

“Whatever You Do”

Why discipleship is withering – and what we can do about it

“Whatever you do, work heartily . . .
you are serving the Lord Christ.”

- Colossians 3:23-24

Christians today urgently need to revive their commitment to whole-life discipleship. Millions of churchgoers are “Christians” for only an hour a week – Christianity is something they do on Sunday morning rather than a way of life. The withering of discipleship is one of the gravest threats facing the church today.

The main cause of the problem is that churches have disconnected discipleship from everyday life. Too often, pastors talk about our “walk with God” and “stewardship” almost exclusively in terms of formally religious activities like worship attendance, Bible study, evangelism and giving. As crucial as these activities are for every Christian, they will never take up more than a tiny percentage of life for those who are not in full-time ministry.

The largest portion of life – our work in the home and in our jobs – is excluded from our concept of discipleship and stewardship. Most churches have nothing spiritually powerful to offer for the activities that define most of our daily lives during the other six days of the week. This leaves us preaching a faith that is not relevant to the totality of people’s lives. It also risks the rise of a new monasticism in which discipleship is equated with religious works.

The Theology of Calling: Whole-Life Stewardship

It is urgent for the future of the church that we recover a whole-life model of discipleship that understands every legitimate human activity as responding to a call from God. Every human being is called to be, in all of life, a steward of God’s creation.

In most churches today, “stewardship” only means giving and volunteering at church. But the biblical model of stewardship encompasses our whole lives - it is primarily about who we are, not what we do - and how we cultivate the world in all our activities. Whatever you do, Paul says in Colossians 3:23-24, work heartily, because *whatever you do* you are serving the Lord Christ! Our individual discipleship, our church communities, and our witness to society at large must recover a holistic theology of stewardship and calling. We must re-integrate our model of discipleship with the call to cultivate the world.

The central element of this perspective is that all legitimate work is a calling from God. Work – understood as any activity, paid or unpaid, by which an individual provides others with products, services, assistance, development, or other benefits that are of value to them – is a subject of tremendous theological and pastoral importance:

- It is a mode of human participation in God’s creative and redemptive activities.
- It manifests the image of God, exercising the regency He gave us (Genesis 2:15) and imitating His attributes (John 5:17).
- It puts to use the talents God gives us.
- It is how we serve our neighbors in our everyday activities.
- It is one of the main ways we reflect the character of Christ (Mark 10:42-45).
- It carries out the cultural mandate, developing the potential of creation.
- It obeys God’s direct command (e.g. Exodus 20:9; II Thessalonians 3:10).
- It is one of the core elements of discipleship and spiritual formation.

Work is a core element of the personal dignity of every individual. It is one of the central purposes God originally created humanity to fulfill – other than reproducing, work is the only specific activity identified in the text of Genesis as the purpose of human life before the Fall (Genesis 2:15). And although work is often painful and difficult now, in the fallen world, work itself is not a result of the curse. It is no less beneficial or imperative than it was before the Fall – as countless biblical passages indicate (e.g. Exodus 20:9 and 35:30-35; Psalm 90:17 and 128:2; Proverbs 12:11-14, 16:3, 18:9, 22:29, 24:27, 31:13 and 31:13-31; Ecclesiastes 3:22, 5:6 and 9:10; Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27; John 5:17; Ephesians 4:28; Colossians 3:23-24; I Thessalonians 4:11; II Thessalonians 3:10-12; I Timothy 5:8; and II Timothy 2:6).

Reconnecting *Oikonomia* (“Stewardship”) with *Oikonomia* (“Economics”)

It is no coincidence that “stewardship” comes from the same Greek word (*oikonomia*) as “economics,” which refers to the management of things in the world. Good stewardship *is* good management of things in the world.

Unfortunately, churches usually limit their concept of how we serve God (“stewardship”) to formally religious activities. This radically separates it from our management of the creation order (“economics”). A holistic theology of *oikonomia* would re-integrate a God-centered commitment to whole-life discipleship with a God-centered commitment to cultivate the world. This would revitalize our discipleship, and deepen our theological perspective on the crucial role of work in the Christian life and on the enormous sphere of activities defined by work (employment, ownership, commerce, finance, entrepreneurship, etc.). It would also help us incorporate the principles of wise creation management into our church programs.

Economics is usually approached in terms of mathematical data and formulae, or controversial questions of public policy. Those approaches are each appropriate for their proper purposes, but we also need to develop a theological perspective. Economics is the social system through which individuals organize and exchange their work and its fruits. All economic activity – such as owning property, buying and selling, employment, contracts, finance and investment, business and entrepreneurship – is ultimately grounded in people’s work. Just as work manifests the image of God, exercising the regency we have from Him by imitating his service and care for

others, economic activities manifest the image of God, exercising our regency by imitating his sovereignty, agency, providence, justice and love.

Even the interpersonal relationships within the Trinity are reflected in this sphere. It's no coincidence that when theologians examine how the three divine persons freely and voluntarily work the divine will in unison, theologians call this the "economic Trinity." This use of the term "economic" draws an analogy from the free and voluntary coordination of diverse activities for mutual benefit in human society (as distinct from the coercive coordination of activities we call "political"). By extension, an economic order appropriate to the image of God in every individual is one that liberates people to put the talents God gives them to use in work; values the larger sphere of economic structures and activities that make work possible; protects people's legitimate interest in receiving and disposing of the fruits of their own work (primarily through wages); and rewards individuals or holds them accountable as they serve or harm their neighbors. Such an economic order is by far the best practical way to reconcile the dignity and freedom of the individual with the needs of the community and the imperative to serve others.

"Stewardship"

Tiny sliver of life

Your calling from God

Serve your neighbor

Generosity

Spiritual

Church (no world)

"Economics"

Vast majority of life

Your daily work

Serve yourself

Accomplishment

Materialistic

World (no church)

Oikonomia

All of life

Work as a calling from God

Support yourself by serving others

Accomplishment empowers generosity

Spiritual and material

Church engaging the world

The Evangelical and Protestant Perspective

This biblical understanding of whole-life discipleship through stewardship and calling, dormant if not completely absent in much Christian thinking and practice today, was an important distinguishing element of Christianity for most of the last two millennia. And in particular it has been essential to evangelical and Protestant religion. At bottom, the biblical view of stewardship and calling is rooted in a fundamental commitment to the direct and personal relationship between God and each individual.

The 16- century Reformers blasted medieval asceticism – especially its claim that church work was morally superior to other kinds of work – as both a primary cause and a primary product of legalistic self-salvation thinking. The elevation of “sacred” work as more spiritually important than “secular” work went hand in hand with the elevation of the priest as mediator between God and the layperson. But when the Bible says Jesus has a direct personal saving relationship with every individual Christian, it simultaneously calls every one of us to do all our work “for the Lord” and puts His claim on all of it as service to Him. Therefore, the Reformers declared (in very strong language) that the pure biblical gospel could not be separated from the affirmation of all legitimate work as equally “called” by God.

“These shepherds do not run away into the desert, they do not don monk’s garb, they do not shave their heads, neither do they change their clothing, schedule, food, drink, nor any external work. They return to their place in the fields and serve God there!...Against this liberty the pope and the spiritual estate fight with their laws and their choice of clothing, food, prayers, localities, and persons.”

- Martin Luther, Sermon on Luke 2:15-20

“The Lord bids each one of us in all life’s actions to look to his calling...The Lord’s calling is in everything the beginning and foundation of well-doing...It will be no slight relief from cares, labors, troubles, and other burdens for a man to know that God is his guide in all these things.”

- John Calvin, *Institutes* III.10.6

This perspective is the reason evangelical and Protestant religion has historically been distinguished from other Christian traditions by the greater priority it places on making our faith active out in world, rather than placing more priority (as other traditions do) on what goes on inside the church. But in the present day, evangelical and Protestant Christians have largely lost the biblical perspective on stewardship and calling that originally served as the foundation of that commitment to making faith active in the world.

The Damage Being Done

It would be difficult to overstate the spiritual damage being done by the disconnect between discipleship and everyday life in most preaching. By far, most of people's waking hours are taken up not by religious activities but by work – in the home and on the job. Time spent working dwarfs time spent in church activities even among those who are especially active in their churches. If we offer a model of discipleship as something that happens in the context of the church and specifically religious activities, we exclude most of life from discipleship. We have no grounds to complain about “Sunday morning Christians” if we are preaching a Sunday morning faith.

In addition to leaving God's people unequipped to live for Christ in their whole lives, the absence of a biblical perspective on stewardship and calling is facilitating the rapid growth of unbiblical perspectives that devalue and marginalize the spiritually critical sphere of work and economics. The falsehoods of the “prosperity gospel” and other forms of entitlement mentality are largely fueled by the attitude that treats work as a burden and a curse, rather than a glorious opportunity to serve God and our neighbors by participating in God's creative work through cultivation of the creation order.

More fundamentally, the widespread practice of emphasizing the crucial spiritual importance of church activities and “kingdom work” while implicitly devaluing (through silence if not through explicit denigration) other forms of work is an open invitation to a new monasticism. Much that we hear from our pulpits is already alarmingly close to the medieval outlook in which church work is treated as morally superior – implying, among many other errors, that the people who do church work are also morally superior. If we value the pure gospel, we should remember that all legitimate work done by any Christian is equally service to God and his kingdom.

And, ironically, the attitude that treats church work as superior to non-church work actually undermines even church work itself. Churches that equip Christians with a biblical perspective on their jobs and other work outside church are equipping them to experience all forms of work as discipleship – and thus, ultimately, increasing their interest in doing more church work. Meanwhile, churches that devalue work in general are undermining the motivation to get involved in church work, since church work is not just *church* work, it's church *work*.

The Present Need

There are several growing Christian movements that acknowledge the need to apply biblical teaching to working life. So far, they have primarily focused on bringing formally religious activities (like evangelism and missions) into the workplace. We applaud these efforts and pray for their success, but we believe something more fundamental is needed. In addition to bringing religious activities like evangelism into the *workplace*, we must recover our lost biblical perspective on *work itself*. Since it is work that uniquely constitutes the workplace and defines its parameters, recovering a biblical perspective on work as a calling from God and an exercise of stewardship is not only imperative in itself, it is also a necessary precondition to sustainable success in pursuing such goals as workplace evangelism.

Efforts to rectify our lack of a biblical perspective on economics, the social sphere of work, have been less encouraging. Some Christians, seeing the need for God's people to engage with

economics, are rushing in to do so without first carefully studying scripture and developing a well-rounded biblical perspective on this sphere. As a result, they unconsciously adopt an unbiblical and materialistic approach that conceives of human beings primarily as *consumers* whose problems can be solved by giving them money, rather than conceiving of individuals as image-bearing *producers* of value whose main economic need is for opportunities to liberate their God-given talents and apply them in service through the work to which they are called.

Church Callings and Spiritual Disciplines

By advocating a restoration of the biblical perspective on whole-life discipleship through stewardship and calling, we do not wish to denigrate the value of the church and the clergy, or of religious activities and spiritual disciplines. God forbid! The church is the light of the world (Matthew 5:14) and capable and committed pastors are the backbone of its capacity to impact the world for Christ. The foundation of a strong pastor, in turn, is the gospel call – and the gospel calls all of us, clergy and laypeople alike, not to church work alone but to whole-life discipleship in the church and in the world.

Also, we have intentionally defined “work” to include both paid and unpaid activities in order to avoid elevating paid work over unpaid work, such as work that takes place in the home. We are concerned that many Christians today unconsciously treat work as less morally or spiritually valuable when it is paid; working for pay is explicitly blessed in the Bible (e.g. Luke 10:7) and fulfills the crucial biblical duty to provide for one’s household (e.g. I Timothy 5:8). However, we would not want to overreact to this deficiency by neglecting to affirm the value of unpaid work alongside the value of paid work.

The Kern Family Foundation’s Role

A restoration of this biblical perspective in Christian life will require contributions from many Christians in a variety of contexts. Rather than try to do everything, each of us should find the appropriate context to make our own personal contribution – that is the whole point of the theology of calling. The Kern Family Foundation has a longstanding commitment to the central importance of seminaries as incubators of capable and committed pastors, equipping them to lead healthy churches. Because we value well-equipped pastors, we’re launching an initiative to equip seminaries to make this biblical perspective a central element of the education of future pastors.

We are building a nationwide network of seminary professors, drawn from across all disciplines and crossing boundaries of denomination and faith tradition within the broader evangelical and Protestant community, who share our view that this biblical perspective must be a part of seminary education – not as one isolated topic students briefly study but as a key element of a holistic biblical perspective on human life, one with applications in all areas of learning and ministry. Please e-mail Program Director Greg Forster (gforster@kffdn.org) for more information about the Oikonomia Network or to find out if there’s a role you can play.

We are also heartened to see that others are addressing this need in various other contexts according to their differing gifts and callings; we pray the Lord will bless their work and we ask for their prayers (and those of all others) as we begin our own work.

– The Kern Family Foundation