

The other 100,000 hours



How the church marginalizes itself from the working world

By Chris R. Armstrong

MOST CHURCHES ARE GOOD AT figuring out what to do with their congregations during the hours on Sunday morning in which they have a captive audience. But what about the rest of the week? What does the church have to say about the struggles and joys, trials and triumphs, and inherent worth of our working lives?

“The average person will work 100,000 hours in their lifetime,” says Jeff Van Duzer, dean of the Seattle Pacific University School of Business and Economics. “This seems like an enormous waste if it’s spent doing fundamentally meaningless things whose only value is a paycheck.” To be sure, many Christians develop, at some point in their lives, a sense that daily work does indeed matter to God. And eventually, some come to understand that their own work complements God’s work — the six days of creation, the redemptive love of Jesus, the ushering in of new heavens and new earth. God sustains the world, but God’s creatures do their part in caring for it as well.

But does the church have anything more profound to say about the value of work? And how might the-

ological schools prepare their graduates to help ordinary Christians do their work in light of their faith? Those are questions worth pondering.

Princeton scholar David Miller explores this topic in his 2006 book *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement*. As Miller explains, the 1980s saw an explosion of books, magazines, conferences, networks, and organizations focused on putting the two halves of life together: worship and “the other 100,000 hours.”

Significantly, these efforts have been almost entirely led by lay people. Evidence of churches, denominations, or theological educators helping the laity see work as a daily calling is still thin on the ground. “Sermon topics, liturgical content, prayers, and pastoral care rarely address — much less recog-

nize—the spiritual questions, pastoral needs, ethical challenges, and vocational possibilities faced by those who work in the marketplace and world of business,” Miller says.

William Messenger, the Harvard Business School-trained executive editor of the Theology of Work Project Inc., regularly counsels executives who are people of faith. He relates that most businesspeople, though they may otherwise love their church and their pastor, feel their pastor simply does not understand their working world and its issues. One businessman quoted by Miller puts the situation in stark terms:

In the almost 30 years of my professional career, my church has never once suggested that there be any type of accounting of my on-the-job ministry to others. . . . There has never been an inquiry into the types of ethical decisions I must face, or whether I seek to communicate the faith to my co-workers. I have never been in a congregation where there was any type of public affirmation of a ministry in my career [as a sales manager]. In short, I must conclude that my church really doesn't have the least interest in whether or how I minister in my daily work.

Messenger admits that many pastors will never be attuned enough to the concerns of business people to offer really deep advice on knotty ethical issues. For these, the best form of support may be to facilitate small groups of like-minded people—for example, workers in similar jobs—to read Scripture, pray, and discuss matters touching their work. Miller agrees and says that pastors who are most distant from work-related concerns can take steps to bridge the divide between themselves and the working people in their pews. Some ways they might do so:

- Be present in the work sphere and listen carefully.
- Become workplace literate (for example, by reading the *Wall Street Journal*).
- Preach to work concerns.
- Use adult education, small groups, and retreats to address workers' sense of work-faith disjunction.
- Train laity in devotional disciplines linked to their work and daily lives.

This kind of engagement may not be possible if a pastor embodies anti-business biases. And researchers like David Miller of Princeton and Laura Nash of Harvard say that such biases are common—sometimes inherited from seminary professors. Messenger says that businesspeople tell him things like this:

My pastor always talks about profit as if it were greed. Well, that shows they know nothing at all about how the business world works. So when the

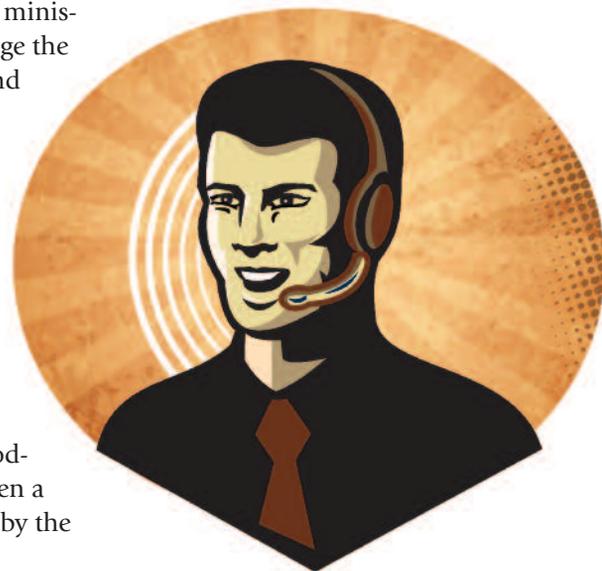
pastor preaches sermons on this, he always tells me to do things that are useless in terms of the value I provide to society. If I started doing the things my pastor suggests, it would ruin my business, and then I couldn't provide jobs, good service for customers, and useful products, so the function I'm filling in society would cease to exist.

Of course, it's easy enough to point to prominent failures by business leaders over the past few decades. Human weakness is on display in the marketplace as in every other sphere, and that should make us wary of “sprinkling holy water over all of business,” to borrow Van Duzer's words. He often pushes back on antibusiness attitude among clergy, but he also finds himself trying to rein in business leaders who are inappropriately sanguine, even smug, about what they do. “I sometimes want to say: ‘You have bought into a world system which is in some ways antithetical to God, and I want you to rethink this.’”

There is potential for greed and corruption in any field, and thus clergy are rightly concerned not to become uncritical apologists for big business. But if they want to speak to the business world with credibility, they also need to engage in the hard work of understanding the morally complex, socially engaged world of the marketplace. To minister to the work lives of their people, pastors need not themselves be executives or economists, any more than they need to be doctors to visit the sick in hospitals. But some learning must happen: the church, by failing to learn even the basics of the marketplace, marginalizes itself from the lives of most of its people.

Seminaries and a theology of work

Any inquiry into the capabilities of clergy points back to theological education. And surely most ministers who want to engage the working world will find that their theological school left them unprepared. Miller argues that clergy suffer not only from a lack of direct business experience (and thus an insufficient awareness of the issues), but also from “a lack of ministry models to emulate, and even a sense of intimidation by the business world.”





On the theological side, it is no wonder clergy are flummoxed by discussions of business and economics. Most 20th- and 21st-century theological reflection on work and business—what little there is—has tended to focus on the problems of the marketplace, ignoring its constructive and creative dimensions, according to Miller. This represents a clear break from earlier periods of Christian theology—most notably during the Lutheran Reformation—when questions of work and vocation were actively studied in light of Scripture and tradition.

As centers of theological reflection, theological schools today might consider their own responsibility to cultivate in future clergy a robust theological understanding of work. To begin at the beginning: What does God intend for human work and its economic organization? The simplest answer, which reappears in many forms among the lay people who write about the intersection of faith and work, is that God created work and uses it to benefit all people.

How work connects to God

1. Work as a graced activity benefiting all

Discussion of faith and work are often informed by the notion of common grace—the understanding that God bestows a measure of grace on all people, whether or not they are Christians. Although most often mentioned by Reformed theologians, common grace is rooted in the first chapters of Genesis: God creates everything from nothing. Made in God’s image, mankind also creates— not from nothing, but things of greater value out of things of lesser value.

“Business is the primary institution in our society that creates economic value,” says Van Duzer. “Many other institutions create mainly social, intellectual, spiritual capital—and business draws on those. But as it relates to economic capital, business is the only

institution focused on creating that. Everyone else draws down on the value created by businesses: churches, universities, arts organizations, and so forth.”

This role comes into focus in the third chapter of 1 Corinthians, which describes Christians laboring together with God as God metaphorically cultivates his grain and builds his temple. Bill Heatley, author of *The Gift of Work: Spiritual Disciplines for the Workplace*, asks of this passage, “What does it mean to be a field?” He says it means that Christians are to meet the needs of others and help the world flourish and prosper. “What does it mean to be God’s building?” He replies, “In many ways, to live the embodiment of being part of the temple—a place of dwelling, peace, security; a place of family, of growth, of storage for future use, for difficult times.”

Here is a theological principle of some power: The God-ordained use of work to create better things out of lesser things means that if a workplace is organized to extract rather than create value—and in the process actually destroys resources or harms human relationships or undermines the good of society—then that workplace is not operating according to the principle of value creation through work. So there are better and worse ways of organizing work, and it is possible to assess them theologically. To build and safeguard the flourishing of people on earth, the sphere of work desperately needs Christians to act according to Christian ethical lights (which in a given situation may or may not be consistent with the ethics of other religious or non-religious groups).

This is not an easy task. Many work-related situations are gray areas that call for judgment. In some cases, a line of business might increase value only incrementally while also very slightly and indirectly harming other human beings. Many work-related decisions are mitigated by government regulations, competition, and personal factors. The thing not to do, Van Duzer says, is to “talk about an arena of work such as business as if it was an immutable thing like gravity, and all we can do is bring our best selves to it.” That is not true, he insists, because business is a social construct. “God cares about how it is constructed. And some of the paradigms, themes, value systems for business are in fact open to be reevaluated with Christian lenses.”

2. Work as a place of self-expression

God has designed work in a way that allows individual and unique persons to use their abilities and indeed their very personalities to benefit others. Work is a mode of expressing who we are. Van Duzer puts it more strongly in the case of business:

"Business exists to give people opportunities to express aspects of their identity in meaningful and creative work," he says. But this can be said of other sorts of workplaces as well. As we work, we often find a special kind of fulfillment and affirmation not available to us in other spheres of life.

3. Work as a place of formation

Work carries a special benefit for people open to being shaped by God in the midst of it. Attentive workers can find that their labor—either with others or in solitude—can promote holiness. As people experience the stresses, strains, toils, and triumphs of working and seek God in the midst of it all, allowing their personalities to be shaped in ways that are sometimes painful, they can grow. The questions to ask, says Heatley, are these: "What does it mean for Christ to be in me when I am putting together my case file, my spreadsheet, conducting my board meeting? How can I become more like Christ? What steps must I take?"

Those steps may be difficult, requiring actions that rub against sinful inclinations. Or, they may lead to actions that open surprising vistas of grace. Heatley is both an information technology professional and a board member for the Theology of Work Project. As he began to consider his role at work through a theological lens, he says he began to consider the 19th chapter of Acts, which explains that God performed wonders through Paul "so that even his handkerchiefs and apron were taken to people and healed them." Heatley realized that since Paul was a tent-maker, his apron and kerchief were in essence

his tools. "God filled the tools of his trade with goodness and holiness, to be means of blessing," he concludes. "My tools were e-mails, meetings, and project plans."

It wasn't immediately obvious how God could work in the midst of such mundane realities. At the time, Heatley was receiving 200 to 300 e-mail messages a day in his corporate setting, and they seemed an insurmountable burden, a pile of minutiae. But when he embraced the idea of being a co-laborer with God, he tested it on his inbox.

He read St. Francis de Sales, the early-16th-century bishop of Geneva who wrote *Introduction to the Devout Life* especially for lay people. De Sales, he says, "taught that the distaff, the spindle, the simple mundane things of life were actually great opportunities spread throughout our day to do good for God."

So Heatley decided to wrap each e-mail in prayer. "I prayed before I read, and before I responded to, each e-mail. Then I prayed God's blessing into the e-mail."

What happened next? There are always people in organizations who resent and envy those entrusted with more authority, more money to manage. These can become enemies, who wish others ill. Heatley observed that "those e-mails had the effect of turning many of these enemies into friends. There was nothing special in them. Just, in my mind, they had this effect on people purely because God had blessed them."

Heatley suggests that when we become intentional about co-laboring with God, we can watch his hand at work in us, seeing "how intensely he cares about me, and about other people, and how he cares about the good that can be done through me and other people."

Note that this is never merely a matter of individual growth. Christian discipleship in the work place requires ethical behavior for the common good. But ethical behavior is not always easy. He says, "We need to ask, 'How would Jesus work if he were me, in my job, my profession?'" 

In the next issue: How theological schools, nonprofits, and foundations are helping people think through issues of faith and work.

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