

Work, Wealth, and Business as the Ground of Christian Discipline

B Y R O G E R W A R D

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The peculiar American struggle with faith, wealth, and work is expressed in four recent books that affirm Christians in business while offering various theological critiques of capitalism or its effects. These authors stand in a long line reaching back to colonial voices like the anti-slavery merchant and Quaker John Woolman and the theologian and pastor Jonathan Edwards who warned his wealthy congregants that God had made them “for the good of your fellow creatures, and not only for yourself.” Balancing the spiritual dimensions of work with, and sometimes against, the norms of free market capitalism is an enlivening challenge.

In *Doing God’s Business: Meaning and Motivation for the Marketplace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006, 259 pp., \$18.00), R. Paul Stevens, who was professor of marketplace theology and leadership at Regent College, Vancouver, BC, presents a two-fold argument for Christian participation in business. First he establishes that “business exists, not mainly to make a profit but to meet needs and wants and to do so profitably” (p. 109). He makes a robust theological argument in support of wealth creation as an essentially good human activity that is, “part of the purpose of God on a

very large scale" (p. 111). In light of this he asks a telling question: "Is there an ethic strong enough to direct and discipline capitalism?" (p. 108) The second part of the argument examines motivation in business, and Stevens encourages entrepreneurship and habits conducive to capitalistic success. Profit is necessary for business to exist to produce goods and services that sustain and enhance human experience as the vehicle for God's work of "transforming creation, culture, community, and people" (p. 177). Rather than seeing faith as a way of resolving or bringing meaning to work, he says "we will find our satisfaction in God through our experience of work" (p. 198).

Stevens's engagement of business as a creation of God for the common good is attractive. Embracing our work as a fulfillment of God's purpose will clearly resonate with readers. What I find absent in Stevens's approach, however, is recognition of the spiritual effects on men and women who see the brutality of capitalism for people on the bottom as well as the top of the economic scale, but who feel powerless to do anything about it other than simply abandoning the field.



Amy L. Sherman's *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011, 272 pp., \$17.00) takes up the theme of Proverbs 11:10, "When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices" (p. 45). Sherman argues that the lives of the righteous ones, the *Tsaddiqim*, constitute a preview of God's kingdom in demonstrating the practices of shalom. This broad vision of the Christian gospel follows Ron Sider's critique of the reductionist gospel of personal salvation in which the Christian "can simply accept the gospel and go on living the same adulterous, materialistic, racist life" (p. 70). Sherman also evokes C. S. Lewis's understanding that "the universal longing for a better, more just, peaceful and healthy world suggests that either there was one or one day there will be one" (p. 80).

In the second part of the book, Sherman explores discipling for vocational stewardship and argues that it is missing from current church practice. She thinks what people need is a vision of institutional transformation or reform of practices based on the principles of justice and shalom (p. 99). Our work is central to God's redemptive story, she says, as "God continues his creative, sustaining and redeeming work through our human labor" (p. 104). She describes the "vocational sweet spot," where our skills and the world's needs intersect with God's priorities (p. 110). An example is the Mavuno Church in Kenya that combines social justice weekends with music and film industries. Sherman also strongly encourages participation in targeted church initiatives focusing on long-term community development. As one participant told his pastor after working in a challenging neighborhood, "This is where the kingdom of God needs to be" (p. 203). Sherman describes the transformational impact of the gospel on the lives and vocations of

believers who are able to re-create their workspace and career organically into shalom and justice. As Christians, she says, we cannot hold wealth without concern for the common good for those living next to us.

A significant virtue of Sherman's book is the affirmation of work combined with a substantial critique of congregations and the ends of business. I think this book would be particularly good for a church study group because of the examples and resources for discipling it contains.



John C. Knapp, in *How the Church Fails Businesspeople (And What Can Be Done About It)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011, 192 pp., \$15.00), begins with the observation that "as believers strive for coherence across all areas of their lives, much is at stake for the church" (p. xiii). He notes that clergy are often not interested in the working lives of their parishioners because they do not consider their jobs as callings (p. 28). Knapp thinks this is partially due to seminary training that lacks rigor in the area of addressing the "dehumanizing forces and temptations of the marketplace" (p. 39). He also thinks congregations have lapsed into a materialistic view, seeing people in terms of "what they are worth" despite a survey of Old Testament and New Testament scripture that shows "desire for wealth for oneself is never sanctioned" (p. 47).

Knapp traces the history of wealth in the Church, beginning with the common ownership of property in the New Testament church, to 950 when the Roman church owned a third of all the land in Europe. Reaction to the church's ownership of wealth and practices of usury shaped the Protestant Reformation, but even so "American believers are led to deem the pursuit of wealth more admirable than sinful" (p. 65).

This is the condition from which Knapp suggests we should rethink Christian vocation and workplace theology. Such a change could

sponsor a spiritual awakening of our understanding of wealth and work, and dramatically affect the potential of the Church to shape our lives. Knapp's theology of work as Christian wholeness is based on Micah 6:8. By living an ethic of love and responsibility, he argues, Christians in business can help the world become what it ought to be (p. 109). He commends

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David Miller's *God at Work* and organizations like the Christian Business Roundtable for providing a multiplicity of resources for the growing faith-in-work movement (p. 129), and Knapp is encouraged by the potential for the Church in providing models of care.

The evidence is clear that many workers, and not all of them Christian believers, long for a sense of meaning in their work. I agree with Knapp that the contemporary church's failure to see this longing as an opening for gospel witness and care is puzzling. Perhaps we are collectively still entranced by the Niebuhrian bifurcation of "moral man, immoral society" and are not yet ready to face the challenge of articulating a Christianly-shaped economy or a business-oriented faith life.



Jeff Van Duzer, formerly dean of the Business School and now provost at Seattle Pacific University, writes in *Why Business Matters to God (And What Still Needs to Be Fixed)* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011, 206 pp., \$20.00) that "if Christians can understand that the work they are doing is God's work, they can bring a sense of joy, meaning, purpose, pride and hope to their tasks that might otherwise elude them" (p. 19). Van Duzer draws business into the grand narrative of God's desire to restore a loving relationship with humanity. The original disobedience in Eden brings consequences that include broken human relations, business disparity, and depraved working conditions. Because the free market is "not inherent in God's design," it reflects "God's concession" to fallen humanity (p. 77). But by recognizing this limitation, Christians can still engage in business with a sense of hope and meaning, though resisting the status quo requires an alternative conception of business beyond profit maximization.

Van Duzer's vision for businesses is that they should serve others, be sustainable both fiscally and environmentally, and support institutions for the purpose of pleasing God. This includes straining to live within the limits of cost and profit (p. 161). All institutions, he says, are intended by God to work together to seek the common good, and Van Duzer's most direct challenge to a business status quo is to exchange profit maximization for the goal of "a reasonable risk-adjusted rate of return" necessary to raise capital (p. 171). Profit is not a reward, in his thinking, so much as a measure of business efficiency and alignment with market forces. In this way profit is a constraint and "a marvelous tool that brings forth the best from the company"; people who scorn profit seeking, he writes, "scorn an effective tool for providing for God's children" (p. 174). The edificatory tone of Van Duzer's book is most clear when he states "the call to business is a noble calling, a calling to participate at the very heart of God's work in the world" (p. 199).

Van Duzer exemplifies what I mentioned in the introduction of this review as the peculiar American interest in eliding business, work, and Christian faith. There are some inconsistencies on the need or necessity

of profit and whether the market or other business institutions are part of God's idea for human thriving. And yet the book works in providing a clear-eyed assessment of a reconception of business success that is self-consciously Christian and a part of God's grand narrative.



Considering all the books reviewed here, I am most struck by the relevance of a point Amy Sherman raises about the anemic Christian descriptions of work. She worries that congregations miss opportunities to see their members' work as occasions to express the Body of Christ in the world. The remedy would be a return to the thought of Walter Rauschenbush, and Dorothy Day in her own way, who elevate the worker as a Christian brother, a center of dignity and value around which the Church and our economic order ought to be organized.

The fear of socialism has affected our general conception of labor so deeply that the rightfulness of ownership and the absolute dominion of those controlling capital have become so engrained in our thinking that it raises few flags when "Christian" is combined without seam to "capitalism." The broad sense of the books reviewed here is that active participation in a market-based system is warranted *as synonymous* with the growth of God's kingdom. I do not want to argue here that this is wrong on its face, but I do think we are living in a culture of Christianity that uncritically accepts our economic system as normative for our future and for the global community. In the eschaton, and perhaps even before, we may have some explaining to do to our sisters and brothers in the global south and east who have borne the short end of the stick of the free market, and then perhaps also to the Master who told his disciples how difficult it is for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of heaven.



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