First Step on the “Ladder” of Employment

Have you ever noticed the imaginary pedestals upon which we tend to place people who respond to the Holy Spirit’s urging (or God’s calling) to become “full-time pastors or missionaries”? We ought to be praising God for each and every one as they decide to fashion their lives in that way, but the danger is that we may not fully appreciate the ones who make different but still Spirit-led choices. We need to ask, “Are we not ALL — as business people, engineers, nurses, and social workers — to be occupied in full-time Christian endeavors?” Martin Luther stated, “The works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they may be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks — but that all works are measured before God by faith alone. Indeed, the menial housework of a manservant or maidservant is often more acceptable to God than all the fastings and other works of a monk or priest, because the monk or priest lacks faith.”

William Tyndale likewise offered, “There is no work better than another to please God: to pour water, to wash dishes, to be a souter (shoe-maker) or an apostle, all is one; to wash dishes and to preach is all one, as touching the deed, to please God.”

Having worked for IBM for over 30 years, I observed many church friends and acquaintances make “life-changing decisions” to enter either the pastoral or missions disciplines. Visits to our church from Bob and Florine Hawkins, missionaries to the Amazon jungle ministering to the Wai Wai Indians, always brought that “twinge” of doubt about whether being an IBMer was as important to God as being knee-deep in alligators or translating the Scriptures for some far-off, indigenous race. Jack Murray, an evangelist for the Bible Evangelism organization, often stated, “If God asks you to become a missionary, why stoop to be a king?” Wow, how these encounters would often cause self-inflicted guilt trips! Was I missing God’s direction in my life? Or, more importantly, was I “missing out” on some special blessing that seemed to be reserved for others? Was a sovereign God really directing my paths? Or was I stuck on a lower rung of some spiritual hierarchy ladder that was all the while extending toward the heavenly hosts, leaving me further and further behind? Could Tyndale possibly reach down from heaven and scratch a 21st-century update to his quote, as follows; “souter, or an IBMer, or apostle, all is one”?

How can my professional preparations over those years mesh with biblical perspectives regarding my work or calling? My understanding of the Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation, suggests a “work” theme throughout. The biblical theme of “work” demonstrates that there is balance between, on one hand, all things done to glorify the Lord — having our lives read as a living Gospel before men — and on the other, “He gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.”

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1 Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520)
2 William Tyndale
3 Ephesians 4:11
When God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to take care of it, \(^4\) He set in motion the continuum of the work theme that permeates the Scriptures. It is important to notice that man was to work and care for creation and this occurred before the Fall and its resultant curse. Additionally, as far back as the creation of man and woman, they were commanded to fill the earth and subdue it. They were to rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground. \(^5\) That could not have been accomplished without significant investment of effort. If man was to responsibly plant, cultivate, and reap from God’s creation, could that not stand equally with the catechism that declares that the “chief end of man is to glorify God” \(^6\) and to love and serve Him? There are, at least, five commands that God initially gave Adam and Eve, often labeled the “creation mandate.” They were to (1) be fruitful, (2) increase in number, (3) fill the earth, (4) subdue it, and (5) rule over creation. Those were actually the first commands ever given by God. He has neither changed nor rescinded them. We cannot escape the same responsibility by claiming that we are members of a different generation or dispensation.

It would appear that God wanted man to work because of the value He had demonstrated in the six-day creation process as “He ended the work, which He had made; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work, which He had made.” \(^7\) It also appears that He wanted us to follow His example by appreciating appropriate rest after working sufficiently hard enough to require it! So, after working for six days, resting on the seventh, and then creating Adam and Eve, giving them a creation mandate, God gives them free rein to work with His creation, presumably to grow things, perhaps to understand its elements by adding their human touches. How could they make a perfect creation better? God created incredibly intelligent beings and put them in charge of naming an endless number of animals and plants. Could He also have allowed them to begin work on their version of the Periodic Table of Elements? Scientists and horticulturists are carrying on today what Adam and Eve started and experienced in the Garden. Efficiencies in agriculture, advances in understanding uses of the elements, the process of combining “bits and bites” into intelligent communication are all part of the creation and cultural development process. We also have the mandate to “subdue the earth,” partnering with our Creator to improve the culture and the plight of humanity (after the Fall) and to effectively use the earth’s resources in a responsible way. That mandate would be a divine imperative to use our God-given interests, skills, and occupations in the grand scheme of work. Do we appropriately view our contributions, our occupations, as a life ministry, being equally pleasing in the sight of God with every other calling? Or are we still looking up the extension ladder?

It is interesting to note the circumstances in which Martin Luther found himself in the 16th century that presumably motivated the quote included in the first paragraph of this article.

\(^4\) Genesis 2:15  
\(^5\) Genesis 1:28  
\(^6\) Westminster Catechism  
\(^7\) Genesis 2:1-2
While Adam and Eve were to “care” for the creation — to protect its resources — they were to use it for their comfort as well. There was a dual role in this caring. They were to use creation’s resources, develop its raw materials, and “get creative” in the way they developed ways to use its energy. However, they were also to protect it from misuse, pollution, and waste. Battles over these two views abounded. Over the centuries of the early church, there were those who responded to the early Greek philosophy of valuing the eternal, spiritual world to the detriment of enjoying the creation that God had given. This view, called asceticism (which had significant impact on some in the first-century church), managed in one form or another to linger until the time of the Reformation. Basically, the views of sacrifice, self-abasement, and avoidance of physical pleasures were perceived as being better than enjoying the richness of creation.

By Luther’s time, it was generally believed that it was more profitable to be a monk, sworn to celibacy, than to be married. It was permissible to maintain possessions, but to be impoverished was better. You could be a carpenter, a stone mason, or a shepherd, but to spend your total day in prayer and meditation was better. What had happened to the original zoologist, farmer, gardener, hunter, and (presumably) spiritual leader, Adam? Luther and the other reformers sought to have us return to the conviction that the best way to answer our “calling” by the Holy Spirit was to be so effective as a manservant or maidservant that our daily work would ultimately be an offering of praise. They sought to overcome the notion that the monastic life was the highest rung on the ladder.

So what are the implications? For me to be called as a career IBMer may be viewed by God as being equal with that of any other calling! Wow! That is a very freeing notion. We are responsible before sovereign God to be the best at whatever He has designed us to do because that is the way we fulfill His plan for doing Kingdom things — His plan for being Christlike. We should desire to be the best at what He has designed us to be because it is the way we most effectively utilize and honor the resources He has given us. We should desire to engage in work that is satisfying and value it as being healthy. “The sleep of a laboring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep.” 8 We should desire to be the best at what He designed us to be so that we can answer others when they ask us “for a reason for the hope that is within us.” 9 We should want to be the best at what we do to benefit others in our workplace, in our neighborhood, or on our planet. One way for us to remain engaged in the world about us and with our fellow sojourners is to work with and among them.

Furthermore, performing our jobs effectively is not only about putting food on our family’s table or ultimately about sharing the Gospel of Christ. Often the most engaging parts of our performance in our work may be the real charisma others observe in our actions. It is about working with Christ as the reason for working. It is about our relationship with Him and obeying His calling, understanding that the calling is only effective when we recognize His hand in it. Luther states, “If you ask an intelligent maidservant why she scours a disk or milks the cow she can say: I know that the thing I do pleases God, for I have God’s work and commandment […] God does not look at the

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8 Eccl. 5:12
9 1 Pet. 3:15
insignificance of the acts, but the heart that serves Him in such little things.” 10 It is about having fellow workers observe our dedication to detail, our joy in occupation, and our passion for people, such that we may actually have more opportunities to share the Gospel than if we had planned an evangelistic campaign. Joy in being involved in the disciplines for which God has designed us is unbelievably rewarding. Often it is said that when one is involved in joyful, rewarding work, they would do it without pay! While it may be true that God has also given us work in order to put food on the table — and in reality we could not fulfill that responsibility without pay — there are many who have decided by choice that they want significantly more than that. Often, decisions are made for the rewards of company name, salary, or job title. It is hardly a surprise that over two-thirds of the workers in America don’t like their jobs.11 Succumbing to the demands apparently necessary to attain the American dream more often than not cause individuals to choose work for which they were not designed. The American dream of a wife, a child, two cars, and a house, all within the first two years after graduation, is an instant-gratification dream.

If Christ is our reason for working, it could be argued that we should make decisions about work based on His design (and hence, our ultimate resonance with what we do) and not upon how much we can acquire and how quickly we can acquire it. When we talk of “work” and use the word “vocation” (in its Latin root – vocare meaning “to call”), we are really talking about God. God’s call upon our created lives is made manifest in the gifts He has given each of us. We should exemplify the manifest image of God, a God who took pleasure in His work, seeing that “it was very good.” 12 Further, Old and New Testament principle characters, gifted by the Spirit of God, demonstrated leadership, craftsmanship, and artistry in a broad expanse of disciplines. God called Moses from tending flocks for his father-in-law to national leadership when He said, “Go to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.” 13 Bezalel, filled with the spirit, “had skill, ability, and knowledge in all kinds of crafts — to make artistic designs and to work in gold, silver, and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood and engage in all kinds of artistic craftsmanship.” 14 Cush was a mighty hunter and warrior before the Lord. 15 David, in a manner similar to Moses, was called from tending sheep to fulfill multiple roles in military, political, and national leadership. In a demonstration of Spirit-inspired inter-Testament consistency, we find Paul working as a tentmaker (to support his mission work); Luke applying his physician capabilities; and a variety of fishermen, vineyard owners, and farmers all involved in meaningful work disciplines. Often, Christ’s parables included laborers, harvesters, pig farmers, homeowners, and so on. It is possible that Jesus actually spent more time using the carpentry skills learned at His earthly father’s feet than He later spent involved in His heavenly Father’s mission of spiritual salvation of a lost human race. His discussions of “the kingdom on earth” were filled with examples of everyday life and work, demonstrated by the everyday people of His culture.

10 Martin Luther, Exposition on I Pet. 2:18-20, excerpted in What Luther Says, 1500-1501
11 Dayton Daily News, Business Section 8/22/02
12 Gen. 1:31
13 Ex. 3:10
14 Ex. 35: 30-32
15 Gen. 10:8-9
Similarly, Paul, while working with his own hands, addressed the notion of work in admonishing slaves to work willingly as both a testimony to their owners and as a service to their Lord. He also explained to the Thessalonians, who were often preoccupied with a misunderstanding of the imminent return of Christ, that “if anyone does not work, let him not eat.” Note that Paul drew distinctions between lives given over to religious contemplation and his (their) manual labor and apostolic service. He not only elevated their various work disciplines, but in his dissertation on seeking to give no offence, he also urged, “Whatsoever you do, do it all to the glory of God.” How that must have flown in the face of the Greek and Roman cultures where workers were virtually indentured to their craft and were considered second-class citizens, at best. The Greek and Roman upper classes perceived the “good life” as being one of leisurely pursuit of religion, politics, recreation, and philosophy. Upper-class, “free” people needed no calluses on their hands or wrinkles in their brow. Paul admonished his converts to re-create the image of God by using the totality of their being — their bodies, hands, hearts, and minds in the pursuit of God-honoring work, because it was neither second class nor separate from anything, including genuine religious pursuits.

The Reformers suggested that since “to preach, to wash dishes, all is one” was the appropriate balance for each Christian life, we should be careful about the term “full-time Christian work,” lest that notion relegate many of us to something less, such as (perish the thought) “part-time Christian work.” There should not be a “more called” category for the cleric or missionary. Martin Luther, in his 1522 “Treatise on the Estate of Marriage,” declares that when “a father who goes ahead and washes diapers or performs some other mean task for his child — God with all His angels and creatures is smiling — not because a man is washing diapers, but because he is doing so in Christian faith.”

It is vitally important to our Christian life to appropriately value all God-given human tasks as being spiritually equal. There is an inherent difficulty in following the admonition in the song lyric, “This world is not my home, I’m just ‘a-passin’ through.” We must avoid the tendency to compartmentalize our daily experiences such that we perform our spiritual obligation on Sunday and somehow shift into the second-class citizen life of “menial” tasks on Monday. Full-time Christian work should be understood in the context of specific education and training that result, after God’s calling, to related professions in order to advance Kingdom issues on earth. Engineers, teachers, and accountants should be considered as being in the full-time Kingdom-building business as well. The body of Christ has no superior or inferior part.

It is also important to recognize that salary, job title, and company names are not reasons for choosing careers — or better, “life ministries.” As early as the 1970s, students (and, to a considerable extent, non-students) had become “careerists” whose “life decisions were determined not out of a sense of vocation, but in terms of career.” The tensions that exist in today’s culture between life-work and life-style can bring inordinate pressure to bear on these life decisions. Gaining financial power should not be the focus of our
lives. God-given skills, interests, personality, and values all play an important role in this decision process as we respond to calling — vocation — life-work. Relying on those criteria, we can best be a service to both Christ and others.

Finally, it is vital to understand that our God-given abilities as engineers, missionaries, dentists, youth leaders, accountants, pastors, and IBMers all contribute to building an effective body of Christ — a body having no superior or inferior parts. The unified body of Christ should be demonstrated to a world existing without a redemptive Gospel, as we have our lives read as a living one — a Gospel that respects our separate and distinct roles, within unity, for services to our fellow human sojourners and to our Savior. Our service should be to meet the needs of others: “Let him steal no more: but rather let him labor, working with his hands the things which are good, that he may have to give to him that needeth.” 19 Our service should be to those who are weak: “I have showed you all things, how that so laboring ye ought to support the weak, and remembering the words of Jesus, how He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” 20 John Calvin expresses his view of mutual service in this way: “It is not enough when one can say, ‘Oh, I work, I have my trade, I set the pace.’ This is not enough; for one must be concerned whether it is good and profitable to the community and if it is able to serve our neighbors […] And this is why we are compared to members of a body. The life of the Godly is justly compared to trading, for they ought naturally to exchange and barter with one another in order to maintain intercourse. Our work should be a testimony to the unsaved — ‘And that ye study to be quiet, to do your own business, and to work with your own hands as we command you; that ye may walk honestly toward them that are without.’” 21 Our mutual gifts, skills, interests, personalities, and values — our work — are all needed as a contribution to one another in community, and all are gifts of worship to our Savior. Therefore, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.” 22

There need not be a feeling of an extension ladder pulling away from us. Rather, “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder and every rung goes higher — higher!”

19 Eph 4:28
20 Acts 20:35
21 I Thess 4:11-12
22 Col 3:23