

Observations on the Theology of Work and Economics

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It is hard to miss the recent increased attention that evangelicals have been paying to the topic of work, vocational stewardship, business as mission, and calling. Several important books have recently been released, including Kenman Wong and Scott Rae's *Business for the Common Good*, Tom Nelson's *Work Matters*, and Amy Sherman's *Kingdom Calling*, to mention only a few.¹ There is a resurgence of interest in the question of what is needed, biblically and theologically, to connect Sunday worship with the work that all of us do Monday through Saturday. This represents a commendable shift in evangelical priorities, and the papers in this symposium are drawn from the consultation on the Theology of Work and Economics at the Evangelical Theological Society annual meeting. The consultation aims to be a forum for the discussion of those and related topics.

To set the stage for the papers that follow, it seems useful to draw attention to some perennial tensions in evangelical thought related to work and economics. Historically speaking, *ministry* and *business* have frequently operated in hermetically sealed compartments. The bottom line is that the evangelical church has yet to integrate ministry and business or harness its potential synergy in significant ways for the cause of global evangelization.

The sad reality for far too many in the church is that ministry is sacred and business is secular. You do not have to be a theologian to grasp the logical conclusions that follow and that perpetuate these bifurcated realms. Christian discipleship is reduced to one form or another of ministry effort, and all ministry is done through the institution of the local church or a nationally or globally oriented para-church organization. Therefore, all those serious about ministry

will be drawn to spend as much time as possible in the ministry world. Perhaps one can even take some of that ministry into the secular workplace and redeem it. Perhaps Bible studies or personal evangelism efforts will help redeem that space.

When we relegate work (which God ordained before the fall) to the secular realm we cede territory that is squarely a part of God's kingdom design. This separation has profound consequences. In fact, from a biblical vantage point, what we commonly refer to as ministry is no more sacred than business or any other legitimate calling—God is the author and designer of all of life. That means that reflecting God's image in our work life, whatever the profession, is indeed a sacred calling and one worthy of a lifetime of intentional effort. It is most certainly not a necessary evil. We commend the framers of the Cape Town Commitment for very clear language that charts a fuller, more robust trajectory for evangelism and discipleship, thereby inviting the remaining 98 percent of the Christian community who do not serve in formal ecclesiastical roles to understand their vocation as “ministry.” We all must reflect God's image as we employ our unique areas of giftedness in service to our neighbor, the kingdom, and the world around us.

We read this bold statement in part 2 of the Cape Town Commitment, titled “Truth and the Workplace,”

We name this secular-sacred divide as a major obstacle to the mobilization of all God's people in the mission of God, and we call upon Christians worldwide to reject its unbiblical assumptions and resist its damaging effects. We challenge the tendency to see ministry and mission (local and cross-cultural) as being mainly the work of church-paid ministers and missionaries, who are a tiny percentage of the whole body of Christ.²

Unfortunately, the Cape Town Commitment, like a large swath of evangelical reflection on work and economics, fails to integrate these kinds of profound shifts throughout the two parts of the document and, it seems, even enconces further the very sacred-secular divide that it strives to dismantle. Business as a vocation and ministry is embraced and honored as a worthy calling, but wealth and wealth creation? Not so much. Yes, the evangelical community loves the good that money and resources can buy in terms of global evangelism and the financial sustainability it brings to ministry efforts, and we want people, even business people, to use their gifts creatively in the marketplace. Profit and wealth creation, though, is still an area of significant tension, and Craig Blomberg and Walter Kaiser both wrestle with this issue in their symposium papers. In the Cape Town Commitment, we read the very appropriate forewarnings about the perils and human propensity toward materialism and greed, but deeply ingrained in

the document is a bias against wealth creation and wealth in general. Without a clearly articulated rationale for creating wealth, it is hard to talk coherently about what systemic economic ideas or teachings we can draw from Scripture to illumine global financial and economic realities in the twenty-first century.

A well-resourced, expanding global church requires the participation of those who are creating wealth and stewarding it well.³ Many are eager to jump into the economic dialogue at the point of the discussion regarding the best ways to redistribute other people's wealth. Most, however, fail to consider the economic conditions by which wealth is best created or how, once created, it is most wisely and biblically invested toward God's intended purpose. Does it matter whether profit is given away generously, reinvested in business, or taxed and redistributed by governments? I would contend that Scripture and historic Christian theology has plenty to say on these fundamental economic issues, but it will require some effort to extract it from the Christian tradition and then refine it into useable material for today. Evangelicals would do well to take up further study and sustained reflection on these core issues in twenty-first century Christian discipleship and spiritual formation. As the renowned Dutch statesman Abraham Kuyper proclaimed in his famous "Sphere Sovereignty" speech, "No single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: Mine!"⁴

The gulf between economics and theology in evangelical social engagement and missionally informed action is a momentous barrier that must still be overcome before we can truly embrace all legitimate vocations as sacred and worthy callings. In God's economy, he has entrusted his people with his resources to fulfill his mission here on earth. That is a profound stewardship responsibility and privilege.

Yet, business people, like anyone else who produces value in the world, are not truly free to be productive and profitable without their brothers and sisters embracing a robust theology of work and a sound understanding of economics. When we look at how we fulfill the biblical mandate to address the needs of those less fortunate, and how we take the Christian message of hope to a lost world in need of restoration and redemption—even these fundamental mandates cannot be divorced from their economic ramifications. Not all economic forms of organization and practice foster biblical principles and human flourishing, but nearly every economic ramification has profound moral and pragmatic consequences. Religious leaders must move beyond good intentions to sound, biblically informed economic thought.

Notes

1. Kenman L. Wong and Scott B. Rae, *Business for the Common Good: A Christian Vision for the Marketplace* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011); Tom Nelson, *Work Matters: Connecting Sunday Worship to Monday Work* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011); Amy L. Sherman, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011).
2. The Third Lausanne Congress, *The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call To Action* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2011), 35.
3. For more on the ongoing evangelical engagement with questions of responsible resource development, see Arif Mohamed, Brett Elder, and Stephen J. Grabill, eds., *Kingdom Stewardship: Occasional Papers Prepared for the Lausanne Resource Mobilization Working Group for Cape Town 2010* (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library Press, 2010).
4. Abraham Kuyper, "Sphere Sovereignty," in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.