

# Investing Ourselves in the Divine Economy

BY LEE HARDY

In our work-related choices, we yearn for a sense of direction. How can we know which school to attend, career to pursue, or job to take? Discerning the shape of God's will for our lives in the world of work requires a certain kind of literacy, an ability to read the divine economy of human labor and locate our place within it.

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As Christians we believe it is important to do God's will, especially in the momentous decisions of our lives. But it is precisely in making these big choices that we often feel at a loss. This is no less true of our work-related choices, when we particularly yearn for a sense of direction. How can we know which school to attend, which major to declare, which career to pursue, which job to take? In these situations we sometimes find ourselves wishing for a miraculous sign—a voice from heaven, an instructive dream, or maybe just a well-placed glow. Almost anything, it seems, would do if only God would speak to us directly and relieve us of our uncertainty. But usually such signs are not forthcoming. Has God spoken only to a select few and left the rest of us in the lurch?

Certainly not. But discerning the shape of God's will for our lives in the world of work requires a certain kind of literacy, 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. Allow me to bring this economy to light with two stories, and then indulge in a little historical theology.

## TWO STORIES

Once upon a time there was a pious man standing on his roof, surrounded by rising floodwaters. His neighbor came by in a canoe and offered to take him to shore. "No thanks. God will take care of me," he informed him, with a remarkable air of calm. The waters continued to rise. Then a county sheriff came by in a motor boat and told him to hop aboard. He refused, saying "Don't worry about me, God is my help." The waters rose again. Finally a helicopter appeared overhead and dropped a line to him. But he didn't take it, calling out over the rushing torrent, "God will save me!" In minutes the river swept him away and he drowned. When he got to heaven he asked God why God didn't save him. God replied, "Didn't save you? I tried three times! First I sent your neighbor, and you refused. Then I sent the sheriff, and you refused. Then I sent a helicopter, and you refused again!"

This was one of my former pastor's favorite sermon illustrations and I heard it several times during his tenure. The point, however, was well taken each time it was made: with few exceptions, God has chosen to work in this world through the agency of human hands. We tend to limit God to the miraculous; but God has in fact resolved to take care of us largely through the ordinary activities of our neighbors. Each morning we pray to God for our daily bread—and already people are at work in the bakeries. For the most part, that's how God's world works.

Of course, God could have created a world in which he saw to our needs directly—a world where food miraculously appears on our tables at mealtime, clothes suddenly show up in our closets at the beginning of each season, and car repairs mercifully occur overnight as we sleep. But God did not choose to create that kind of world. He chose to create an even better, if more challenging, world. He chose to create a world where we, as God's representatives, are involved in the on-going business of creation and the repair of creation—a world where we assume responsibility for the well-being of the earth and all who inhabit it, exercise our minds and imaginations, and make significant choices and expend our energies.

The world that God created is also a world where we are not sufficient unto ourselves. Granted, each one of us has strengths and abilities. But we are also creatures of need. Again, God could have created the world differently. He could have made us so that we were capable of meeting all of our needs through our own efforts. But God chose to connect us to each other in a circle of need and care, to make of us a society of interdependent persons who serve each other and are served by each other. Every connection in the social bond is made where human need and human ability meet. 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 pre-

pare food. Soon we grow up and come to find our own place in this interconnected system of mutual support. When we do so, we begin to participate in God's way of caring for the human community. We invest ourselves in the divine economy.

So much, then, for the drowned man who refused the help of others when he was in need. A story might be told about this unfortunate man's neighbor, Fred, as well. Fred was a pious man too. He was also a plumber. But he never had a sense of God's calling in his life. For years he would pray for a sure sign that would set him to a special task in Kingdom service. But it never came. And he remained a plumber until he breathed his last. When he arrived in heaven he asked God why he had never received a calling. God answered, "Remember when you tried to save your neighbor in the flood? I called you then. For I have commanded you to love your neighbor, and I gave you a boat and a neighbor in need. The call was clear and you responded. Indeed, as a plumber you were responding to my call all along—serving your neighbors in need with the talents, training, tools, and opportunities I gave you."

We tend to think that God calls people only to special tasks in spectacular ways, and sometimes God does. Like Fred, it's hard for us to see the connection between our ordinary work and the kind of life to which God calls us. Our work has

little, if any, religious significance for us. We tend to restrict the scope of God's call to churchly matters or mission projects. But we also need to recognize the call of God in the world of work, to hear him speak in the day-to-day circumstances of our lives. For there, too, God calls us to serve. The sixteenth-century reformer John Calvin had it right when he wrote,

"No task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight."

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**God chose to make us interdependent persons who serve each other and are served by each other. When we find our own place in this interconnected system of mutual support, we begin to participate in God's way of caring for the human community. We invest ourselves in the divine economy.**

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#### **A LITTLE THEOLOGY**

Early in its history the Christian church made an outstandingly unhelpful distinction between two kinds of Christian life, between two roads to heaven. The high road was for all who were willing to leave the world behind and enter the monastery for the life of prayer and meditation. They were full-time Christians. They had received a call from God, a call to

forsake their jobs and family in order to live the religious life. The low road was for the rest of us, either unwilling or unable to free ourselves from secular entanglements. We live a regular life. We work for a living, refrain from doing wrong as best we can, and attend church on Sundays. We are part-time Christians. We have one foot in the sacred realm, the other in the secular. Apparently we never experienced that call from God, that special vocation.

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**If a social structure—an existing pattern of practices and expectations—does not allow us to serve our neighbor and honor God, it must be changed. The Calvinist impulse was to bring existing social institutions into line with our vocations, not our vocations into line with existing social institutions.**

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Martin Luther, the German reformer, challenged this two-track version of the Christian life by claiming that all Christians have a calling from God, and that our calling can—and usually is—fulfilled in the midst of our “secular” involvements. Everyday life is in fact not secular; it is charged with religious significance. For it is the scene of God’s providential activity,

an activity in which we participate through our labor. God calls each one of us to serve our neighbors in the various roles, or “stations,” in which we have been placed. If I am a baker, then God is calling me to meet my neighbor’s need for daily bread. If I am a father, then God is calling me to care for and educate my children. If I am a citizen of a democratic country, then God is calling me to participate in the political life of the nation. In responding to our callings, we are actually participating in God’s care for humanity and the earth. We are God’s co-workers. The call does not bid us to leave the world, but to engage the world in God’s name.

The concept of vocation was modified by the second-generation reformers in ways that are important to us today. Luther taught that to discover our vocation we have only to reflect on the social positions we already occupy. He called those positions “stations.” Our calling is mediated by the duties that attach to our stations in life. To discover our calling, we need only remind ourselves of who we are. Still wedded to some degree to the medieval worldview, he thought that those stations were a direct expression of the creation order, as good and as stable as the turning of the tides or the cycle of the seasons. The Calvinists realized, during the social turmoil of the early modern era, that social institutions are in part the products of human hands, and therefore neither especially stable nor especially good. 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. For that reason, the Calvinists made two modifications to the received view of vocation. First, to discover our vocation we look initially not to the duties that attach to our stations in life, but to the gifts God has given us as individuals. Then we can consider how those gifts can be employed within a given social structure. Second, if a given social structure—an existing pattern of practices and expectations—does not allow for the use of our gifts in ways that truly serve our neighbor and honor God, then the social structure must be changed. The Calvinist impulse was to bring existing social institutions into line with our vocations, not our vocations into line with existing social institutions.

### **TWO GUIDELINES**

The concept of vocation is rich and expansive, worthy of a lifetime of reflection and exploration. Among its implications are two guidelines that give us some direction to discern our vocation and thus invest ourselves in the divine economy. They follow immediately from the notion of work as the social place where we can put the talents God has given us in the service of others.

The first step in discerning a vocation is identifying the specific gifts God has given us. Gifts serve as indicators of what God would have us do with our lives. For God gave them to us with the idea they would be developed and employed for the good of the human community. We are enjoined, as members of the church, to “serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received” (1 Peter 4:10b). The same principle holds for society at large.

We should be careful not to give too narrow a definition of our gifts. Surely they include our talents and abilities, but also encompass our concerns and interests. Almost any ability could be used in a variety of jobs. Concerns and interests help narrow the field. If I am blessed with an unusual degree of manual dexterity, there are a number of jobs in which I could excel—anywhere from dentistry to watch-repair. But if I also find myself deeply concerned about the health of others and interested in the practice of medicine, then perhaps I should consider becoming a surgeon.

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. What have I done, and done well? Was it a matter of working with people, ideas, or things? Do I work best in groups or alone? Do I lead or follow? Do I thrive on routine or variety? Can I sit for hours in an office or do I need to be moving around outside? In answering these questions it is important to listen humbly to others—they often have a better and more sober view of ourselves than we do. We all know of round pegs who insist on filling square holes, despite the fact that the mismatch has been repeatedly pointed out to them.

The second step in vocational discernment is finding a place where our gifts can be put at the disposal of those who can benefit from them. Of course, being the self-interested creatures that we are, the temptation is to consider first how our gifts can benefit us. We tend to evaluate a job solely on the basis of salary, security, status, and satisfaction. These are all legitimate considerations. No argument here. But the chief consideration for one

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**As Christians, we are obliged to evaluate a job on the basis of its social content—the way it benefits, or harms, others. Because of the effects of sin on the institutional shape of work in our society, we cannot assume that the highest paying jobs are the ones that fill the greatest and most important needs.**

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who would follow Christ in the world of work is service. Again, Calvin is on point: those who belong to the household of faith, he counsels, should “choose those employments which yield the greatest advantage to their neighbor.” This is to say that, 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.

A vocation is a call from God to use the gifts that he has given us for the benefit of the human community. In response to that call, we need to discover and develop the gifts that God has given us, and then find a place where they can be exercised in the service of our neighbor’s need.

#### **A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Those familiar with the biblical language of calling may wonder if there is much warrant in Scripture for the concept of work as a vocation. Consider some of the key passages in the New Testament that speak of the Christian’s calling: we are called to repentance and faith (Acts 2:38); we are called into fellowship with Christ (1 Corinthians 1:9); we are called out of darkness and into the light (1 Peter 2:9); we are called to be holy (1 Peter 1:15); indeed, we are called to be saints (Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2).

I could list more, but perhaps we can already see the pattern. The vast majority of occurrences of the word “calling” (or, in Greek, *klesis*) in the New Testament do not refer to work, occupation, or paid employment at all. In these passages we are called, as the Scottish theologian Gary

Badcock recently put it, not to a particular job, but to a way of life—a life of love for God and neighbor; a life of faith, hope, kindness, patience, and charity. Here all Christians have the same calling: to follow Christ, and in so doing to be conformed to his image. So we might ask: what does that 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. Christ commanded us to love our neighbor. How will we respond to that command? 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.

Of course, my job is only one of the places I respond to my calling. 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. When Jesus called his disciples to love God and neighbor, he called them to a way of life that knows no bounds or compartments. That call, our vocation, demands a response in all the roles and relations in which we find ourselves.

We need not sell all our possessions and enter the monastery in order to be full-time Christians. Nor need we enter the mission field. We can respond to the call of God in the midst of our daily lives, including our work. That makes being a serious Christian both easier and harder at the same time: easier in that we do not have to give up marriage or money or success in order to follow Christ; harder because we really do have to follow Christ in all areas of our lives, at work as well as in church. When we are serious about that, we may find that the sacrifices required of us are just as great as the sacrifices made by the saints we admire from afar. But the rewards will be just as great as well.



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