and developing a

well-rounded biblical perspective of this sphere. As a result, they unconsciously adopt an unbiblical and materialistic approach that conceives of human beings primarily as *consumers* whose problems can be solved by giving them money rather than conceiving of individuals as image-bearing *producers* of value whose main economic need is for opportunities to liberate their God-given talents and apply them in service through the work to which they are called.

This symposium on the Theology of Work, which will appear serially in the spring issue of the *Journal of Markets & Morality*, was created to be forum whose aim is to contribute valuable perspectives that lead to an integrated perspective on stewardship, work, and economics for leaders in the seminary, church, and business communities.