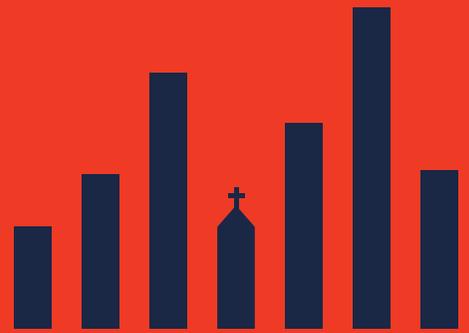


*Rethinking the Church's Calling to the Marketplace*



**OUR  
SECULAR  
VOCATION**

J. Daryl Charles

“The faith and work movement has been around for decades, and all too often that conversation has remained at the level of talk. J. Daryl Charles’s *Our Secular Vocation* ably summarizes the current situation and moves beyond mere words to catalyze actual transformation. This book can change how you live and work in God’s world.”

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—**David W. Gill**, author of *Workplace Discipleship 101: A Primer* and former Mockler-Phillips professor of workplace theology and ethics, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“Daryl Charles’s book exemplifies his fine qualities, bringing a refreshingly ecumenical perspective to the much-controverted topic of the role of work and calling in the Christian life. The goal here is the achievement of what Robert Benne has called a ‘holy secularity,’ a way of engaging the world that involves not only a rethinking of the Christian life but a revitalization of the church’s role in the sustenance of that life, and the life of the world.”

—**Wilfred McClay**, Victor Davis Hanson Chair in Classical History and Western Civilization, Hillsdale College

“We spend most of our days at work. For many of us, in the marketplace. It is high time for a theology of work and the marketplace, but it takes a rare combination of wisdom, courage, and erudition. J. Daryl Charles is uniquely fitted for this task. Every Christian asking for God’s perspective on work should read this book.”

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“The need for quality and thoughtful material that resources Christians for meaningful work and ministry in the marketplace cannot be overstated. Charles powerfully argues for an ‘all things belong to Christ’ approach to creation and culture, collapsing any possibility of a sacred-versus-secular view. Charles’s work is powerfully written, well researched, thoughtful, personal, and timely. A great gift to the church and to her leaders!”

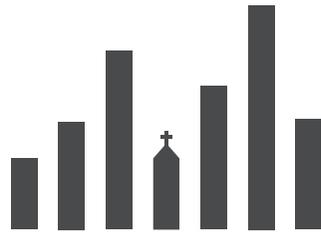
—**Benjamin Quinn**, associate professor of theology and history of ideas and associate director of the Center for Faith and Culture, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“In *Our Secular Vocation*, Daryl Charles deftly navigates the worlds of biblical studies, theology, church history, and pastoral ministry in addressing the important subject of work and vocation. The book concludes with well-considered pastoral guidance that comes out of his years of ministering to college students. This is not an introductory work. It is for those who are looking to go on a rigorous journey—for those who do, the abundant insights gained will be well worth the effort.”

—**Scott B. Rae**, dean of faculty and professor of Christian ethics, Biola University

“Charles’s title immediately grabs the reader’s attention with its paradoxical assertion. Christians work in a world filled with secular and religious worldviews that diverge from their faith, so navigating work in a pluralistic context matters for both credible witness and personal peace. But the title is also provocative for another reason: biblical believers no longer have ‘secular’ vocations or occupations, for all they do is rooted in the creation mandate of Genesis 1–2; the redemptive call of Romans 12:1–2 and Colossians 3:17–23; and our ultimate destiny worshiping and working in the new creation (Revelation 19–22). With this paradoxical vision in mind, Charles is effective in helping thoughtful people navigate the fallenness of much of work.”

—**Charles E. Self**, visiting professor of church history, Assemblies of God Theological Seminary



# OUR SECULAR VOCATION

*Rethinking the Church's Calling to the Marketplace*

J. Daryl Charles

**BH**  
ACADEMIC  
BRENTWOOD, TENNESSEE

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Published by B&H Academic  
Brentwood, Tennessee

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ISBN: 978-1-0877-6576-1

Dewey Decimal Classification: 261.1  
Subject Heading: CHURCH AND VOCATION / WORK / VOCATION

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Cover design and illustration by Darren Welch.

Printed in the United States of America

27 26 25 24 23 BTH 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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## CHAPTER

# 1

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### Introduction: The Church in Society *Why the Marketplace Matters*

I believe the church has largely failed Christians who struggle daily to live out their faith commitments in their places of employment.” So protests one business consultant and educator, who finds the church “oddly indifferent” to marketplace challenges and deplores what he sees as the church doing “little or nothing” to equip believers in the workplace. Most Christians, he observes, perceive the church and its clergy to be “preoccupied with the private sphere of life,” seemingly disinterested in the ethical issues associated with the weekday. The church, he worries, is “virtually silent on the subject of work”—a rather sobering concern when in fact, most of us are called by God to the marketplace.<sup>1</sup>

The burden of this consultant is shared by many. In fact, the editor of a recent volume on Christian vocation laments, “Religious education,

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<sup>1</sup> John C. Knapp, *How the Church Fails Businesspeople (and What Can Be Done about It)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), xi, xii, 25.

sermons, and sacraments or other celebrations seldom address vocation or foster vocational conversation, especially across the lifespan.”<sup>2</sup> My own experience in congregational life, both past and present, would seem to confirm the above claims that the church is largely silent about work, vocation, or the marketplace to which most of us are called. This situation, unfortunately, is not a recent development. A significant study from the mid-1990s found that “religion is largely irrelevant to the work experience,” which can have “little or no bearing on the way people view work.”<sup>3</sup> And there is little indication that this has changed since then. Yet, this perception stands in stark contrast to wider empirical research over the last forty years, up to the present, which suggests that experiencing purpose or meaningfulness in work due to a sense of calling, regardless of its type or social context, contributes *substantially* to people’s psychological health and well-being.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kathleen A. Cahalan, “Introduction: Finding Life’s Purposes in God’s Purposes,” in *Calling All Years Good: Christian Vocation throughout Life’s Seasons*, ed. Kathleen A. Cahalan and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 4. Throughout this volume I use the terms *vocation* and *calling* interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> James C. Davidson and David P. Caddell, “Religion and the Meaning of Work,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33, no. 2 (1994): 135–36.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Douglas T. Hall and Dawn E. Chandler, “Psychological Success: When the Career Is a Calling,” *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 26 (2005): 155–76; Ryan D. Duffy and William E. Sedlacek, “The Presence of and Search for a Calling: Connections to Career Development,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 70, no. 3 (2007): 590–601; Bryan J. Dik and Ryan D. Duffy, “Calling and Vocation at Work: Definitions and Prospects for Research and Practice,” *The Counseling Psychologist* 37, no. 3 (2009): 424–50; Michael F. Steger et al., “Calling in Work: Secular or Sacred?,” *Journal of Career Assessment* 18, no. 1 (2010): 82–96; Bryan J. Dik and Ryan D. Duffy, *Make Your Job Your Calling: How the Psychology of Vocation Can Change Your Life at Work* (West Conshohocken: Templeton Press, 2012); Jacob A. Galles and Janet G. Lenz, “Relationships among Career Thoughts, Vocational Identity, and Calling: Implications for Practice,” *Career Development Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2013): 240–48; Robert B. McKenna et al., “Calling, the Caller, and Being Called: A Qualitative Study of Transcendent Calling,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 34, no. 4 (2015): 294–303;

The broad perception that religious faith is “largely irrelevant” to the work experience, regardless of its provenance, should deeply trouble and sadden us. But, again, this is no new development. Consider this testimony from a sales manager in the steel industry:

In the almost thirty years of my professional career, my church has never once suggested that there might be job-related accountability . . . My church has never once offered to improve those skills which could make me a better minister . . . There has never been an inquiry into the types of ethical decisions I must face . . . I have never been in a congregation where there was any type of public affirmation of a ministry in my career.<sup>5</sup>

Did you catch how many times the word “never” appeared in that lament? And, truly, it is a lament. This sort of confession should drive pastors and priests, Christian educators, seminary professors, and church leaders to their knees. In the earliest church, there were no clergy; all were laity. The disciples of Christ functioned *in* the marketplace rather than being called *away* from it.<sup>6</sup> Even the call of Christ to become “fishers of men” did *not* call people away from their vocations; fishermen still fished in the Sea of Galilee. And we can be sure that none of the earliest disciples were itching to leave their nets for some fantasy called “full-time Christian ministry,” even though their lives were radically transformed. How far we have fallen in our professionalizing of the clergy and letting dualism continually invade our understanding of calling.

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Jina Ahn et al., “A Cross-Cultural Study of Calling and Life Satisfaction in the United States and South Korea,” *Journal of Career Development* 20, no. 10 (2019): 1–15; and Evgenia I. Lysova et al., “Calling and Careers: New Insights and Future Directions,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 114 (2019): 1–6.

<sup>5</sup> William E. Diehl, *Christianity and Real Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), v–vi.

<sup>6</sup> Only in time did a distinction arise between clergy and “laity” (from the Gk. *laikos*, meaning “the people”). The laity consisted of those who were not “consecrated” for the service of God.

Three generations ago novelist Dorothy Sayers, perhaps best known for her detective stories,<sup>7</sup> offered something akin to the above complaints in addressing the subject of work:

In nothing has the Church so lost Her hold on reality as Her failure to understand and respect the secular vocation. She has allowed work and religion to become separate departments, and is astonished to find that, as a result, the secular work of the world is turned to purely selfish and destructive ends, and that the greater part of the world's intelligent workers have become irreligious or at least uninterested in religion.<sup>8</sup>

Sayers was not sparing about the church's abdication on this point. Consider those initial words: "In nothing has the Church so lost her hold on reality. . . ." Her conclusion was in keeping with her characteristically acerbic wit: "How can anyone remain interested in a religion which seems to have no concern with nine-tenths of his [or her] life?"<sup>9</sup>

Sayers's rebuke, offered in the 1940s, remains every bit—if not more—relevant today as the church navigates into the third decade of the twenty-first century. Indeed, how *can* anyone take Christianity seriously, particularly in a post-Christian era, if the church has little vision for that domain in which all people—not just Christians—spend "nine-tenths" of their time? On a subject of universal and timeless importance, the Christian church should be proclaiming a clear message, insofar as it is responsible for relating biblical belief to all of life.

There are three possible explanations for why Christian belief is not regularly influencing public opinion or equipping its own for service in the marketplace: (1) The church is being suppressed in a totalitarian

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Dorothy L. Sayers, *Lord Peter: The Complete Lord Peter Wimsey Stories* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

<sup>8</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, "Why Work?" in *Creed or Chaos? Why Christians Must Choose Either Dogma or Disaster; or Why It Really Does Matter What You Believe*, repr. (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1974), 106.

<sup>9</sup> Sayers, 106.

society. (2) In her beliefs and practice, the church does not differ greatly from wider society. (3) The church has largely withdrawn from social institutions and wider society. This present volume presumes to speak to the latter two scenarios, both of which imply the absence of any moral authority by which to influence the surrounding culture. A large part of the church's lack of authority and social impotence is the fact that we have not equipped those who are in the marketplace, whereby we have wrongly understood "ministry" to be church work.

### Accounting for This Tragic Neglect

Among students of history and theology, much is made of the sacred-versus-secular dichotomy that has often attended the church's thinking over the ages. The ancient roots of this disjunction, as characterized by the purported superiority of a *vita contemplativa* over a *vita activa*,<sup>10</sup> can be found in the early church and extend both to the medieval church and beyond. This divide, however, invalidates the very spirit of New Testament teaching, which declares that there is no cultural, social, or occupational hierarchy from the standpoint of Christian faith. Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free, married and unmarried, clergy and laity—and white-collar and blue-collar workers—all have equal standing. As striking evidence thereof, the Creator of the universe was

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<sup>10</sup> Greco-Roman attitudes toward physical labor (as suited chiefly for servants/slaves) over against the contemplative life are, of course, well known. This dualism, nevertheless, would remain through the centuries, even influencing early Christian and medieval thinking about the physical body and physical labor. A very useful—and accessible—critique of this sort of dualistic thinking can be found in Jay Wesley Richards, "Be Fruitful and Multiply: Work and Anthropology," in *Work: Theological Foundations and Practical Implications*, ed. R. Keith Loftin and Trey Dimsdale (London: SCM, 2018), 110–26. The strength of Richards's argument is to point to the unity of the material and nonmaterial within each person.

incarnated as a woodworker,<sup>11</sup> and the “apostle to the Gentiles” worked as a tradesman.<sup>12</sup>

Significant changes accompanied Protestant reform in the early sixteenth century—among these was the understanding of work as a calling. Such changes were of a theological nature, anchored in the conviction of (1) creation’s goodness and (2) the “priesthood of every believer.” Nonetheless, Protestants today, in their piety, might be every bit as prone as Catholics to erect precisely that longstanding, though false, dichotomy of sacred versus secular. A very strong and resilient centrifugal force seems to exist that, as Sayers noted, keeps work and religious faith as “separate departments.” The sacred–secular divide, at bottom, mirrors a decisive theological deficiency. It reflects not only an inadequate soteriology but a deficient ecclesiology and pneumatology as well. In the words of one thoughtful observer, it “shrivels people’s theological imagination for how the creator and redeemer God of all things might work in and through them in all of life.”<sup>13</sup> This chasmic—and catastrophic—divide cries out for illumination (and elimination!) via the church’s teaching ministry.

The tendency toward split thinking must be addressed in every new generation. The focus of the church’s teaching, at least among churches and congregations that are thought to have a high view of scriptural authority and are more evangelically oriented, is inclined toward the spiritual and “vertical” rather than an ethical or “horizontal” approach to faith.<sup>14</sup> That is, it tends to be preoccupied with the spiritual life and per-

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<sup>11</sup> In the Gospel narratives, Jesus is described as the “carpenter’s son” (*tektōn*, Matt 13:55; Mark 6:3). No doubt he learned Joseph’s trade, which would make him a builder, a designer, and perhaps even a “civil engineer.”

<sup>12</sup> See Acts 18:1–4.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Greene, preface, in *Transforming Vocation: Connecting Theology, Church, and the Workplace for a Flourishing World*, ed. David Benson et al. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021), xiv.

<sup>14</sup> The focus of my burden concerns that part of the Christian church that is theologically orthodox, committed to the authority of Scripture, the lordship

sonal experience of Christian faith—what God does *in* us—rather than supporting a public faith—what God intends to do *through* us. Christian faith in our day is often made a private matter, with any public expression becoming increasingly offensive. In consequence, lay Christians, constituting virtually the whole of the church, end up having a shriveled view of their daily work and believing that they are second-class Christians. All too often, believers individually and collectively are inclined to view the church as a realm of spiritual escape—a sanatorium or refuge from the world.<sup>15</sup> More often than not, the church’s teaching has the effect of calling believers *away from* the world rather than into it, given its inability to present the marketplace as a zone of high and noble calling. One fitting analogy that might help us correct the course is to think of the local church as a spiritual gymnasium or training center rather than a sanatorium,<sup>16</sup> as a place where believers are fortified and equipped for the daily ethical and economic challenges of the marketplace. The marketplace, after all, is where we spend “nine-tenths” of our lives.

The matter of why we are here on earth and our role as God’s representatives and stewards is taken up more fully in chapter 3, where we will attempt to develop a theology of work. This theology finds its anchor in the opening pages of Scripture. The Genesis creation narrative, progressive in nature and culminating on the sixth day with human creation, is emphatic: *all* of creation is “good” (Gen 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25), indeed “very good” (1:31). Since humans are the climax of creation, God commands

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of Christ, salvific faith, and redemptive witness to the world. Here I do not concern myself with those rather amorphous religious communities that might be identified as “mainline” churches or “cafeteria Catholics” (to use the language of John Paul II). This distinction is intended to be less a judgment than a simple observation.

<sup>15</sup> This is not to deny that believers are “resident aliens,” in the language of Ps 119:19 and 1 Pet. 1:17. It is, however, to point out that our emphasis on “aliens” often negates the reality of our “residence.”

<sup>16</sup> By the latter, I mean a place in which people who are chronically ill convalesce and receive medical treatment or long-term medical care.

us to be fruitful and to tend to the created order. To be created in God's image or likeness (Gen 1:27) is to be made stewards of what God has created, even in its fallen state. To fail to take up this response is to defy or negate our very purpose.<sup>17</sup> Christ's redemptive work does not eliminate this responsibility; rather, it confirms it.<sup>18</sup>

Above I noted the widespread tendency of the church's teaching to call believers away from the world rather than redemptively into it. One contributing factor to this distorted way of thinking undoubtedly is our response to Jesus's exhortation not to "love the world." Many parallel warnings also appear in the New Testament. Consider, by way of illustration, those well-known statements to the disciples on the eve of our Lord's crucifixion. Jesus said, "As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you"; and "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 15:19 and 18:36 NIV). These admonitions appear to be strengthened elsewhere by Pauline teaching:

- Do not be conformed to the world (Rom 12:2).
- In its present form, "this world . . . is passing away" (1 Cor 7:31).
- If anyone is in Christ, old things have "passed away" (2 Cor 5:17).

Critically, "the world" in Scripture carries multiple senses and therefore requires that we differentiate in terms of its meaning where and

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Marshall and Lela Gilbert, *Heaven Is Not My Home: Living in the Now of God's Creation* (Nashville: Word, 1998), 15–24 and 71–87, have developed the implications of the creation narrative with particular insight.

<sup>18</sup> In virtually every chapter, I argue not only for the importance of theology in the Christian ethic but the central—though supremely neglected—role that a *theology of creation* plays in the church's witness to the world. One source of confusion is in-house in nature. An example illustrates. In *Good Work: Christian Ethics in the Workplace* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), Esther D. Reed argues that "a Christian ethic of work" is rooted in Christ's resurrection. Reed is doubtless representative of many well-meaning Christian writers. But this belief is fundamentally flawed, as chapters 2 and 3 will make clear. Christ does not set in place a *new* ethic that is unrelated to the created order; rather, he confirms and restores what was ordered in creation, *at the beginning*.

when it is used. At least three different uses in the New Testament can be distinguished: (1) the world system, tainted by sin and its surrounding effects and hostile to God's purposes;<sup>19</sup> (2) the world in a geographical or earthly sense; and (3) the entire created order. The above admonitions by Jesus and Paul accord with the first definition: the fallen world system that opposes God's purposes.

Another contributing factor—perhaps the chief factor—behind the perennial sacred-versus-secular mindset is a wrong understanding within the Christian community of the notion of “vocation” or “calling” (the focus of chapters 4 and 6). Vocations outside the church are typically viewed as inferior, and thus less holy than those inside it. Not only does this flaw in our thinking betray who we are as the redeemed community, but it also betrays the world to which we are called, and which needs our preserving influence.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the relative absence of the church's preserving social presence in the world dishonors the Creator and Redeemer of all things, who seeks “to reconcile everything to himself” (see Col 1:15–20). Although it is never explicitly stated, many (if not most) Christians believe that the workplace represents a secondary or inferior calling when compared to church work, evangelizing, Bible study participation, going on mission trips, and the like. We really don't believe, at the deepest level, that our work *is* our witness, that the church's vocation *is* secular, and that the marketplace *is* the context of our greatest service to God and others. We really don't believe, deep down, that our

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<sup>19</sup> As the first three chapters of this volume emphasize, human labor is a part of creation's mandate and our design based on the image of God, not *the fall*. Theologically, it is essential to distinguish what the curse is *not*. The curse does not alter (even when it distorts) creation; and where work *is* a curse, it is one of our own making. This claim, I grant, will need some unpacking.

<sup>20</sup> Knapp, *How the Church Fails Businesspeople*, has graphically and persuasively argued this. He goes so far as to argue that the “out-of-the-salt-shaker” imagery, popularized by evangelical writers in recent decades, mirrors part of the problem in our thinking. See, for example, Rebecca Manley Pippert and Mark Mittelberg, *Out of the Saltshaker and into the World: Evangelism as a Way of Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999).

good works in the home and greater community and our work done on Monday through Friday are sufficiently pleasing to God.<sup>21</sup> But the truth is that millions of believers serving God and working for the common good through their various professions constitute proof of life-change that the world simply cannot refute. The marketplace, then, is the chief setting in which Christians impact society. It is there that, day in and day out and generation after generation, Christian influence will produce its greatest effect.<sup>22</sup> But tragically, most pastors and Christian leaders remain ill-equipped to offer counsel on matters of work.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps, in response to my argument thus far, you the reader have mentally cited the precedent of Acts 6, where the apostles complain that they should not leave their duty to “the ministry of the word” and prayer to “wait on tables” (Acts 6:1–4); after all, at this point in Scripture’s narrative, their vocation was evangelization and providing spiritual leadership. This I grant. But those whose vocation is to prepare meals and wait on tables “might with equal justice” protest, “It is not meet for us to leave the

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<sup>21</sup> As one educator rightly observes, there exists in many evangelical circles a sort of “evangelistic reductionism,” by which it is thought that “personal evangelism” is the highest work; see Kenneth A. Cherney, Jr., “Hidden in Plain Sight: Luther’s Doctrine of Vocation,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 98, no. 4 (2001): 287–88. If, however, we truly saw the nobility of vocation and our service in the Monday-through-Friday, truly extraordinary opportunities for “evangelism” would result.

<sup>22</sup> The theological matter of work, vocation, and the marketplace is not merely a “Western” issue. In many parts of the world, it plays out in significant socioeconomic and political ways, particularly as it concerns the question of poverty. A sturdy theology of work and vocation can lift people to a level whereby not mere poverty alleviation but poverty *prevention* is redemptive and normative; see Greene, *Transforming Vocation*, xv.

<sup>23</sup> One writer has described most clergy as “amateurs” in terms of their relation to many of the important issues facing people in the workforce; see Gordon Preece, “A Job and a Life: Reintegrating Faith, Home, and Work,” *St. Mark’s Review* (Spring 1998): 25. We need greater emphasis on the church *scattered* than the church *gathered*, argues Preece (30). It is difficult to disagree.

service of our tables to preach the word.”<sup>24</sup> To call our congregants away from the marketplace, the realm to which virtually all believers are called, is to violate scriptural revelation, negate our stewardship of the created order, and work against God’s purposes.

Our approach to theological education and the way we train emergent Christian leaders tend to confirm a basic distortion in our thinking about work and vocation.<sup>25</sup> A serious examination of the curricula of our seminaries and divinity schools, with few exceptions, shows that little in the way of coursework and degree requirements addresses “vocation” and “calling,” properly understood—much less the sacred character of our work in the marketplace.<sup>26</sup> In surveying 154 seminary students

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<sup>24</sup> Sayers, “Why Work?,” 107–8.

<sup>25</sup> In the U.S., the Association of Theological Schools has about 275 member institutions. This does not even include Bible schools and para-church organizations.

<sup>26</sup> An encouraging development has been the recent formation of the Oikonomia Network (ON). The ON advertises itself as “a learning community of theological educators and evangelical seminaries dedicated to raising up church leaders who help people develop whole-life discipleship, fruitful work and economic wisdom for God’s people and God’s world.” “Who We Are,” Oikonomia Network, accessed March 10, 2022, <https://oikonomianetwork.org/about-us/>.

In the context of Christian liberal arts education at the undergraduate level, an initiative administered by the Council of Independent Colleges and funded by Lilly Endowment Inc., the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE) was launched in 2009 as a network of colleges and universities “committed to fostering the theological exploration of vocation in their campus communities.”

NetVUE advertises itself as “a nationwide network of colleges and universities formed to enrich the intellectual and theological exploration of vocation among undergraduate students.” NetVUE grew out of another project launched in 1999, Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV), which originally supported eighty-eight independent colleges and universities around the country in “establishing or strengthening programs that would (a) help students examine the relationship between their faith and vocational choices; (b) provide opportunities for young people to explore Christian ministry leadership; and (c) enhance the capacity of an institution’s faculty and staff to teach and mentor students in this regard.” However, the extent to which these programs

at fourteen institutions to find out how future pastors were being prepared to minister to members of the business community, the authors of *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday: The Challenge of Fusing Christian Values with Business Life* found little encouraging evidence.<sup>27</sup> Reflecting on these results, they write, “A church that baptizes (and later marries) your children, helps you worship God weekly, and buries your friends and family members at the end of their lives can also be a church that leaves you unsupported when it comes to who you are as a businessperson.”<sup>28</sup>

The results of the above survey squared with a 2009 survey of courses at eighteen leading seminaries and divinity schools,<sup>29</sup> which was able to identify only a few elective courses that addressed work-related issues at all.<sup>30</sup> A perusal of current course offerings in these institutions that might most closely approximate marketplace concerns indicates that not business or commerce or industry per se but urban ministry, social justice or economic justice, ministry to the poor, racial inclusion, and sexual inclusion are viewed as the primary means of addressing the marketplace. And this trend is sure to continue, given the fevered pitch of current

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have assisted the Christian community and Christian leadership in particular in helping change perceptions of work, vocation, and the marketplace remains difficult to assess. See “About NetVUE,” The Council of Independent Colleges, accessed March 10, 2022, <https://www.cic.edu/programs/NetVUE>.

<sup>27</sup> Laura Nash and Scotty McLennan, *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday: The Challenge of Fusing Christian Values with Business Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> Nash and McLennan, xviii.

<sup>29</sup> These institutions included Asbury Seminary, Boston University School of Theology, Chicago Theological Seminary, Columbia Theological Seminary, Dallas Theological Seminary, Denver Seminary, Fuller Theological Seminary, Harvard Divinity School, Howard University School of Divinity, McCormack Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary, the University of Chicago Divinity School, the University of Notre Dame Department of Theology, Vanderbilt Divinity School, and Yale Divinity School.

<sup>30</sup> The 2009 survey was undertaken by John Knapp; both the Knapp survey and the Nash-McLennan survey are reported in Knapp, *How the Church Fails Businesspeople*, 37–39.

discourse on race, diversity, and inclusion.<sup>31</sup> In any case, any emphasis on the “priesthood of all believers”—*omnes sacerdotes* (“all are priests”)—that calls Protestants back to their roots and to the sacredness of work in the marketplace is scarcely to be found in seminary and divinity school coursework.<sup>32</sup> Substantial curricular change would require institutional reform on a wide scale—reform requiring a different academic model. What is needed in theological education is nothing less than a transformation of its core components. Every course and every theological topic at the seminary/divinity school level needs rethinking, to eliminate the perpetual “sacred-versus-secular” residue and to foster the integration of faith, work, and vocation in a holistic way.<sup>33</sup> At the most basic level, among those things needing serious examination in terms of course content are the following: a theology of creation, a theology of work, human flourishing, a theology of vocation, a history of the “sacred versus secular” divide, the Lutheran breakthrough of the sixteenth century, the importance of engaging competing worldviews, ethical and economic challenges of the workplace, a theology of stewardship, service toward the common social good and community flourishing, and redefinition of “mission.”

Relatedly, most seminarians tend to arrive at seminary or divinity school with a generally negative perception of work, business, commerce

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<sup>31</sup> The current cultural climate and not a commitment to Scripture and historic Christian theology is likely to bring about significant changes in seminary/divinity school course offerings. We should not be surprised when even traditional course offerings in theology, hermeneutics, and biblical studies are eclipsed in the service of so-called social justice.

<sup>32</sup> Theological training today—whether in hermeneutics, systematic theology, historical theology, homiletics, or hymnology—joins denominational life and the wider arena of Christian publishing to indicate that no holistic vision focusing on work and the marketplace exists for the purpose of equipping the layperson for the workweek.

<sup>33</sup> In addition, parachurch groups and organizations such as Cru, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Reformed University Fellowship, Baptist Collegiate Network, and other campus ministries need a reorientation as well, where college graduates are being prepared expressly for the workplace.

and wealth, and the marketplace. Rather than rejoicing in their past work and careers, most seem glad to have left them. Virtually all of these individuals seem to be seeking a “higher calling” and a more satisfying career. Even among the most pious, standard responses tend to confirm this unhealthy dualism: “God called me to the pastorate/full-time Christian work”; “God called me out of business”; or “God called me [thankfully] out of my job.” Normally implied in such comments is that God did *not* call that person into business, the workplace, or economic life. How refreshing it would be to hear someone say, “God called me into business”; “God called me to corporate work”; or “God called me to be a lawyer/banker/medical professional/farmer/woodworker/social worker/IT specialist/home builder.”<sup>34</sup>

True, the last three decades have been witness to something of a faith and work movement within wider Christian circles. And such is encouraging.<sup>35</sup> But as it stands, this movement, ably chronicled by David W. Miller in *God at Work*, has been a largely lay-led and lay-confined phenomenon.<sup>36</sup> Relatively few participants are pastors, priests, and church leaders—Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox—who have assumed leadership roles.<sup>37</sup> In large part, expressions of a so-called faith and work vision remain lay-led.

But there is a reason for this chiefly lay-led phenomenon, as a cursory survey of standard teaching and preaching from our pulpits reveals. Though 99 percent of our congregants are called to the marketplace to serve others (and thus God) through their creative abilities, few receive nurturing and equipping for the daily ethical and economic challenges they encounter. They are basically left to figure things out for themselves.

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<sup>34</sup> Any theological orientation that elevates “pastoral ministry” and mission-as-evangelism over the church’s calling to the marketplace is a distortion.

<sup>35</sup> Because of my association with the Acton Institute, I have witnessed encouraging signs emanating from the faith and work movement.

<sup>36</sup> See David W. Miller, *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>37</sup> A notable exception to this is the organization Made to Flourish, founded by pastor Tom Nelson in Kansas City.

Frankly, the great majority of pastors, priests, and Christian leaders have never spent a significant season of their lives working *in* the marketplace. They therefore lack the vision for the marketplace that is required to equip and nurture most of their congregants—men and women who are butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers, nurses and lawyers and drivers of hearses, psychologists and businessmen, and information technologists.<sup>38</sup>

Sadly, as Douglas Schuurman has correctly pointed out in his important work *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life*, the church-centeredness that dominates most of our congregations and activities mirrors a deficient vision of why the church exists.<sup>39</sup> Surely, pastors and priests would benefit significantly from spending a portion of their lives working in the marketplace. Such would sensitize them in critical ways to the challenges and true needs of their congregants. More important, it would help collapse any sacred-versus-secular dichotomy that might be part of the clerical mindset.

## **The Challenge Confronting the Church: Her Social Presence**

Given the above factors contributing to the church's vision (or lack thereof), there is a vastly compelling need for resources that will enable pastors, priests, educators, Christian leaders, and indeed laypersons themselves to cultivate a vision for (1) the design and dignity of work, (2) the importance of the doctrine of vocation, and (3) the high calling of the workplace. After all, this is where we believers spend much of our lives and can best influence society. Nowhere will our presence be felt as it will in the marketplace. Nowhere else will the fruits of our faith be more on display. This, after all, is a primary context of our service to God and to

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<sup>38</sup> Whether this lack of vision is due to disinterest or intimidation is difficult to say. Perhaps it is a mixture of both.

<sup>39</sup> See Douglas J. Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), esp. chapter 1.

others. Our work, embedded in the context of our individual callings, is nothing less than worship.<sup>40</sup>

The starting place for any reexamination of work and vocation is necessarily theological.<sup>41</sup> Thus, theological questions arise: What is the uniqueness of the human person in all of creation? What are the implications of being created in the *imago Dei*? Are human beings designed to flourish? What are the implications of the fall, and how are we to understand human depravity? Do the effects of sin's curse nullify the creation mandate? How do the doctrines of creation and redemption intersect? In what ways do the "city of God" and the "city of man" interact? What is the extent to which Christ's ownership and redemption of all things touch and permeate the entire width and breadth, the material and non-material aspects, of creation? And how does the church's eschatological outlook, with its emphasis on a new earth, bear upon her perception of—and daily involvement in—this world?

In the last three decades important writings on work, vocation, and the marketplace have been published. But much of the significant literature was released during the late 1990s and early 2000s, with several volumes having appeared in 2011 and 2012.<sup>42</sup> That means many of

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<sup>40</sup> Chapter 3 attempts to strengthen the case for this unity. See also John Bergsma, "The Creation Narratives and the Original Unity of Work and Worship in the Human Vocation," in *Work: Theological Foundations and Practical Implications*, ed. R. Keith Loftin and Trey Dimsdale (London: SCM, 2018), 11–29.

<sup>41</sup> This is why seminaries, divinity schools, and church-related colleges should be leading the way in terms of recovering a proper vision of work, vocation, and the marketplace. See also notes 29–33 of this chapter.

<sup>42</sup> Consider, for example, the following list of volumes, comprising the most significant works on the topic(s) to date: Lester DeKoster, *Work: The Meaning of Your Life* (1982); Judith Allen Shelly, *Not Just a Job: Serving Christ in Your Work* (1985); Doug Sherman and William Hendricks, *Your Work Matters to God* (1987); Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* (1990); Michael Novak, *Business as a Calling: Work and the Examined Life* (1996); John Paul II, *The Meaning of Vocation* (1998); R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in*

these works are almost two decades old. Thus, fresh perspectives are in order. This is the case not only because of (1) the ongoing neglect in the church's teaching and preaching, and (2) the need for every successive generation of believers to confront its stewardship of creation and human culture, but also because of (3) an evolving, shifting, and highly technological workplace, and (4) the current social unrest as demonstrated, mostly recently, since the spring–summer of 2020. Lately, all facets of our society—particularly the marketplace—have experienced disorientation and dislocation.

At this point, a few specific comments about the aforementioned literature are necessary. The content and character of the existing texts on work and vocation are wide-ranging. Some are more practical and

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*Biblical Perspective* (1999); Gordon T. Smith, *Courage and Calling: Embracing Your God-Given Potential* (1999); Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening to the Voice of Vocation* (2000); Gilbert Meilaender, ed., *Working: Its Meaning and Its Limits* (2000); Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (2001); Laura Nash and Scotty McLennan, *Church on Sunday, Work on Monday: The Challenge of Fusing Christian Values with Business Life* (2001); Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (2002); Douglas J. Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* (2004); Darrell Cosden, *A Theology of Work: Work and the New Creation* (2004); William C. Placher, ed., *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (2005); Os Hillman, *The 9 to 5 Window: How Faith Can Transform the Workplace* (2005); David H. Jensen, *Responsive Labor: A Theology of Work* (2006); Gilbert Meilaender, *The Freedom of a Christian: Grace, Vocation, and the Meaning of Our Humanity* (2006); R. Paul Stevens, *Doing God's Business: Meaning and Motivation for the Workplace* (2006); John D. Beckett, *Mastering Monday: A Guide to Integrating Faith and Work* (2006); Darrell Cosden, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work* (2006); David W. Miller, *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement* (2007); Amy L. Sherman, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good* (2011); Tom Nelson, *Work Matters: Connecting Sunday Worship to Monday Work* (2011); Timothy Keller and Katherine Leary Alsdorf, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work* (2012); R. Keith Loftin and Trey Dimsdale, ed., *Work: Theological Foundations and Practical Implications* (2018); Daniel M. Doriani, *Work: Its Purpose, Dignity, and Transformation* (2019); and J. Daryl Charles, *Wisdom and Work: Theological Reflections on Human Labor from Ecclesiastes* (2021).

pastoral, some even bordering on the genre of self-help. Some are more serious theologies of work or vocation. Some take the reader on a brief stroll through history to observe diverse perspectives on such topics. And some of the important contributions to the literature are anthologies, pulling together writings on work or vocation from both ancient and modern writers, though usually without practical content or application.

The best and most theologically serious of those works published over the last three decades are useful in probing the design of work or the importance of vocation. Usually this grounding is located in the book of Genesis or in great models of faith. So, for example, in Israel's history we see Moses as the leader extraordinaire, Abraham as the risk-taker, Joseph as the political savior, Deborah as the wise judge, David as the bold warrior, Daniel as the political advisor, and Esther as the politically wise steward of providence. Few volumes, however, combine (1) a serious theology of work or vocation with (2) a historical overview of the church's understanding of work, vocation, and the marketplace, (3) biblical perspectives on stewardship that encompass both Old and New Testament teaching, and (4) a pastorally sensitive vision for educating congregants that is rooted in the conviction that the church's main witness to the world occurs in the marketplace. Of those volumes that do attempt this sort of synthesis and are well written,<sup>43</sup> their publication dates generally range from 1990 to 2004.<sup>44</sup>

This present volume represents an attempt at synthesizing the theological and the hermeneutical, the historical and the contemporary, the ethical and the pastoral. After all, work and vocation are by no means the domain of mere academic study or historical reflection; at the same time, they cannot and must not be reduced to mere self-help or pop theology

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<sup>43</sup> Several of the more substantive and integrated are those by Hardy, Smith, Jensen, and Schuurman (see n. 42).

<sup>44</sup> Two notable exceptions are the Loftin-Dimsdale and Keller-Alsdorf volumes (see n. 42), the former of which was published in the UK.

topics.<sup>45</sup> Rather than mirroring the priorities and values of the wider culture, the church must be faithful to the historical Christian tradition while also “translating” transcendent values in meaningful ways. Every generation, as I have noted, is faced with this task; and in every generation the challenges are unique, requiring new perspectives. Therefore, faithfully and meaningfully coming to terms with the cultural climate is the task set before us, although it is not easy. As will become clear in the following chapters, neither isolation, nor capitulation, nor triumphalism represents faithfulness.

In the early twenty-first century, we live in a post-Christian and post-consensus social climate; that much is indisputable, at least for those in Western, largely democratic societies.<sup>46</sup> This climate is one in which moral principle, traditional values, and historic Christian faith are derided; to affirm such principles in our day is to be branded “hate-filled,” “bigoted,” and “intolerant.” Nevertheless, we are to take our stewardship of the culture seriously. As Christians, there exist three possible responses. First, we could resign ourselves to the impossibility of the task and withdraw, or at least develop a theological rationale for withdrawing as we seek to preserve our Christian identity. This, of course, can be done in multiple ways. One is to adopt the fatalistic mindset, “There’s no point in rearranging the chairs on a sinking ship.” Such is the stereotypical response of fundamentalism, which in the American context has been characterized by a bloated eschatology wherein otherworldly priorities cancel out or at least diminish the church’s attempts at taking

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<sup>45</sup> One thinks, in this regard, of more blatant (and best-selling) examples of “self-help,” “pop theology,” and “motivational psychology” as found, say, in Stephen R. Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989), *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness* (2004), and *The Leader in Me* (2008) or Joel Osteen’s *Become a Better You* (2007), *Every Day a Friday* (2011), and *The Power of I Am* (2015).

<sup>46</sup> See J. Daryl Charles, “Post-Consensus Culture, Natural Law, and Moral Persuasion: Translating Moral Conviction in a Disbelieving Age,” in *Wisdom’s Work: Essays on Ethics, Vocation, and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Acton Institute Press, 2019), 1–26.

human culture and national citizenship seriously. Another rationale might be that of the Anabaptists, who were part of a minority movement in sixteenth-century Protestantism that confessed a separation from “the world” (and from vocations that were perceived as representing it).<sup>47</sup> To this day, many adherents of this tradition are separatistic.<sup>48</sup> Regardless of its varied justifications, we may call this alternative isolation.

A second response to the cultural situation is the opposite of separation or isolation. In essence, it is insufficiently critical and discerning of the social and philosophical assumptions that drive the culture, so that Christians end up capitulating and being absorbed into the surrounding cultural climate. This posture is typical of the Protestant mainline, so-called cafeteria Catholicism, and of an increasing number of self-professing evangelicals who desperately wish to be perceived by the world as relevant but who, in the end, often sacrifice their theological integrity.<sup>49</sup> In any case, if the first tendency is isolation, the second represents capitulation.

An alternative response is the proper way to live out the profession of faith, with integrity and in faithfulness.<sup>50</sup> This posture mirrors a willing-

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<sup>47</sup> See the Schleitheim Confession of Faith (1527), which serves as the chief early Anabaptist confession of faith and practice deemed central to Anabaptist conviction.

<sup>48</sup> This tendency remains true even when contemporary Anabaptists, who have taken extraordinary measures to demonstrate social concern (in disaster relief or conflict resolution, for example), chafe under the perception that they are “separatistic.” Nevertheless, separatism has been at the center of their theological identity from the very beginning, as historic affirmations such as the Schleitheim Confession (1527) indicate. It is for this reason that today’s Anabaptist will not be found working in various sectors of the culture deemed to be “worldly”—for example, in law, economics, philosophy, political science, public policy, banking, government service and public office, diplomacy, the military, police and law enforcement, and security, to name but a few.

<sup>49</sup> What the term “evangelical” means in our day is beyond the scope of the present volume, even when it needs probing.

<sup>50</sup> See Robert Benne, *Good and Bad Ways to Think about Religion and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

ness to count the cost of Christian discipleship while remaining engaged citizens of our current communities.<sup>51</sup> It is neither about retreating nor withdrawing in character, nor is it about being spiritually dull, undiscerning, and indiscriminately accommodating; rather, it is about wrestling in serious and committed ways with stewardship of the surrounding culture and the entire created order, and doing so based on an awareness of faithfulness. This posture motivates us to be humble, thoughtful, and confident. We Christ-followers are called to use our gifts and callings to build up the common good and to serve others, not merely ourselves.<sup>52</sup> This response may be described as faithful stewardship, about which I will have more to say.<sup>53</sup>

Being a steward entails a certain vision for bridge building. That is, stewards look for creative, resourceful, and strategic ways to penetrate the social fabric of which we are a part and to contribute to the common good of others. In the ordinary, in the daily nine to five, we find points of commonality with others in the workplace through each task; it is there that we serve God and our fellow image bearers most fully and tangibly. Hence, it is in the marketplace that we demonstrate the greatest level and degree of service both to God and to others. Yet some soul-searching is in order on the part of the church: Wouldn't society, in truth, be better off if the church stopped elevating "full-time Christian ministry" and began encouraging and equipping its own to see the nobility of

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<sup>51</sup> Two caveats are in order. One is that separatists—here again I have in mind Anabaptists, in whose tradition I grew up—are quick to describe their lifestyle commitments as "radical discipleship." Second, the sort of social engagement I am advancing is not to be confused with the idol of "social justice" that grips contemporary American culture and much of the church, particularly those segments of the church in which theology takes a back seat to social relevance.

<sup>52</sup> While "the common good" occupies an important place in Catholic social teaching, it tends not to be part of Protestants' vocabulary. It is not an exaggeration to connect the dots, as it were, between Protestant—and frequently non-denominational—megachurches and teaching/preaching that appeals almost exclusively to individualism, over against a common good.

<sup>53</sup> See chapters 3, 4, and 6.

the Monday–Friday calling to the marketplace? Without help from the church (and from Bible teachers within it), many believers remain confused, unfulfilled, and/or disillusioned concerning their jobs.

True, it is far easier to retreat into a dualism of “this world over against the next” or the common dualism of “full-time Christian work” over against regular work. The church’s temptation in any age is to withdraw from society, on the one hand (even when we construct a theological rationale for building so-called prophetic communities on the cultural sideline<sup>54</sup>), or simply to blend in with surrounding society, on the other. Nevertheless, faithful stewardship—of *all* creation—is our *calling*. The triteness of this formulation should not obscure its truth: the steward’s motivation is faithfulness and not so-called success.

### The Church’s One Foundation

A vibrant, morally guided social ethic, as chapter 3 will argue, does not descend out of thin air. It issues out of individual doctrinal commitments that Christians hold—commitments we each share with others—Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant—both present and past. More specifically, those commitments will require, as already noted, that we rethink the doctrine of creation, the manner in which creation and redemption are interlocking, and the implications of that unity for the Christian community’s social witness (a witness that is chiefly in the marketplace).

Dorothy Sayers is perhaps best known as the creator of Lord Peter Wimsey, the aristocratic amateur detective.<sup>55</sup> Less recognized are her

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<sup>54</sup> A chief example of which is the work of Stanley Hauerwas and many Anabaptist writers in the mold of John Howard Yoder.

<sup>55</sup> From 1949 to 1957, Sayers served as president of the Detective Club, formed in 1930 by a group of British mystery writers. During this golden age of murder-mystery writing, those belonging to this esteemed fellowship included Agatha Christie, Ronald Knox, Hugh Walpole, Baroness Emma Orczy, R. Austin Freeman, G. D. H. and Margaret Cole, and Henry Wade. The club’s first president was none other than G. K. Chesterton.

forays into the realm of theology, which, one discovers, turn out to be exceedingly rich. In such writing, Sayers is impatient with those who in her day viewed doctrine as “hopelessly irrelevant” to the life of the ordinary Christian.<sup>56</sup> *Creed or Chaos?* constitutes Sayers’s witty, imaginative, and at times acerbic call to take dogma seriously.<sup>57</sup> She writes, “The word *dogma* is unpopular, and that is why I have used it. It is our own distrust of dogma that is handicapping us.”<sup>58</sup> In truth, “the dogma *is* the drama,” she insists.<sup>59</sup> But sadly, in her view, our failure to appreciate the role of theology has rendered Christian cultural witness impotent, cutting us off at the knees. Thereby, she laments, we have “efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah” and “certified him [to be] meek and mild.”<sup>60</sup> These are strong—and very fitting—words: by our depreciation of—or disinterest in—theology, we render Christian cultural witness impotent, effectively “paring the claws of the Lion of Judah.”

For Sayers, doctrine possesses two inviolable functions in the life of the Christian. First, it defines what is distinctive about our world- and life-views. To lose sight of the importance of doctrine is to lose the backbone of the faith we profess and to invite spurious alternatives. Second, doctrine alone furnishes the basis for a uniquely Christian social ethic. Christian theology, after all, is an attempt to describe the nature of the world in which we live, which includes human nature, moral reality, and our place in the cosmos. Without a theological foundation, the church is utterly incapable of explaining, let alone embodying, the contours of a Christian social ethic. Theology

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<sup>56</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Dogma Is the Drama,” in *Creed or Chaos? Why Christ Must Choose Either Dogma or Disaster (Or, Why It Really Does Matter What You Believe*, repr. (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 1974), 50.

<sup>57</sup> In addition to *Creed or Chaos?*, Sayers’s best known work in the realm of theology is *The Mind of the Maker*, published in 1941.

<sup>58</sup> Sayers, “The Dogma Is the Drama,” 40.

<sup>59</sup> Sayers, “The Greatest Drama Ever Staged,” in *Creed or Chaos?*, 5, emphasis added.

<sup>60</sup> Sayers, 9.

alone allows us to contend for a baseline morality in the public square; doing that depends on our awareness of an objective moral order as displayed through creation and the cosmos.<sup>61</sup> But as Sayers well knew, what is needed in the church is not academic theology but a theology of the everyday.

## The Church's Responsibility for the World

Undergirding my thinking about work, vocation, and the marketplace is a basic assumption about the relationship between faith and culture. This leads me to ask, What responsibility does the church have for the world? Is the church, in fact, responsible for it? And if so, to what extent? Chapter 3 sets forth a theological premise that is foundational to my argument—a premise established by New Testament texts such as John 1:3; Eph 1:10; Col 1:15–20; and Heb 1:2:

- John 1:3: All things were created through Christ.
- Eph 1:10: All things will be brought together in Christ.
- Col 1:15–20: All things were created by and for Christ.
- Heb 1:2: Christ has been appointed heir of all things.

The guiding premise, then, is that “all things”—visible and invisible, material and nonmaterial—belong to Christ. There is *nothing* that does not belong to him, based both on creation and redemption. As someone has said, everything is “twice his.” The Colossians text above is particularly adamant in its proclaiming Christ’s supremacy in both creation and redemption. Its language—“all creation,” “all things,” “everything,” “all his fullness”—bears witness to this glorious reality. That Christ reconciles all things “to himself” (v. 20) and that “by him all things hold together” (v. 17) demonstrate that he is both the object and the instrument of all creation. This language, utterly compelling, supports and encourages

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<sup>61</sup> This will be taken up more fully in chapter 3.

Christians' activity in the culture in the deepest and most profound way, collapsing any possibility of a sacred-versus-secular dichotomizing that religious people might entertain.<sup>62</sup> This language, furthermore, reminds us that our activity in the surrounding culture is intended to *improve* the human condition, not merely to save some from a sinking ship. The combination of common grace, an ongoing expression of God's providence, and Christ's redemptive grace together move human culture in the right direction in accordance with the divine purpose, ennobling and restoring it and allowing people to flourish. Such is true regardless of the particular cultural moment in which we find ourselves. The question is whether Christians, in their basic theological orientation, actually believe this.<sup>63</sup>

This reality, of course, does not relieve us of the tension, complexity, and ambiguity that attend the daily nature of our stewardship over all things. In our work, at the job, in the marketplace, we are confronted with dilemmas and challenges that seem to contradict Christ's ownership of and lordship over all creation. How to mediate that reality as stewards—"coregents," if you will—of the created order requires wisdom, prudence, humility, and hope. But wisdom, humility, and hope are an absurdity—in truth, an impossibility—if (1) work is not that for which we were created, (2) "calling" is reserved only for pastors and priests,

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<sup>62</sup> On the implications of the Colossians 1 text and how it informs the church's cultural mandate, see the wonderfully rich discussion found in William Edgar, *Created and Creating: A Biblical Theology of Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 148–77 (esp. ch. 8, "The First Vocation"). Edgar's understanding of cultural engagement can be summarized as follows: it is "the human response to the divine call to enjoy and develop the world that God has generously given to his image bearers."

<sup>63</sup> Few have stated the church's role in human culture with greater clarity than Robert W. Jenson, "The Church's Responsibility for the World," in *The Two Cities of God: The Church's Responsibility for the Earthly City*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 1–10. Jenson's argument is essentially this: through the church's instrumentality, we work for and seek to maintain the promise of a *transformation* of all of creation.

the cloistered and the closeted, and (3) the marketplace is simply that ubiquitous sphere of unbearable life which we must somehow tolerate to make ends meet.<sup>64</sup>

Rethinking the ramifications of Christ's lordship over the entire created order, then, is of highest importance. In light of our frequent experience, not only is a proper understanding of the doctrine of creation central to our mission in the world, but as I will argue in the following chapters, a proper understanding of redemption must go hand in hand with it.

Redemption is not merely a rescue operation before impending disaster, or after disaster. It is, rather, the commencement of the "return" or restoring of "all things" to their proper ownership.<sup>65</sup> The Christian church of every generation needs to be confronted with the ramifications of Augustine's two cities metaphor: We believers have two citizenships, one in the city of God and one in the city of man. And while our ultimate allegiance belongs to the heavenly city, this does not mean that we do not take our citizenship in the city of man seriously. Because all things were created by and for Christ, we are therefore stewards of all aspects of human culture (in the city of man). Our two citizenships, therefore, forbid our disengagement from the earthly city. Our stewardship of matters in the earthly city, as it turns out, will be a measurement, on judgment day, of our service to God and to fellow human beings.

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<sup>64</sup> Chapter 5 probes the book of Ecclesiastes, which confronts the absurdity of finding wisdom, meaning, and hope where such assumptions are based on a false view of ultimate reality.

<sup>65</sup> Theologically, the church confesses that we live in the period of the already-and-not-yet. That is, the kingdom of God has not yet been fully consummated; creation still groans in its expectation as it awaits consummation (see Rom 8:22). Nevertheless, the seeds or "firstfruits" of redemption are now with us. This is the "already" aspect of Christ's transformation of all things. This means, on the one hand, that we eschew any sort of utopian thinking about perfecting society while, on the other, that we work to bring more of Christ's transformative influence into the present.

## A Personal Word

I write with motivation that is, broadly speaking, twofold. On one level, I am burdened that within the church we need a rediscovery of the doctrine of vocation and of the design and dignity of work.<sup>66</sup> While we Christians are impeded by both the culture's view of work as well as that of the church, it is the latter that is especially troubling. Having spent most of my professional career teaching at the university level in a Christian liberal arts context,<sup>67</sup> I am struck by how frequently over the years one distinct conversation reoccurs. That conversation almost invariably revolves around what a student should pursue following commencement. It usually starts with one or more of these questions: What am I to do after graduation? How should I use my gifts and abilities? To what am I personally called? Is there a "call" to the marketplace? If so, is a calling to the marketplace as noble as "Christian ministry"? Can the efforts and energy I expend in the workforce be considered sacred? Often, though this question is not usually vocalized, students want an answer to this as well: Is there really any dignity and meaning in work, regardless of what I end up doing?<sup>68</sup>

Importantly, it is not just people entering the workforce that wrestle with the meaning of work and the question of vocation. Middle-aged workers wrestle with this as well, as do retirees, though they are seldom encouraged to vocalize such concerns.<sup>69</sup> What's more, most people—and especially students—are surprised and shocked to find out that such

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<sup>66</sup> I use the term "rediscovery" for the simple reason that in every successive generation the church must come to grips with these doctrines, which are central to biblical revelation and to the church's cultural witness. Every era is in need of cultural apologists like Martin Luther and Abraham Kuyper and Dorothy Sayers and John Paul II.

<sup>67</sup> Before entering the university classroom, I did public-policy work in criminal justice in Washington, DC.

<sup>68</sup> In no university context in which I have taught has any course been offered that addressed these questions.

<sup>69</sup> The matter of retirement is taken up in chapter 3.

matters are not just relevant in the college years, when career or career choices are often confronted seriously for the first time.<sup>70</sup> My view is that children can be shaped and molded by their parents (and other teachers) toward a sense of purpose and vocational direction. In fact, the contexts of family and community facilitate this learning process quite naturally (at least in theory)—where faith is taken seriously. Every human being has the glorious privilege and frightening responsibility to wrestle individually with these matters and pursue avenues of work and service that correspond to his or her overall calling.

Dorothy Sayers's brilliant essay "Why Work?" was a succinct and forceful attempt both (1) to decry prevailing "Christian" attitudes toward work, vocation, and the marketplace and (2) to elevate these spheres of life on the basis of biblical revelation. Every generation needs such an apologist for the marketplace, someone who is convinced that this is where Christian service and stewardship are most needed. Sayers was right: one important "business of the Church [is] to recognize that the secular vocation, as such, is sacred."<sup>71</sup>

A second personal motivation behind this current volume's creation needs identifying. Rarely, if ever, are the insights of Wisdom literature applied to the matters of work, vocation, and the marketplace. I am not referring merely to proverbial wisdom in Scripture such as one finds in Psalms or Proverbs but to the little-examined and much-misunderstood book of Ecclesiastes, to which a coming chapter is devoted. To the surprise of many, a serious reading of the Bible's Wisdom books yields simple yet stunning perspectives on work, calling, and stewardship. This is

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<sup>70</sup> While chapter 6 will address such matters more fully, vocation or calling is not chiefly about making certain career choices or deciding what job to take, even when it informs such decisions. Rather, it concerns how we relate Christian faith to the totality of one's life, of which work and the marketplace are a significant part. Vocation concerns broader life stewardship; it is "a theology for living." See Kathryn Kleinhans, "The Work of a Christian: Vocation in Lutheran Perspective," *Word & World* 25, no. 4 (2005): 402.

<sup>71</sup> Sayers, "Why Work?," 105.

especially true of Ecclesiastes, when it is viewed through the lens of faith and in light of the writer's unique literary-rhetorical strategy. Against the backdrop of divine providence and divine inscrutability, the apologetically minded writer argues that for those who revere God, work takes on an entirely different cast than the "meaninglessness" and "vanity" that a materialistic worldview engenders.<sup>72</sup>

The argument of this volume has four principal parts. Chapters 2 and 3 are of a theological nature. They examine the roots of our social and ecclesiastical predicament with a view to then probe its theological underpinnings. Indeed, we may call these "doctrines" of work, of vocation, and of stewardship. Chapter 4 looks back in history to the early sixteenth century in an attempt to appreciate a significant breakthrough in terms of the church's understanding of work, vocation, and the marketplace. It cannot be overstated how important that breakthrough was, both for the church in Martin Luther's day and for the church of any era. Chapters 5 and 6 go together insofar as they illuminate perspectives on work in the Wisdom literature of Ecclesiastes and establish a link between our work and our callings (i.e., our vocations). The volume concludes in chapters 7 and 8 with reflections on the church's presence in society, forming something of an *inclusio* with the introductory chapter; this includes final thoughts on the knotty and perennial questions of discernment and guidance.

The first order of business is to understand why the church has neglected the marketplace. What accounts for the widespread separation of work and religious faith and the failure to understand and respect the secular vocation, which in turn has rendered the church's witness to the culture insubstantial? What attitudes inform this seemingly perennial split in the church's thinking and its teaching? Preliminary reasons for this dilemma have been suggested. Let us probe more deeply.

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<sup>72</sup> See Charles, *Wisdom and Work: Theological Reflections on Human Labor from Ecclesiastes* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021).

## OUR SECULAR VOCATION

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