



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Investing in the Divine Economy
(*Vocation*, pp. 29-35)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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Investing in the Divine Economy

God created us to serve and be served by each other in the world of work. When we find our place in this interconnected system of mutual support, we participate in God's way of caring for the human community. We invest ourselves in the divine economy.

Prayer

Giver of every good and perfect gift, we, who consume more than we need and own more than we can use, come before you now to confront the truth that our deepest need is not met by possessing things, but by being a part of something bigger than our selves and beyond the reach of our control.

Allow us to employ our gifts in your kingdom—making the crooked straight, the blind to see, the lame to walk, the lost found, and the dead alive again. Amen.

Scripture Reading: 1 Peter 4:10-11

Reflection

Our primary calling in the New Testament is not to particular social roles, jobs, or careers, but to a new way of life, which is described as following Christ (1 Peter 2:21), having fellowship with Christ (1 Corinthians 1:9), leaving darkness and entering the light (1 Peter 2:9), becoming holy (1 Peter 1:15), and being a saint (Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2). So what does this have to do with our work?

"The concept of work as vocation comes to the fore when we ask ourselves how we propose to follow Christ," Hardy suggests. "Here the concept of vocation picks up on the New Testament image of the church as a body: all are called to follow Christ, the head of the church, but each one has a special role to play in the body on the basis of a unique gift. *The concept of work as vocation in effect says that the same principle holds for society at large.* Like all Christians, I am called to love my neighbor. But I respond to that call on the basis of my particular set of abilities and passions—as a builder of houses, auto-maker, school counselor, youth minister, or dental hygienist."

Hardy uses the notion of "divine economy" to capture how God has created us to be interdependent persons who serve and are served by each other: "We are born ignorant, but there are parents and teachers; we are born naked, but there are those who design, manufacture, and distribute clothing; we are born hungry, but there are those who produce, distribute, and prepare food." Our work becomes a part of our Christian vocation when we find a place of service within this system of mutual support and enter into God's way of caring for the human community.

The great German reformer, Martin Luther, believed God calls all Christians through their social roles, or stations. "Our calling is mediated by the duties that attach to our stations in life," Hardy summarizes Luther's view. "To discover our calling, we need only remind ourselves of who we are." Later reformers, like John Calvin and his followers, realized that human institutions could be unstable and corrupted by human sin. For instance, "the duties and expectations attached to the social role of father in some societies can be dangerous and damaging. So can the duties and expectations that impinge upon those who currently practice family law." This refor-



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mation legacy suggests two guidelines for investing ourselves in the divine economy:

- ▶ *Specific gifts are indicators of what God would have us do with our lives.* Our gifts include not only talents and abilities, but also concerns and interests. "Discovering our gifts is not a matter of simple introspection or private self-estimation. We find out what we are good at by reflecting on the loop of our life experiences and the feedback we receive from others," Hardy notes. "It is important to listen humbly to others – they often have a better and more sober view of ourselves than we do."
- ▶ *God calls us to serve others.* Though we are tempted "to evaluate a job solely on the basis of salary, security, status, and satisfaction," he observes, "as Christians, we are obliged to evaluate a job on the basis of its social content – the way in which it benefits, or harms, others. Because of the effects of sin on the institutional shape of work in our society, we cannot assume that all existing occupations are equally helpful, or that the highest paying jobs are the ones that fill the greatest and most important needs. To catch hold of our calling, we need not only a sober estimation of ourselves, but a critical understanding of our society."

Study Questions

1. How does your current work, occupation, or career measure up to the first guideline: are you discovering and employing the specific gifts that God has given you?
2. How does your current work, occupation, or career measure up to the second guideline: what is the social content of your work – the ways in which it benefits, or harms, others?
3. To what extent should Christians evaluate a job offer on the basis of salary, security, status, and satisfaction?
4. "Of course, my job is only one of the places I respond to my calling," Hardy observes. "I also respond as a citizen of a democratic country, as a neighbor in my corner of town, and as a member of a local community of faith. Human life is multi-faceted. And so will be our response to God's call" (p. 35). In what relationships and roles, in addition to your employment, do you invest in the divine economy?
5. Comment on Dorothy Sayers' observation that "A right kind of work must be related, not only to the needs of (people), but also a willingness to love and serve the material body of God's universe" (in "Other Voices," *Vocation*, p. 59).
6. The Calvinist view opens the possibility of a broader social critique of our roles; not only our personal jobs and relationships, but entire forms of occupation and social roles can be reformed according to God's will. How might your current occupation and social roles need to be reformed in light of the divine economy?

Departing Hymn: "Voice That Calls Us Each by Name"

Investing in the Divine Economy

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how the call to employ our individual gifts in service to the body of Christ also applies to our work in the society at large.
2. To understand the “divine economy” as an interconnected system of mutual support through which we participate in God’s way of caring for the human community.
3. To examine whether our jobs, social roles, and careers lead us to discover and employ the specific gifts that God has given to us.
4. To evaluate the social content of our jobs, social roles, and careers – the ways in which they benefit, or harm, others.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Vocation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Discerning God’s call for our work and career requires “an ability to read the divine economy of human labor and to locate our place within it. If that economy is hidden to us, it’s probably because we tend to think of God as a distant deity, making only occasional appearances in a world that otherwise runs pretty much on its own,” Hardy notes. To remind us how God continually works in the world, Hardy tells this familiar story: “Once upon a time there was a pious man standing on his roof, surrounded by rising floodwaters...” (*Vocation*, p. 30).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a member to read 1 Peter 4:10-11 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Describing our divine calling, 1 Peter 2:9 rejoices, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” Our primary vocation, or calling, is to enter the kingdom of God in faithful obedience.

But what does this vocation imply for our personal and family relationships, our choice of jobs and careers, and our deliberate preparation for these through experience and education? In other words, what is the connection between this call to follow Christ and our *work*? (We are using “work” broadly to include volunteer service activities as well as business or professional employment, and caring for friends, family members, and others through institutions of care-giving. All of these relationships are part of the “divine economy,” the way God created us to serve and be served by others through an interconnected system of mutual support.)

1 Peter 4:10-11 relates vocation to our work when it instructs us to use God’s gifts in the service of others (in the faith community). Hardy suggests that the same principle – of discovering our gifts and employing them to benefit others – applies to society at large.

Study Questions

1. Discuss whether members have opportunities to explore their gifts (interests and concerns as well as abilities and talents) as they work. Do colleagues, family members, and friends regularly help them to evaluate what they have done well and how they do their best work? Encourage members to brainstorm on how they might develop and employ more of God's gifts in their work.
2. Some members may provide daily care to family members or friends; they may help care for others directly through volunteer opportunities or employment. Brainstorm how they benefit others *indirectly* through the products they manufacture, professional services they provide, charitable groups they support, and the wise investment of their money.
3. Salary, security, status, and satisfaction are legitimate concerns, of course, but they should not be the only, or the most important concerns for a Christian. We should avoid some jobs and workplaces regardless of their attractiveness by these measures, because they do not really benefit (and may harm) others. Encourage members to reflect on job offers and careers they have considered. How much salary and security should be enough? How important is status? Should some unsatisfying work be endured for the sake of the good it contributes in the divine economy?
4. In our families we may care for spouses, children and grandchildren, aging parents, or brothers and sisters. We may support and encourage our friends. In our communities we may care for others by volunteering in a professional association, sports club, or school group. At church we may serve others through teaching, leading in worship, singing in a choir, visiting hospitals, working on a clean-up crew, praying for others needs, or celebrating their growth. Our hobbies may benefit others, whether we share garden-fresh vegetables, make encouraging greeting cards, or help maintain a local hiking trail. Selecting financial investments, voting in elections, writing political representatives, and supporting worthy causes can be ways of serving others in the divine economy.
5. We should broaden the idea of "social content" to include how our work benefits, or harms, the environment. Why? Human welfare is intertwined with the welfare of the soil, air, water, and ecological systems on which we depend. In addition, God calls us to care for the material world independently of its usefulness to us (Genesis 2:15).
6. Members may evaluate their family roles – as spouse, parent, or child – and how they treat their friends. Encourage them to evaluate not only their specific jobs and workplaces, but their careers. How are they harmful to others? The harm may be to individuals, groups of people (through gender or racial prejudice), or to the environment (through waste products, careless use of energy, or poorly designed processes). The harm that we do may be indirect and unintentional. Ask members to brainstorm on how they can become (and encourage others to be) more sensitive of others' needs and more careful with the supporting environment – in their families, their specific workplaces, and the types of work they do.

Departing Hymn

"Voice That Calls Us Each by Name" is on pp. 47-49 of *Vocation*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a closing prayer.