

Dialogue II

The Complexities of Vocation and Business: A Rejoinder To “Middle Management as a Calling”

Brian Porter
Hope College

Introduction

“Management as a Calling” applies the concept of vocation (i.e., work as a calling) to middle management. It is a pertinent topic for management professors since a large percentage of students of this field are destined to be middle managers. The paper’s summary of relevant books on the topic is helpful and provides insight. The suggestion that a greater emphasis should be placed on lower echelons of management, rather than CEOs and senior executives, is practical advice. The authors’ criticism of Warren Bennis’ distinction between leaders and managers as conflicting with the biblical attribute of humility is appropriate.

Though “Management as a Calling” is a valuable and well-written paper, one could argue that it exaggerates the importance, perception, and recognition of middle managers.

The paper also tends to simplify a complex topic. The premise that all work is a calling, including middle management, has many ramifications.

Unrecognized Middle Management

Klay, Lunn, and TenHaken (2004) portray middle managers as undervalued (“a boring, thankless, unrecognized calling. . . contributions of managers not only are ignored, but also often maligned,” pp. 126-127), godly heroines making the world a better place (“God works in partnership with them to contribute to society,” p. 128). The authors also suggest that, because middle managers are not appreciated, they have been disproportionately affected by corporate restructuring. Two contrasting positions can be offered regarding these observations. First, just because a middle manager may be integral to an organization participating in

the market system, this in itself does not make the position commendable nor is it indicative of godliness. What is good for business, the economy, and consumers (e.g., lower prices) may have very negative and unbiblical ramifications (e.g., degradation of the environment). Second, although layoffs are often improper and highly unethical, a case could be made that economic reasons, not lack of appreciation, have driven much of the downsizing of middle management. A more skilled and empowered workforce does not require as many managers. A wider span of management (i.e., fewer middle managers and levels of management) reduces costs, speeds up decision-making, increases flexibility, and gets the organization closer to its customer.

The authors also claim that business education focuses almost *exclusively on CEOs and executive teams*. If true, this is unfortunate and blatantly opposes basic biblical precepts of idolizing and favoring those of high status, power, and wealth (Matthew 19:30, James 2:1-4). All professors of management, particularly those at Christian institutions, would serve their

students by not lionizing CEOs and senior executives. Yet, most business courses may not be as one-sided as Klay et al. contend. For example, introductory management classes typically cover topics relevant to a variety of managers, including middle management, such as ethics, workforce diversity, quality management, organizational culture, social responsibility, planning, scheduling, organizational communication, managing change, groups and teams, motivating employees, leadership, operations and value chain management, and budgeting. The Robbins and Coulter management textbook, specifically referenced by Klay et al., is replete with advice and quotes from middle and lower managers (e.g., laboratory supervisor, pharmaceutical sales representative, project director, area service director, corporate trainer, data resource coordinator, etc.).

Work and Calling

The authors' theological discussion of work and calling is well done and is an informative primer. Klay et al. embrace the Reformed (Luther) theology that if a work is lawful and moral it is from God. However, the authors

do not discuss what constitutes a moral work. “Management as a Calling” gives the impression that the majority of stations, including middle management, are moral. Klay et al. implicitly support this position by asserting that the market system itself is inherently moral, by linking Adam Smith, capitalism, holiness, and godly values. Such a premise is disconcerting. A strong argument could be made that many stations, including those in middle management, are not moral (all have been touched by sin) and that unbridled capitalism often has highly immoral implications.

Joseph Stiglitz, former World Bank economist and the 2001 Nobel Prize recipient for economics, believes that the hand of capitalism is not only invisible but nonexistent. Stiglitz contends that markets are not self-regulating and that they further the gap between rich and poor (Joignot, 2004, p. 43). Four decades ago, Albert Carr (1968) recognized that even the most religious individual is unable to maintain complete honesty and ethical behavior while participating in business. Even if an organization is comprised of individuals with good intentions, the organization itself will be deeply involved in at least subtle

strategies of deception. Arthur Jones, in his book *Capitalism and Christians* (1992), is also critical of modern-day business and what capitalism has evolved into. He contends that as an organization participates in capitalism and becomes fascinated by its own needs — survival, efficiency, maximized profits — the organization pays less attention to the “humanity” of its business. If these assessments of business and the free market system are even partially accurate, one must critically evaluate the morality of stations. Though Klay et al. disagree, Hardy may be correct in suggesting that a garbage collector is more valuable to society than *certain* advertising executives. “Management as a Calling” implies that Hardy condemns all advertising executives, but this is not accurate. Hardy limited his criticism to advertising executives that intentionally deceive consumers into believing an ordinary product (e.g., dish detergent) is indispensable to gracious living (Hardy, 1990, p. 90).

The authors of “Management as a Calling” are more comfortable with Calvin’s perspective of *gifts* than Luther’s perspective of *stations*. Although the Calvin

position is more appealing — proposing that each person has unique gifts and is able to use them in an appropriate vocation — it may not reflect reality. Freedom to choose or change one's station may not be as feasible as Klay et al. suppose. Socio-economic conditions, not one's gifts, may be a greater determinate of one's vocation. Research by sociologists Parcel and Menaghan (1994) indicates that occupational and economic conditions that parents face have significant implications for their children's lives. Imagine, for example, two newborn babies with similar gifts born to families of dissimilar stations. The first baby will be raised in a nurturing and loving family by parents with graduate degrees from prestigious universities — the father a judge and the mother a doctor. The second baby is born to a poor inner-city teenager and will grow up under extremely difficult conditions. Though these two children are born with similar gifts, these two children are probably destined for very different stations and vocations. Certainly there are many doctors, judges, dentists, waitresses, gas station attendants, and middle managers that practice their profession not because of gifts

but because of the socio-economic factors in which they were born.

Klay et al.'s article is not the first to address the topic of vocation in the *The Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*. The Fall 1998 issue contains an insightful dialogue between Mark Ward and Robert Huie. Ward's close association of work with God's will, a position very similar to Klay et al., was of grave concern to Huie.

Ward's interpretation may be good news for those who have well-paying, fulfilling jobs with opportunities for advancement — they need only to continue pursuing their careers and glorifying God. But for those of the lower classes who are locked into low-paying, degrading work, the "biblically-based work ethic" might amount to a message of "stop complaining, get back to work, and praise God" (p. 29).

Huie is insightful in recognizing that work and calling is an extremely biased teaching. Though we would like to think otherwise, our society has created a hierarchy among occupations largely based on salary and prestige. To a large measure, one's occupation is how one

assesses oneself and others. Upon meeting someone for the first time, one of the first questions is “What do you do for a living?” Immediately thereafter, judgments and comparisons occur. For one whose work is enjoyable and is at the high end of this hierarchy, vocation theology is a godly affirmation of one’s lucrative salary, social status, and superiority. For one that is lower on the occupational hierarchy, the idea of work and calling may be less palatable. The same is true for those whose work is unfulfilling or even detrimental to health and/or psyche. For example, studies show that certain factory employment can extinguish one’s ambition, initiative, and purposeful directions towards life goals (Gini & Sullivan, 1987). Many are in a situation where work is dissatisfying and frustrating, yet there is little or no alternative to change stations. Understandably, for some, work is nothing more than a means to a paycheck, and these people should not be considered ungodly.

Possibly the most infamous criticism that pertains to vocation theology was expressed in 1844 by Karl Marx. “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the

heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soul-less conditions. It is the opium of the people.” In short, the *mélange* of work and religion can lead to an exploitation of workers. After all, if one’s vocation is one’s service to God, no other just compensation is needed. One could contend that the warnings of both Huie and Marx are in some ways validated in the United States, the First World country that most associates Christianity with work. Research indicates that 50% of men and 46% of women want to work less (Parcel & Cornfield, 1999, p. 83). According to Harvard economist Juliet Schor (1991), American workers are overworked, putting in more hours per year than their *secular* European counterparts and enjoying less vacation time. Relative to other developed countries, the United States is extremely polarized, where the top 1% of Americans control about 40% of all wealth and the bottom two-thirds have relatively no savings (Henwood, 2003, p. 24). According to the Luxembourg Income Study, among First World countries the United States has the smallest percentage of middle class, the largest percentage of poor, and

the largest percentage of wealthy (Henwood, 2003, p. 133).

Concluding Thoughts

Because we see through a glass darkly (1 Corinthians 13:12), we must approach theological applications with humility. Though it may be true that middle management can be one's vocation, the issue is complex. To know one's gifts and to find an appropriate vocation is not a simple task. Regrettably, one's social and economic factors, rather than gifts, may be a better determinate of one's work. There are many other complicated issues tied to work and calling, yet only a few that could be discussed in this brief rejoinder. I fully support Klay et al.'s recommendation that when educating students the emphasis should be on all levels of management, not just CEOs and senior executives. Fortunately, I believe this is already being accomplished. I do not agree with Klay et al. that there is a pressing need to present management as an exciting calling for students. In my experience, business students are anxious to participate in business and they see little conflict between being a manager and serving God. Rather, students need to better understand that,

although it has many virtues, business and capitalism often foster greed and deception. This is not to discourage business students, but rather to exhort them to act justly, walk humbly, and to seek their vocation with discernment, fear, and trembling (Micah 6:8, Philippians 2:12).

Brian Porter

Associate Professor
Department of Economics,
Management, and Accounting
Hope College
Holland, MI 49422-9000
616-395-7572
porter@hope.edu

REFERENCES

- Carr, A. (1968, Jan./Feb.). Is business bluffing ethical? *Harvard Business Review*, 143-153.
- Gini, A.R., & Sullivan, T. (1987). Work: The process and the person. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 649-655.
- Hardy, L. (1990). *The fabric of this world*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans.
- Henwood, D. (2003). *After the new economy*. New York: The New Press.
- Huie, R. (1998, Fall). Image-bearing apprentices of a working God? A response to Mark D. Ward's "Toward a biblical understanding of the work ethic." *The Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*, 26-29.
- Joignot, F. (2004, Feb. 22-23) Un Nobel se révolte. *Le Monde*, 2, 40-43.
- Jones, A. (1992). *Capitalism and Christians: Tough gospel challenges in a tough world economy*. New York: Paulist Press.

Klay, R., Lunn, J., & TenHaken, V. (2004). Middle management as a calling. *The Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*, 118-137.

Marx, K. (1844). *Selections from contribution to the critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*.

Parcel, T.L., & Cornfield, D. (1999). *Work and family: Research informing policy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Parcel, T.L., & Menaghan, E.G. (1994). *Parents' jobs and children's lives*. New York, Aldine De Gruyter.

Robbins, S.P., & Coulter, M. (2002). *Management* (8th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice Hall.

Schor, J. (1991). *The overworked American: The unexpected decline of leisure*. HarperCollins.

