

THY WORKMATE IS
THY NEIGHBOUR

ESSAY ON THE THEOLOGY OF WORK

AN ESSAY BY STUART MCGREGOR

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‘What we do everyday is not reflected in the nature of the ministry of the church.’¹

This damning statement highlights a significant problem of contemporary church. It seems that many churches are concentrating so much on being relevant, in the entertainment sense of the word, that they are losing their relevancy in the marketplace.

“There [is] a problem, a major problem: my Sunday experience [has] no connection to my Monday world,”² attests William Diehl. A dichotomy has formed between the worlds of Church and everyday life and consequently the need for some to develop a Theology of Vocation³ has come back to the forefront of Christian thought. Whilst this has some merit, it is easy to confuse how one contextualises scripture for relevance in *all* aspects of our life and what it means to be Christian at work. Nevertheless, there are some important challenges being raised and the implications are enormous.

Christian Schumacher wonders whether or not it is possible for a Christian Theology of Vocation to be widely accepted by secular society.⁴ Could the Christian approach to work be an acceptable social norm? A little idealistic perhaps, but still poignant. But the biggest problem with this question is that there is no universal Christian Theology of Vocation to be found because ultimately it is up to the individual to come to their own conclusions based on scripture and tradition—just like so many other aspects of faith.

This essay attempts illuminate the issue and point those seeking a Theology of Vocation in the right direction.

G R A S P I N G A T H E O L O G Y O F V O C A T O N

The attempt to construct a theology of vocation is brought back to the foreground in the Reformation. It was developed most notably by Martin

Luther and John Calvin in their reactions⁵ to the institutional Church. This essay will focus on Luther's treatment of the issue since it is the foundation of many of the sources of this essay.

Luther's doctrine of vocation is firmly entrenched in his theology of "the priesthood of all believers" based on 1 Peter 2:9.⁶ Not only did this scripture undercut the false importance that the clergy had of themselves but it elevated the peasant to hold as high a spiritual office as a priest, bishop or even the pope. As Gary Badcock cites Luther:

There is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status.⁷

Luther bolstered this argument with the Pauline metaphor of the church being like a body of many different parts (1 Cor 12.12–13)⁸ which would leave the difference between clergy and laity functional rather than spiritual.

For Luther, an individual's vocation is represented by any one of three different stations: *Family* (extended), *Political* and *Secular authority* and finally *Church and Ministry*⁹. He considers each station as an honorary decoration from God as it is the mechanism through which God will deal with humanity. As such they are not to be treated lightly by "trading them in to flee to a monastery."¹⁰ Those whom these stations employ, whether they believe in God's sovereignty or not, are ordained by God and are therefore, by default, answerable to Him. Every job is performed as part of the support structure of the greater community, thereby imbuing the most 'basic' vocation, such as being a milkmaid, with religious significance. As Badcock puts it ". . . roast chickens do not fly spontaneously into our mouths, but are *prepared for us* by farmers and cooks."¹¹

Through Luther's understanding everyone can access a spiritual understanding of their vocation in the context of 'neighbourly love'—an explicit commandment of Christ: Love God and love your neighbour (Mt 22.37–40). The work we do is for the benefit of the community— not just the religious community either—for this is where we are agents of the love of God. The reason we do work out of love for our neighbour is compelled by our response to the love of God. 'God does not need our good works—our neighbour does.'¹²

Here a tension arises. Badcock argues that the danger with investing religious virtue into every aspect of day to day living is set against what it means to be *called* in Scripture i.e. the primary identifier of a Christian lifestyle is to

be at some level discontinuous with surrounding society.¹³ As an example he considers Jesus' exhortation for us not to store up treasure on earth but in heaven (Mt 6.19) subpoenaing the explicit biblical tension between wealth and poverty.¹⁴ It is foolish to disregard the implications of this scripture, especially given the affluent context from which this essay is written, but surely part of being *in* our society is actively interacting with its values.¹⁵ For a capitalist society to function, it must make money. To be an effective participant means to, where possible, make money through being employed therefore not be a burden on society (2 Thess 3.10). We cannot realistically escape this environment¹⁶ and it is too late to turn the clock back to some romantic ideal of self-sufficiency and poverty.¹⁷

So, given the tension with being *of* not *in* the world, in what way and to what extent do we exhibit countercultural Christian ideals? I would suggest that the answer that an individual gives will not be particularly visible in the way they live. There is something more surreptitious about Christians living counter-culturally than many would want to think. It centres around understanding that God is involved in some way in everything we do. Finding spirituality everywhere will change a person more than any rules or any mandate to live counter-culturally, simply because it is looking first and responding later.

SOME BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

One of the most significant underlying themes throughout the statutes and ordinances of Deuteronomy was that the Israelites would not forget God delivering them from Egypt. As part of this many menial tasks (e.g. Deut 22.11–12) were given a spiritual significance by writing them into the Law which, in turn, made them into acts of worship. God made Himself accessible, even in mundane existence, by His imbuing everyday activities with religious rite. The small things mattered as much as the big things.

Furthermore, when considering the impact of the various covenants that God made with the Israelites, it is too simplistic to say that God's 'imposition' on such high protocols as outlined in the Torah was simply to provide a moral framework and religious system for them to survive. The laws and sacrifices invariably centred around the wellbeing of the community by orienting them to God first and the neighbours second—a concept that is sustained in the New Testament (Eph 4:28). The wellbeing of the community is God's primary concern and this is achieved through following the religious and moral codes.

T H Y W O R K M A T E I S T H Y N E I G H B O U R

From a similar community focus we can start to shape our understanding of vocational worship. We are on this earth to ensure that it does well, not just for us, but for God.¹⁸ In this process, work will ultimately turn us from a self-fulfilment spirituality to one that is others-oriented (Mark 10:42–45). Work will in that sense become an act of worship.

This is where Luther’s perspective on vocation is most useful. He breaks down the constraints of sanctuary and opens the way for God to be evident in our everyday life. If indeed the act of living needs to be infected with a primary desire to show love for God and love for our neighbours, then work is actually worship to God and ministry to our neighbours. But this is so obvious that it is often missed.¹⁹

P R A C T I C A L I M P L I C A T I O N S

We cannot ignore that the reformation theology was borne out in a specific historical setting. Much of it was formed in reaction to the institutional church and so, while the distinction between clergy and laity is aggressively attacked, it is important not to de-cloak the clergy of the importance of their function—without them many churches would not survive at all. But the most important issue arising from the historical context of the Reformed notion of vocation, is accepting that career choice was somewhat limited back then.²⁰

It was not until the mid-twentieth century that post-war countries could be so bold as to ask of their children “What do you want to be when you grow up?” The possibilities were as exciting as the possibilities and promises that technology was bringing. The post-modern vocational crisis came from no longer seeking identity in a work ethic of loyalty, but in the journey of self-definition which would later lead to the rejection of a ‘career for life’. Identity and vocation are not tied together in the same way as in Luther’s day. But today our specific vocation, whether it is to parenthood, accountancy or to the mission field is no longer just accidental or something we are born into; it is crucial to our self-determined identity.²¹

Well, that’s the theory anyway. In reality there is still a large sector of society that is limited in the choices that they can make. Almost everyone hits a ceiling and reaches a crisis point where they need to decide if they will continue as they are or retrain (often opting to stay as they are). At some point in their lives, every Christian, no matter what he or she is doing, will have to define whatever choices they make within the context of faith.²²

But many forget that it is immaterial to God what people decide to *do* as a vocation,²³ since the overarching principal is that we are on this earth to

ensure that it does well, not just for us but for Him. If our understanding is that we are all believers form a priesthood then we understand that God will empower us for the ministry that he requires us to do.

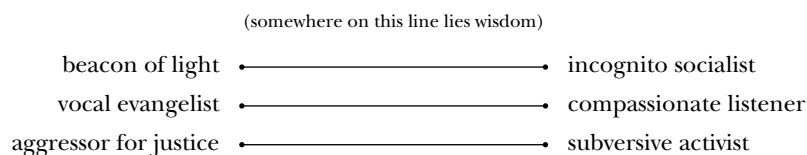
In this understanding of vocation, seemingly mundane jobs can in fact be invested with spiritual significance become an individual’s ministry.²⁴ Gregory Pierce has a wonderful story of a checkout operator in a supermarket who made it her goal to say or do one thing for each customer that would make them feel valued. This was her ministry—to make the task of shopping for groceries a little more bearable.²⁵ But this practical vocational understanding one’s ministry is rare. Most Christians see that they are ministers in their workplace—most of them don’t understand what that means.²⁶

The most common definition of fulltime Christian ministry is going overseas as a missionary, or becoming a minister in the church, or doing something for a Christian organisation, all of which are, in many respects (and not to devalue their importance), analogous to monastic environments—the very movement that Luther sees as being the antithesis of the priesthood of believers. Furthermore, this approach if seen as an ascetic and therefore more spiritual approach will only reinforce the dichotomy. This is not an adequate solution because it is, in short, of no real significance for most of our congregation.

A strictly behavioural approach to being a good Christian worker is not satisfactory either because there are so many interpretations as to what a ‘Christian’ standard of living are.

Randle Manwarring suggest that asking for a pay rise is completely out of line²⁷, but pay parity and egalitarian justice is a significant issue within an employment contract world. Manwarring also advocates that we have to prove the workability of our faith at work²⁸, but Diehl suggests that anyone who thinks that their deeds speak loudly for their witness have a false sense of their own visible faith.²⁹

It would appear therefore, that individuals need to make a choice as to where they stand on the following continua (not a comprehensive list by any means):



In expressing the perceived practical impact that a theology of vocation will have on one's working life, often says more about the biases of the individual, than echoing universal scriptural truth.³⁰

Several books offer sound advice on the how-to of ministry, but possibly the most useful understanding of vocational ministry is simply reframing work within the social ethic of 'loving one's neighbour.' The paradigm then shifts from internal self-help to external community serving. From having this as our underlying framework we can really address some very significant but decidedly grey areas e.g. what would constitute a Christian work environment, or a Christian approach to quality control, or Christian factory layouts?³¹

Viv Grigg's symposium on *Creating an Auckland Business Theology* provides many useful stories from local Christian business people who were asked to submit their reflections of the implications of being Christian in the marketplace. The selection is diverse, from small business to corporate, from consultant to chief executive officer. Invariably they all reflected a social dimension in their ministry.

A graphic design firm may have had a non-hierarchical structure to empower the employees, which is what they felt was the Christian approach.³² Dick Hubbard does have a hierarchy, but sees that "compassion, integrity and having a sense of spirituality in the workplace" is very important.³³

Agfa reflect their social ethic through a policy of not firing people over disciplinary or performance issues. They would rather reposition them in the company in an area that is more suitable for them than make them redundant. Should it come to that, they will endeavour to assist in finding that person a job.³⁴

There are other suggestions too: staff learning CPR³⁵, businesses funding local community projects, standing for justice and equality in the work environment³⁶, not letting the staff work on the Sabbath³⁷ and so the list goes on.

The entire book is full of practical examples like these, but the common theme is: upholding the dignity of the individuals who were working for and with them. They were all neighbours who are loved dearly by God.

This 'thy workmate is thy neighbour' perspective is supported by Diehl as he considers that his ministry at work is providing a listening ear and being attentive to other people's pain.³⁸ He sees that in order for his vocational ministry to have potency, he must break the confines of work and visit people outside of the work environment.³⁹ When we break the confines the 'work relationship' we start relating on a different level. Friendship accepts the

fallibility of each person which is a much more conducive to sharing one's faith or having loving involvement in another's life.

C O N C L U S I O N

Ultimately, the problem of what it means to be a Christian at work is not really ethical or behavioural, but develops with trying to understand the spiritual dimension not so much *in* work but *of* work. Looking for God in every aspect of life is vital to an holistic faith.⁴⁰ A catholic priest who religiously observed the collection people coming for breakfast every morning at his local diner, reflected on them in this way:

They were and are the world of labour, of non-recognition, of commuters, diners bus stops: the world that the institutionalised religious concern attempts to convert by exhorting and sermonising, and yet a world that provides the fresh and raw life from which religious meaning must draw its sustenance for reflection.⁴¹

He was tapping into the truth that one can start to see the divine in the mundane and un-fascinating—just like the aforementioned checkout operator. His paradigm let God be God in everyday situations. He saw the presence of God in 'the world' where the church says it is not. He saw beauty in the ugliness.

Here I feel that the discussion has brought us back to the more fundamental issue. We are called to love God and because God is love, we are compelled to love our neighbours. This is the most we can ever hope to be able to accomplish, and indeed this is all that we are expected of us. This is our calling. Being an IT administrator is not a calling, it is a choice that I made that is subservient to my calling to be Christian in every situation. In effect my Christian life was fulfilled within the sphere of my job. And here is the crunch. My own feelings of failing to be Christian when I was at work accurately reflect the failings of my faith. We live our spirituality, ugly or beautiful.

Church is not the place for expressing the ethics, giving moral or behavioural guidelines for Christians in their work place. The Church's job is to inspire and call people back to obedience and trust,⁴² in every aspect of life because every aspect of our life, whether we like it or not, is our act of worship to God.

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F O O T N O T E S

¹ Banks, Robert, *All the business of Life* (Sutherland, N.S.W.: Albatross, 1987), 53

² William E. Diehl, *The Monday Connection* (New York: Harper Collins 1993). Tense altered.

³ VOCATION DEFINED: Vocation is a term that has been so dissected that it has lost its meaning somewhat. For this essay I shall define vocation as being what one does when one is at work (e.g. in a job or profession) or intentionally not at work fulfilling fulltime commitments other than paid employment (e.g. a non-working parent at home with dependents).

⁴ Schumacher, Christian, *To Live and Work*, (Bromley Kent: MARC Europe, 1987), 18

⁵ Their reactions are the catalyst for their theology.

⁶ William E. Diehl, *Ministry in Daily Life* (Bethesda: Alban, 1993), 11

⁷ Gary, D. Badcock, *The Way of Life*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 34, Citing Luther: *To the higher Christian Nobility*, p. 129

⁸ Badcock, *Way of Life*, 127–129

⁹ Analogous to the operation of the Trinity.

¹⁰ Forell, George W., *Faith Active in Love: An Investigation of the Principles underlying Luther's Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1954), 122-123

¹¹ Badcock, *Way of Life*, 36–37. My emphasis.

¹² Gustaff Wingren, *The Christian's calling*, (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1958), 10

¹³ Badcock, *Way of Life*, 83

¹⁴ Badcock, *Way of Life*, 84

¹⁵ We cannot give *all* our money to the poor, 'filthy rich' electricity companies still want us to pay for our power. Robin Hood is probably not a realistic role model for us.

¹⁶ Luddites live in a paradox—they cannot sustain themselves without first engaging with society around them at some level e.g. they can never strictly own their land, they still have to pay rates to the Government.

¹⁷ Oliver Barclay, *Towards a new Protestant Work Ethic* (Christian Graduate, September, 1983), 9

¹⁸ Charles A. Metteer, *A Survey of the Theology of Work* (Evangelical Review of Theology, Vol 25, No 2, April 2001)

¹⁹ This problem is not at all alleviated by trying to locate mandate for vocation within scripture. Often Genesis 2:15 is cited because it is here that Adam is put to work in the Garden of Eden. My objection to using this as a proof text is that it thrusts the entire justification for working into an ‘other’ spiritual dimension. The reality is that we get up to our alarm clock, not because Genesis says we do, but because we need to pay the electricity bill each month. All that this superficial treatment of defining work does, is reinforce the dichotomy. The real question is not so much that we work, but what makes our work decidedly Christian?

²⁰ Badcock, *Way of Life*, 44

²¹ John Goldingay and Robert Innes, *God at Work Part 1* (Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Books Ltd, 1994), 12

²² Banks, *Business of Life*, 147

²³ Providing it falls within the moral parameters i.e. one cannot be a blessed drug dealer. Badcock, *Way of Life*, 124

²⁴ Metteer, *Survey*

²⁵ A story submitted by Maxine F. Dennis, “Compassion is the most vital tool of my trade”; Gregory F. Augustine Pierce, *Of Human Hands: a Reader in the Spirituality of Work* (Minneapolis: Augsburg and ACTA Publications, 1991)

²⁶ William Diehl, *Daily life*, 33

²⁷ Randle Manwaring, *A Christians Guide to Daily Work*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963), 39

²⁸ Manwaring, *Guide*, 32

²⁹ Diehl, *Ministry in Daily Life* 15–17

³⁰ The ethics based approach is fraught with all the difficulty that comes with situational ethics. The bible does not provide clear and accurate guidelines on redundancy, company structure or free market competition. There is a point that we have to simply approach each situation from the premise that each person that the company regards as an ultimately expendable asset actually holds enormous value in God’s eyes and therefore approached with the same love. There is no definitive answer as to how much the edges that separate good business sense and compassion.

³¹ Schumacher, *Live and Work*, 18

³² Viv Grigg (ed.), *Creating an Auckland Business Theology*, (Auckland: Urban Leadership Foundation), 34

³³ Grigg, *Auckland Business Theology*, 45

³⁴ Grigg, *Auckland Business Theology*, 42

³⁵ Diehl, *Daily Life*, 17

³⁶ David Sheppard, James Allcock and Robert Innes (ed.), *God at Work Part 2* (Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Books Ltd, 1995), 6

³⁷ Grigg, *Auckland Business Theology*, 40. Sanitarium, being Seventh Day Adventist, closes at midday on Friday and do not open on Saturday at all

³⁸ But going out of my way to “go out of my way” is not what Diehl is implying.

³⁹ Diehl, *Monday Connection*, 77

⁴⁰ Diehl, *Monday Connection*, 28

⁴¹ Jeff Behrens, “Andy’s Diner”, Pierce, *Human Hands*, 34

⁴² Sheppard, *Part 2*, 15

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