Theology of Work/Vocation

Scott B. Rae, Ph.D.

Talbot School of Theology, Biola University

*Two Questions for Discussion:*

1. If you took a poll of business/professionals in your church, how do you think they understand their work in relation to their spiritual life?

If you asked them, “why do you work,” what do you think they would say?

2. How are business people perceived in your church?

I routinely ask my students how business people are perceived in their churches:

“Sources of funding for the church,” and many get great joy out of funding these areas of service.

“Help administrate the church.”

“The Strategic Soapbox.” For evangelism.

“Business as mission” strategy.

“Not on the front lines.”

“Doing something lesser for the Kingdom than pastors and missionaries.”

“Supporting those who are where the real action is.”

Regularly I get seminary students who have left their business to come to school. They say things like:

“I left my business to serve Christ full time.”

“I left my business to go into vocational ministry, etc.”

“I’m so excited to be entering the ministry.”

I realized that my students have an underdeveloped theology of work.

1. Work has instrumental value.
2. Work has intrinsic value in serving God.

Theology of work begins with creation—work ordained before the entrance of sin.

5 Key imperatives in Genesis 1:27-parah has economic overtones

Work ordained as part of the dominion mandate for human beings. Dominion as responsible wealth creation.

Portrait of God as a worker-and human beings as made in His image.

Work as good in Ecclesiastes 2: 24-25, 3:12-13, 5:18-20,

NT View of work—many parables drawn from world of work.

Colossians 3: 23-24-work as an arena of service to Christ

III. Work and Ministry

Ministry as service—diakonia, with eternal value

Acts 6: 1-6 as an example

Commissioning business professionals

Insuring that our language reflects our theology

IV. Historical Context

Aristotle’s distinction between the active and contemplative life

Ancient skepticism about commerce/business

Medieval dichotomy between monastery and marketplace

Luther/Calvin and the “worldly calling”

Evangelical dichotomy between work and “ministry”

Conclusion: Affirming work as ministry, the workplace as a crucible for spiritual formation

For further reading:

Wong, Rae, Business for the Common Good, IVP Academic

Nelson, Work Matters, Crossway

Timothy Keller, Every Good Endeavor