

Dialogue II

Middle Management as a Calling

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After discussing the doctrine of calling and the history and importance of the middle management profession, the authors challenge business professors to present management as an exciting calling for students.

Introduction

If one were to ask high school or college students about their career aspirations, it is doubtful any would answer that their desire is to become a middle manager in corporate America. A recent television commercial for Monster.com mocked this as a possible answer to the proverbial “What do you want to be when you grow up?” question. However, a substantial number of students will eventually find themselves in this very role. How will they discover meaning and satisfaction in a job few aspire to and on which society seems to place so little value?

Our task is to examine the doctrine of calling and apply it to business. In particular, we examine the role of non-executive or middle-level management as a calling.¹ Without the work of managers, the possibility for

using highly specialized and productive labor to produce goods and services would be greatly reduced. We seek to integrate business history, economics, and recent literature on leadership with the doctrine of calling and to apply calling to the role of managers in modern business enterprises.

In the following section, we present the views of some important theologians on the doctrine of calling. This is followed by a brief examination of Alfred Chandler’s study concerning the rise of the large industrial enterprise and how these new enterprises developed a new type of worker — the salaried manager. The third section examines the importance of managers in the business sector. The fourth section attempts to connect the doctrine of calling with the role of

management, especially middle-level management. Finally, we conclude with a challenge to professors of business to present management as an exciting calling for their students — one that combines crucial skills with a commitment to service in God’s name.

The Doctrine of Calling

In today’s language, calling has come to be almost synonymous with vocation. One’s calling is seen as related to one’s occupation or way to make a living.² A more biblical view of calling would be to acknowledge that a person is called to follow Christ. Karl Barth notes:

Our premise is that the word “vocation” is not known to the New Testament in its present meaning, i.e., in the narrower technical sense in which it denotes the definite area of man’s work. In the New Testament, [klesis] always means quite unambiguously the divine calling, i.e., the act of the call of God issued in Jesus Christ by which a man is transplanted into his new state as a Christian, is made a participant in the promise (Eph. 1:7; 4:4) bound up with this new state, and assumes the duty (Eph. 4:1; II Pet. 1:10)

corresponding to this state (Barth, 1961, p. 600).

Thus, the call of God affects the entire person and is not merely related to occupation or life work.³

The Apostle Paul wrote:

... let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you. This is my rule in all the churches. Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything. Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called.⁴

The interpretation of this passage is not agreed upon by all commentators. Like Barth, Volf (1991, pp. 109-110) argues that the “calling” in I Cor. 7:20 refers to the calling to become a Christian and that one’s circumstances or occupation are not relevant to the idea of calling. Thiselton (2000) argues that calling and the circumstances can be applied to occupation.

Regarding this passage, Holl (1924/1958) wrote:

Our knowledge of the language is not sufficient to decide with certainty whether Paul here along with a bold thought has made a bold recoinage of a word — the calling of the Christian includes also the position in life in which he finds himself as something ordered by God — or whether he adopts a usage already present, but one that is very rare, and, at most, present in popular language — “klesis” equals that from which one bears his name, therefore his position or his vocation in our sense. The latter is indeed more likely. In any case it was of importance that a sense of the word which touches its worldly meaning should be brought near to the Christian through one passage of the New Testament (p. 127).

Clearly, Martin Luther took this passage to imply that one’s station, which included occupation, was included. In his translation of I Cor. 7:20, he used the word *Beruf*, which had been used exclusively of monastic callings prior to his time.

Luther leveled the field so that all lawful occupations were

legitimate callings of God. Because there is no hierarchy in God’s sight, the common laborer at work was called in the same way a minister was called. Luther also included many non-occupational stations as relevant to a calling — father, mother, son, daughter. In his study of Luther’s idea of vocation, Gustaf Wingren notes that for Luther the stations or orders are oriented to serve others.⁵ So long as a station is lawful and moral, the Christian can participate in it. In fact, the Christian loves his or her neighbor by participating in the station. An important way in which Christians keep the command to love their neighbors is through their activities in their stations. This includes the judge, the soldier, and the executioner.⁶

In addition to its orientation toward service, work as vocation is understood to be a person’s specific gift and assignment by God. Calvin pointed out that in the absence of a sense of calling, people are ever at the mercy of “the boiling restlessness of the human mind, the fickleness with which it is borne hither and thither, . . . its ambition.” Rather than leave us slaves to indecision or rashness, God has “assigned distinct duties to each in the different modes of life.” Calvin

added, "... in following your proper calling, no work will be so mean and sordid as not to have a splendour and value in the eye of God" (Calvin, 1536).

Hardy notes a difference between Luther's and Calvin's views of vocation, with Luther focusing more on one's station and Calvin on one's gifts. Hardy (1990) writes:

Instead of claiming that God has a place for each person in the order of stations in this life, Calvinists often put it this way: God has given each person certain talents and abilities which they should exercise for their neighbor's good. Whereas for Luther our vocation is discerned in the duties of our station in life, for Calvinists it is derived from our gifts. We have a duty to use our talents and abilities for our neighbor's sake. Therefore we are obligated to find a station in life where our gifts can indeed be employed for the sake of our neighbor's good. The station is no longer itself normative, but must be judged by its suitability as an instrument of social service. If it is found to be faulty or ill-adapted to its end, it must be either altered or discarded altogether. We must not only serve God in our calling;

our calling itself must be brought into alignment with God's Word (p. 66).

For the Calvinist position identified by Hardy to be applicable, individual Christians would need a certain amount of freedom and social mobility. A slave in the church at Corinth would not have been able to discard his or her station.⁷

Hardy's distinction between Luther and Calvin needs to be addressed further. The Calvinist position is more amenable to people living in societies such as the U.S., since it presumes the freedom to change position. However, it can lead to improper denigration of the occupations of many people. Luther consistently emphasized the value of the station, so long as it was a lawful and moral station. People can do wrong in their stations, but the station, or task itself, was from God. Hardy suggests that low-status jobs may still be important to God and offers the example of garbage collection. Certainly garbage collection is an honorable occupation. Hardy goes on to claim that the garbage collector performs a more valuable service than the advertising executive who provides a campaign for a new dish detergent (1990, p. 90).

Though in general we agree with Hardy that low-level jobs are honorable occupations, we believe the latter statement fails to recognize the complexity of the modern economic system.

An example used by Luther is noted in Wingren (1957), “God Himself will milk the cows through him whose occupation that is” (p. 9). But how does God provide milk to people in modern America? He uses the dairy farmer, the firms that manufactured the milking machines, the firms that manufactured the trucks that delivered the milk to grocery stores, the drivers of the trucks, the firms who manufacture the plastic for the milk containers, the grocery stores, the workers in the stores who stock the shelves, the workers at the electric utilities who provide the electricity for refrigeration at the stores, and even the people who generate advertising for the supermarket chain. It is easier to see service to others in some occupations than in others, but the milk doesn’t get to the consumer without all of the people involved in the entire process along the way. The production processes that permit high standards of living and relatively low prices for goods and services require the

efforts of many people whose tasks do not seem to be of direct service to others. Nevertheless, the tasks are necessary for the entire system to operate. Similarly, the advertising executive, whose marketing plans are necessary for the mass production of a good that enables low prices for everyone, also serves others.⁸

The high degree of specialization of labor carried out in modern industrial societies involves large enterprises. The result is that many people work at jobs that are highly interconnected with others, making it difficult to see how the individual’s task directly serves others. This is true of managers as well as assembly line workers. The work of the manager can be understood as a calling within Lutheran and Calvinistic thought.⁹ We especially focus on non-executive management, because they are often neglected in these discussions; the tendency in much of the literature relating to business is to identify CEOs and upper-level management as key to getting things done.¹⁰ But the modern market economic system cannot function without the work of low and middle-level managers. In the next section,

we briefly trace out the development of the modern corporation and the concomitant rise of management as a profession in order to show the importance of the non-executive manager in the economic system as a whole.

The Rise of the Large Industrial Enterprise and the Development of Professional Managers

Alfred Chandler (1977 and 1990) documents the rise of the large industrial enterprise in the latter half of the 19th century. Prior to the expansion of markets, made possible by innovations in communication (the telegraph and later the telephone) and land transportation (the railroads), business enterprises were small and run by the owners. Some larger enterprises had foremen in factories, but that was the exception rather than the rule. The partnership was the dominant legal form for commercial enterprises. “The partnership, normally a family affair, consisted of two or three close associates. It was a contractual arrangement that was changed when a partner died or decided to go into another business ... The partnership was used by all types of businesses, from the small

country storekeepers to the great merchant bankers who dominated the Anglo-American trade” (Chandler, 1977, p. 36).

The railroad was the first large-scale business enterprise in the U.S. The geographic scope of the railroads meant that a single person could not effectively monitor and coordinate the movement of the trains.¹¹ The Western Railroad became the first American business enterprise to operate through a formal administrative structure that was

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run by full-time, salaried managers (Chandler, 1977, p. 98).

The expansion of railroads permitted firms to exploit economies of scale by building larger production facilities. Further, the growth of the economy and the development of larger markets encouraged technical innovation that revolutionized American industry. As organizations became large and per-unit costs fell with bigger output volume, firms sought to secure customers and distribution networks to customers in order to

maintain the large volume of output. Chandler shows how first-movers in many industries expanded by means of backward vertical integration or forward vertical integration (or both) to be able to maintain the high “throughput” that was necessary to keep costs low. The result was the development of the modern industrial enterprise. Chandler defines this enterprise as:

... a collection of operating units, each with its own specific facilities and personnel, whose combined resources and activities are coordinated, monitored, and allocated by a hierarchy of middle and top managers. It is the existence of this hierarchy that makes the activities and operations of the whole enterprise more than the sum of its operating units (Chandler, 1990, p. 15).

An operating unit is a factory, a research laboratory, or a sales or purchasing office which operates at a specific geographic place and usually with a single function. It has its own administrative office, managers, and staff and its own set of accounting books. Theoretically, it could serve as an independent firm but is actually part of a larger enterprise. The

number of operating units determines the number of middle and top managers the enterprise hires.

Chandler provides some case studies to illustrate how the process of expansion occurred in the decades around the turn of the 20th century (Chandler, 1977, p. 381ff.). Lower-level managers tended to perform the tasks that the men who owned and ran a single independent factory or enterprise performed. Middle managers are those who supervise the work of the lower-level managers and who, in turn, report to senior executives, who also are salaried managers. Chandler states, “... the tasks of the middle managers were entirely new. Middle managers had to pioneer in the ways of modern administrative coordination” (1977, p. 411). These new types of managers devised ways to coordinate the high volume flow from suppliers of raw materials to ultimate consumers. They also developed ways to expand markets and to speed up the production and distribution processes. These activities of middle managers led to lower costs, increased output, and increased efficiency in distribution that contributed greatly to the rising material

standards of living during this time period.¹²

The management theorists of the early 20th century focused on developing processes and procedures for this new breed of managers. Henry Fayol, believing the practice of management was distinct from the typical business functions, such as accounting or production, developed his 14 principles of management as fundamental rules that could be taught in schools and applied in all organizational situations. Max Weber, in theorizing how work could best be accomplished in large organizations, developed the model followed by managers throughout most of the 20th century: a form of organization characterized by division of labor, a clearly defined hierarchy, detailed rules and regulations, and impersonal relationships (which he called “bureaucracy”).¹³

The Importance of Middle-Level Managers in Modern Business

William H. Whyte begins his 1956 book *The Organization Man* with the observation that “the white-collar people [who] take vows of organization life ... are the mind and soul of our great self-perpetuating institutions.” He maintained that the group of

people who have since come to be called middle managers are “the dominant members of our society ... and it is their values which will set the American temper” (Whyte, 1956, p. 3). Though Whyte’s model of a person dutifully serving one organization throughout his career is no longer the norm for many highly motivated professionals (who increasingly believe climbing the ladder of success is best accomplished by jumping from one organization to another), his predictions concerning the amount of influence middle managers have on the lives of people appear to have come true. Some 45 years later, research shows that the most influential factor in a person’s satisfaction at work is the quality of his or her immediate manager — more influential than the leadership of the organization or even pay.¹⁴ The work of the middle manager in business is not only “service to neighbor,” because it makes possible the operation of large organizations in producing greater material well-being for society; such work also has a major role in directly contributing to the welfare of others.

Given the influence of managers on both the success of

organizations and the satisfaction of the people who work in them, why do they receive so little recognition?

Both the media and business education focus almost exclusively on those who lead

organizations and their executive teams. The contributions of managers not only are ignored, but also often maligned.

For example, Warren Bennis writes in his best-selling book, *On Becoming a Leader*, “I tend to think of the differences between leaders and managers as the differences between those who master the context and those who surrender to it. ... The manager is a copy; the leader is an original. The manager maintains; the leader develops. The manager imitates; the leader originates. The manager is the good soldier; the leader is his own person” (1989, pp. 44-45). This view conflicts with Paul’s admonition, “... in humility regard others as better than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3b).

Managers have been disproportionately affected by corporate restructuring, reengineering, and downsizing in part because those making the

decisions about which jobs an organization can do without have been seduced by the view that

middle managers do not add much value. Managers are seen simply as intermediaries who, more often than not, become

roadblocks to change rather than key agents in translating the overall vision for the corporation into meaningful actions for those who must implement the changes. However, middle management is the group of people in whom the bulk of corporate knowledge resides — as these organizations eventually discover when they must hire new people to fill the very positions they eliminated in their restructuring zeal. Middle managers build up their expertise through daily attention to the details of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling. They cannot do their job well without building a store of knowledge regarding how to address all the problems and opportunities that come along, whether little or large, mundane or unusual. They are not simply yes-men and women carrying out the directions of others. Their jobs do not come with built-in time-outs to check with some higher authority before



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making decisions. Such centralized decision-making may have worked in the mid-20th century, but in today's world of "just-in-time" manufacturing and "real-time" business information, it would be as outmoded as typing carbon copy letters or producing mimeographed employee newsletters.

Middle management may be perceived as a boring, thankless, unrecognized calling. But a calling it is, perhaps precisely because of its anonymity, epitomized by "the man in the gray flannel suit." According to Abraham Zaleznik, in an award-winning *Harvard Business Review* article, (in contrasting managers to leaders) managers become "emotionally detached from their work" in their efforts to "create an ordered corporate structure" (1992, pp. 48-49). We believe that nothing could be farther from the truth. The middle manager's main role is to serve others: the organization and its goals, as well as the people being supervised and their needs. As such, they are *very* emotionally involved in the true "life" of the organization.

When the manager's work is done well, no one notices. Doing her work well means there is nothing *to* notice — other than a

smoothly running operation, populated by satisfied workers. No grand new strategies, risky decisions, or bold endeavors are needed. Says Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great* (2001): "For these people, work is about what they *build*, create, and contribute, comfortable with the idea that most people won't even know that the roots of that success trace back to their efforts" (p. 36).

Take, for example, a manager of a new product development team. Such a team is usually comprised of professionals from within and outside the organization: designers, engineers, suppliers, purchasing agents, manufacturing specialists, computer analysts, financial analysts, marketing specialists, etc. Such a manager is given a direction to fulfill, often with unrealistic time lines and budget constraints. It is her job to plan the project, coordinate the disparate skills and personalities of the people on the team, allocate tasks and resources, as well as make decisions all along the way when this part of the original design cannot be engineered safely or that part cannot be manufactured efficiently. Halfway through the project, the marketing

representative comes in with ideas for changes to better address newly understood customer needs. Should the changes be made, even though it means the project will not be completed on time? Should the changes be made if costly re-dos will be required?

In these and many other situations, the manager must decide how to do what is right for the customer and the company. And often the “right” decisions come at a cost to her personal performance evaluation, if it means not completing the project on time or within budget. Further, her interpersonal skills in interactions with each person on the team set the tone for the team dynamics, favorable relationships among team members, and their ability to meet new challenges. The manager’s integrity is exhibited on a daily basis in determining how differences are resolved or how to motivate frustrated team members. She slowly builds their trust in her management ability through honest communication, evidence of concern for the organization *and* for her teammates, and by delivering results.¹⁵

Managers can find meaning in what they do because God works in partnership with them to

contribute to society through the production of their organization and by creating an environment in which their workers can thrive. Their work is not the stuff that attracts the attention of the media. It has also been largely ignored by business education, which for the most part focuses on strategy development and training people to be leaders at the top of organizations (or more recently, the development of entrepreneurial skill to start new businesses). Middle managers may desire, but do not often receive, recognition or acclaim. They work on a different scale than the leaders who do gain such attention, but they are just as necessary. As Joseph Badaracco says:

Every profession and walk of life has its great figures, leaders, and heroes. Think of the men and women who create or transform major companies. ... We exalt these individuals as role models and celebrate their achievements. They represent, we feel, the true model of leadership. But do they really? I ask this because, over the course of a career spent studying management and leadership, I have observed that the most effective leaders are rarely public heroes. These men

and women aren't high-profile champions of causes, and don't want to be. They move patiently, carefully, and incrementally. They do what is right — for their organizations, for the people around them, and for themselves — inconspicuously and without casualties. ... And since many big problems can only be resolved by a long series of small efforts, quiet leadership, despite its seemingly slow pace, often turns out to be the quickest way to make an organization — and the world — a better place (2002, p. 1).

The efforts of managers may not be recorded for posterity and they may not even be noticed by those around them, but they matter. They matter because these everyday leaders keep our organizations running for the benefit of customers, workers, owners, and communities.

Managers and the Doctrine of the Calling

The section above discussed the importance of middle-level managers in enterprises. The fall from grace of the charismatic or heroic leader has been well documented in recent works,¹⁶ and an emerging literature focusing on “quiet leadership”

(Badaracco, 2002) or “everyday leadership” (TenHaken, 2003) can be applied to managers at many levels and not just to CEOs. Of all the concepts of leadership, this one bears the closest relationship to the Christian notion of vocation (or calling) as it applies to managers. In this context, leadership is but one of the four tasks of managers throughout the organization, not the exclusive domain of those at the top of the organizational pyramid.¹⁷

There is an important affinity between Christian portrayals of vocation and the new literature that describes leadership in terms of the following methods and attitudes:¹⁸

- Effective leaders seek to help others develop a common vision. They share the vision with those who are receptive to it, energized by it, and willing to work hard for its realization.

The biblical vision of the Kingdom of God is not too lofty to be relevant to business enterprises. Like any parish, with specific neighborhood ministries and unique member gifts, firms work in specific places and serve their particular customers by meeting their special needs. They assemble teams, with goals

and assignments, as does any congregation focused on ministries. Both involve pragmatic tasks and require strong management at all levels. Nevertheless, the visions and goals of parishes and firms point beyond themselves to the greater good.

Managers cannot effectively enlist collective “ownership” of a firm’s goals and expect strong commitment without making connections between the firm’s goals and the talents and callings of each person involved. Neither can they do so without connecting the firm’s vision to the inherent desires people have to be part of something bigger than themselves. For Christian managers, that “something” is ultimately the Kingdom of God. They are called to connect their profession, as managers, to their Christian vocation. Indeed, Christian managers have the potential to flesh out a “larger-than-life” vision through the specific ways they lift the professional perspectives of their co-workers toward lofty ideals.

• Effective leaders exercise the “lowly” but critical virtues of patience, care, prudence, self-restraint, disciplined tenacity, humility, and trustworthiness.¹⁹

—*Patience and disciplined tenacity* allow them to focus and persist in the pursuit of long-term goals and relationships, rather than “buying” short-term advantages or allegiances. (See Phil. 3:12-15, where Paul gives himself as an example, “straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” Consider also the monumental work of Nehemiah, who “laid the foundation for the long-term security of the rebuilt Jewish community in Jerusalem by developing covenants, physical security systems, financial accountability, and a system of leadership succession.”²⁰)

—*Self-restraint* leads them to carefully investigate problems by learning from the expertise and experience of others, rather than seizing on a course of action that has gut appeal but is unlikely to provide a lasting solution. (The pharaoh of Egypt, having heard of the wisdom and skills of Joseph, appointed him as chief of staff. The pharaoh enlisted an expert who days before had been a foreign prisoner in his jail. Second only to Pharaoh, Joseph saved Egypt from a devastating famine by coordinating the collection of grain for storage

during seven years of abundant harvests and its sale during the following seven years of bad harvests.)

—*Humility* enables them to work in teams with a shared sense of vision and responsibility, rather than presuming to be the all-purpose experts. (See

John 13:12-17, where Jesus shows his disciples how they are to be servants. In Philippians 2:1-11, Paul beautifully describes what Christian humility entails by focusing on the humility of Jesus Christ.)

—*Prudence and care* press them to carefully consider the costs and benefits of possible approaches to a decision for all stakeholders. This is clearly a matter of good stewardship. Teaching the crowds about the Kingdom of God, Jesus used two illustrations — one of a man building a tower, and the other of a king about to go to war. Both a wise man and a wise king, said Jesus, would carefully consider the likely costs, rather than find himself unprepared to follow through on a building project or a war (Luke 14:25-33).

—*Trustworthiness* requires that they act with integrity, while

also being fully aware of competing values and their own limited powers to change events. Throughout the Bible we are taught to trust God and to be trustworthy in all our dealings.

... Christian managers have the potential to flesh out a “larger-than-life” vision ...

(See Exodus 18:21, in which God instructs Moses to

appoint trustworthy officials for Israel.²¹)

Together, these characteristics of managers as everyday leaders are consistent with the image of leader as “servant.” In his development of the body image of the church, Paul mentioned “administration” (I Cor. 12:27-30) as a gift and assignment by God to build up the church. Quite obviously, Christians’ callings as managers in business depend on similar skills and gifts.

Since the time of Adam Smith, economists have demonstrated the productivity of specialization and exchange. We believe that this economic doctrine relates well to the Christian idea of calling, described above. It is also key to understanding the particular vocation of those called to be “everyday leaders” in the arena of

management in businesses and other organizations.

Adam Smith focused primarily on the advantage of specialization for raising production levels and living standards. Earlier we showed how the geographic expanse of markets and the growth of average enterprise size led to a differentiation and refinement of management skills and categories that went far beyond the owner/manager — laborer model that Smith had in mind. We firmly believe that Christians can both applaud material advances made possible with the growth of specialization — across and within professions, including management — and also affirm the practice of godly values within and through each particular calling.

In the new literature of everyday leadership, the most relevant virtues for managers are usually plain ones, like those mentioned above, rather than heroic virtues or attitudes often attributed to leaders who are said to have built or saved companies. Furthermore, everyday leadership shares with vocation a common realism about situations, expertise, and values. Values are not useful without knowledge, skills, and attention to systems within which

one's work is embedded. Thus, social ethicist and theologian Robert Benne refers to "technical excellences," which are required for the effective practice of any calling:

These technical "excellences" have moral dimensions but cannot be reduced to moral capacities. There are worldly practices that simply must be mastered in order for the social order to work. The church has no particular expertise in them nor does it have a blueprint stipulating their exact shape. These "excellences" have an integrity of their own that cannot be replaced by good moral intentions (Benne, 1988, p. 71, emphasis added).

Like the writers who describe the traits and actions of ordinary leaders, Adam Smith was a realist about morals, motives, and systems. On the one hand, Smith argued that people should (and generally do) pay attention to their moral compass, which requires direction and reinforcement from religion and the law.²² On the other hand, he demonstrated how competitive forces in market systems harness, for the general good, natural human desires to look after one's own interests.

One of the advantages of the view that vocation and specialization are embedded in values and social systems (such as markets) is that managers' calling can be seen to be holy — not in spite of their own limitations of place, time, expertise, and competing responsibilities and values, but precisely *because* of those unique features. As Smith argued, the very narrowness of specialization is an advantage to productivity. However, it is also the very stuff of one's calling. Here, where no one else can possibly know the special abilities, character, and personal circumstances of the members of a work team, ordinary managers are privileged to be able to facilitate a collective shaping of vision, responsibility, and action. Of course, in a dynamic economy and society, the particular place of one's vocation (and even the vocation itself) increasingly changes over time.

As mentors and facilitators, managers respect members of their teams and their vocations. Indeed, Paul's mentorship of Timothy (see relevant passages in I and II Timothy, especially II Tim. 2:24) is useful for understanding the spirit, methods, and importance of this aspect of

the work of middle-level managers. They are continually raising up more skilled, dedicated, and service-oriented people within their organizations. Christian managers fully recognize that God calls individual team members, themselves (each of whom is responsible for discerning and choosing his or her own commitments within a particular profession), the setting, and the circle of responsibility.

Christian managers, like all Christians, understand that their vocations, taken together, are intended to equip the body of Christ for service to the world. Each member of the body, as Paul wrote, has its special function (I Cor. 12:14-26). It is the Spirit of Christ who knits together the body's functions and coordinates its life of service.

Concluding Comments

The church is the community of those who have been called out by God to be His children and His servants. If we are each to love God with our whole heart and our neighbors as ourselves, then part of our service to God involves serving other people. It is common to think of such service as involving specifically "Christian" or "spiritual"

activities. However, the doctrine of calling suggests that we serve others through our faithfulness to our calling. Further, our calling, although not limited to occupation or job, includes the service to others we perform in our occupations. We have argued that this applies to non-executive managers as well as to others.

As Emil Brunner (1937) noted, when we participate in the “orders,” we are cooperating with others. Economists also see cooperation as an essential part of human economic existence due to the productivity of labor specialization. If everyone specializes in some things, people must cooperate in order to mutually benefit from the specialization. This includes the specialization of the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker, as well as the specialization that takes place within large-scale enterprises. The productivity of managers is an important source of American economic growth, as documented by the business historian Alfred Chandler (1977).

Managers need not wait to experience the fullness of their high calling until they occupy the status and enjoy the visibility of celebrity CEOs. Like the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:15), the fullness of vocation is already at

hand, only to be recognized for what it is. Furthermore, ordinary managers can find meaning in what they do precisely because God is at work — even through imperfect systems, organizations, and markets — to accomplish His purposes on earth. That is God’s promise — to work in partnership with each of us for the blessing of the entire world.

Finally, we discussed the lack of prestige often associated with the practice of management. We argued that the almost exclusive focus in the media and in business education on top-level leadership is misplaced and that a greater focus on the important work performed by “mere” managers is needed. The pervasive power of the Holy Spirit and the love of Christ accomplish God’s purposes through billions of individuals who are called to particular professions, jobs, and work teams. Knowing this should be an inspiration for managers, wherever they find themselves. Trusting in God — who calls and shapes them to perform their unique duties — managers can apply themselves with imagination, intensity, and love. They can invest in bringing their skills and those of their teams to the tasks and visions of the larger

organizations they serve — each with its unique responsibilities to clients, customers, employees, and investors. We challenge those who prepare students for futures as managers to hold before them their calling — one that is inspired and directed by God for service to others.

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ENDNOTES

¹Throughout this paper we refer to managers as those non-executive positions within an organization that are often referred to as middle management.

²Marshall (1996) traces out the development of vocation from the Reformation to the time of John Locke. The limiting of vocation to that of occupation took place during this time period, and the richness of the concept that Luther and Calvin developed was lost.

³Two further quotations from Barth illustrate. “Vocation is the ‘place of responsibility,’ the *terminus a quo* of all recognition and fulfillment of the command, the status of the man who is called to freedom by the command” (p. 598). “That a man’s vocation is exhausted in his profession is not more true than that God’s calling which comes to him is simply an impulsion to work. He will always live in widely different spheres if he receives the divine calling and is obedient to it” (p. 599).

⁴I Cor. 7:17-20. All Scriptural references use the New Revised Standard Version.

⁵Wingren (1957), p. 5.

⁶See Luther’s “Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved,” in Tappert (1967).

⁷A criticism made to Luther’s views is the static nature of his thought — one was in a station and should not try to change the station. Volf sees the entire Protestant discussion of vocation as too static and tries to present an alternative approach to theological thinking about work based on *charisms* — the gifts of the Holy Spirit. However, one can adapt the traditional view of vocation to a more dynamic economic system, so Volf’s program is not necessary, especially since it conflates spiritual gifts with human talents.

⁸As noted above, Luther leveled the field considerably. Emil Brunner, another Swiss and Reformed theologian, takes a more Lutheran approach in his discussion of vocation. He states that the stations are there to provide order to society; so we must accept the fact that our duty often conflicts with the ideal. He wrote, “I must behave differently to my neighbor in my capacity as a judge, a policeman, a bank official, a schoolmaster, etc., from the way I would behave towards him in a ‘private’ relationship — as man to man. But consideration for the nation as a whole, of which my neighbor is also a

member, requires this distinction” (Brunner, 1937, p. 225).

⁹We do not mean to limit the notion to Luther and Calvin, since most Protestants share similar ideas, and modern Catholic thought is in line with a higher view of “secular” work than prevailed in the Middle Ages. To limit the length of the paper, we have focused on the Lutheran and Calvinistic developments.

¹⁰Novak (1996) is an exception to this rule. While he writes about CEOs in the book, he also discusses middle management, calling them the “unsung heroes of business” (p. 28).

¹¹Safety also was an important issue. Accidents led to government inquiries and internal investigations by the railroads themselves. A committee for the Western Railroad called on the firm “... to fix ‘definite responsibilities for each phase of the company’s business, drawing solid lines of authority and communication for the railroad’s administration, maintenance, and operation’” (Chandler, 1977, p. 97, quoting from a committee report for the Western Railroad titled “Report on Avoiding Collisions and Governing the Employees”).

¹²This brief discussion has glossed over the large literature in economics concerning the differences between organizing production through the “visible hand” of the firm and the invisible hand of the market that began with Coase (1937). The savings in transaction costs that are generated by the work of those who keep the large firm operating must be substantial to cover the costs of workers whose tasks are not directly productive.

¹³See Robbins and Coulter, p. 30.

¹⁴Eleven thousand employees in 200 FORTUNE 500 companies were surveyed on factors that attract and retain professional employees. They rated Manager Quality at 5.02 on a 6-point scale; Base pay, 4.6; Total compensation and benefits, 3.8; Company reputation, 3.65; and Co-worker quality, 3.54. Found in the Corporate Leadership Council’s *The Compelling Offer: A Quantitative Analysis of the Career Preferences and Decisions of High Value Employees* (Washington, D.C.: Corporate Executive Board, 1999).

¹⁵Shaw (1997), p. 21.

¹⁶See, for example, Khurana (2002), TenHaken (2003), and Raelin (2003).

¹⁷The other functions are planning, organizing, and controlling.

¹⁸This list of virtues is adapted from Badaracco’s book *Leading Quietly* (2002, pp. 169-179).

¹⁹See also Smith (1999). Though the author is speaking primarily about entry-level competencies rather than those necessary later in one’s career, she describes similar virtues in the section “Vital Character Qualities in the 21st Century.”

²⁰Thanks to a reviewer for this example.

²¹The broader context of the verse mentioned deals with Jethro’s advice to Moses about spreading his judicial duties among more people. This can be thought of as setting up a team of “middle managers,” with Jethro as the first “management consultant.” See Cahill (1998).

²²There is a literature about Adam Smith in which a question is debated about whether he changed his mind between writing *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*. The most convincing scholarship suggests that Smith did not forget or recant his moral thinking upon writing *The Wealth of Nations*. Instead, he assumed that the moral foundations described in *Moral Sentiments* were essential to successful growth and justice in market-oriented economies, which he described in *Wealth*. Although he was a deist, Smith’s writing on the development of morals in Western society is explicitly based on Christian teaching about virtue and God’s ultimate reward for a virtuous life. Like the modern writer Michael Novak, Smith calls for the practice of all virtues — including prudence (which is susceptible to economic description) and benevolence (of which God is the only pure example.)

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