

Dialogue II

Total Depravity, Middle Managers, and Conscience: A Response to Klay et al., Porter, and Smith

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Introduction

There are at least three articles worth reading in this issue of *The JBIB*: “Middle Management as a Calling” by Robin Klay, John Lunn, and Vicki TenHaken; “The Complexities of Vocation and Business: A Rejoinder To ‘Middle Management as a Calling’” by Brian Porter; and “Simplicity for Simplicity and Complexity for Complexity: A Response to ‘Middle Management as a Calling’” by Virgil Smith.

In “Middle Management as a Calling,” Klay et al. examine the somewhat invisible role of middle management, arguing that middle managers make a significant contribution not only to the business sector but also to society at large. They argue that middle managers, to paraphrase Luther, are extensions of God’s providential hand. In “The Complexities of Vocation and Business,” Porter reminds us that, in essence, being extensions of

God’s providential hand is not synonymous with godliness. In fact, Porter states, “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” (p. 140). In “Simplicity for Simplicity and Complexity for Complexity,” Smith takes a practical perspective and argues that seeking one’s calling in middle management could be a very difficult endeavor in today’s market economy, given the complexity of specialization and the complexity due to the production of “non-essential” products (because the production of non-essential items makes it difficult for the Christian in middle management to know whether the product produced is intentionally or unintentionally helpful or harmful). Smith then suggests a strategy to help us

“fine-tune” God’s call to vocation: we should use our conscience, that “little voice inside us that provides a stab of guilt if we start to do something that is sinful, or provides a voice of assurance when we are doing that which God asks of us” (p. 154).

Upon reading these articles in succession (and reading them in succession gives one a feeling of contrast), I felt a little like someone lost in a large city trying to find Good. First I meet a friendly group of people who tell me I can find her by walking to the right. Then, after beginning to walk to the right, I meet another friendly person who advises me to “watch my step.” Still lost, I meet a third friendly person who advises me to follow my conscience. The fact of the matter is that everyone’s advice is correct. I can find Good by walking toward the right and by following my conscience. But I must watch my step, because Evil is lurking everywhere. The point is that we must refrain from the tendency to categorize people, places, and things as either good or evil. Rather, we must continue to discuss and debate what is good and what is evil in all phenomena, as these articles do, so that we can accentuate the

good and minimize and counteract the evil. My argument rests on the doctrine of Total Depravity.

The Doctrine of Total Depravity

The Doctrine of Total Depravity was articulated in the years 1618-1619, approximately 136 years after the birth of Martin Luther and 110 years after the birth of John Calvin, during “The Decision of the Synod of Dort on the Five Main Points of Doctrine in Dispute in the Netherlands.” (To some, the Doctrine of Total Depravity may be better known as one of the “Five Points of Calvinism.”) For my purpose here, I am most interested in “Article 1: The Effect of the Fall on Human Nature,” “Article 2: The Spread of Corruption,” “Article 3: Total Inability,” “Article 4: The Inadequacy of the Light of Nature,” and “Article 16: Regeneration’s Effect” under the heading “The Third and Fourth Main Points of Doctrine.” To aid the discussion, I will quote these articles and comment on them below.

Article 1 says:

Man was originally created in the image of God and was

furnished in his mind with a true and salutary knowledge of his Creator and things spiritual, in his will and heart with righteousness, and in all his emotions with purity; *indeed, the whole man was holy. However, rebelling against God at the devil's instigation and by his own free will, he deprived himself of these outstanding gifts.* Rather, in their place he brought upon himself blindness, terrible darkness, futility, *and distortion of judgment in his mind;* perversity, defiance, and hardness in his heart and will; and finally impurity in all his emotions (emphasis mine).

Article 2 says:

Man brought forth children of the same nature as himself after the fall. That is to say, being corrupt he brought forth corrupt children. *The corruption spread, by God's just judgment, from Adam to all his descendents — except Christ alone — not by way of imitation ... but by way of propagation of his perverted nature* (emphasis mine).

Article 3 says:

Therefore, all people are conceived in sin and are born

children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin; without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their distorted nature, or even to dispose themselves to such reform (emphasis mine).

Article 4 says:

There is, to be sure, a certain light of nature remaining in man after the fall, by virtue of which he retains some notions about God, natural things, and the difference between what is moral and immoral, and demonstrates a certain eagerness of virtue and for good outward behavior. But this light of nature is far from enabling man to come to a saving knowledge of God and conversion to Him — so far, in fact, that man does not use it rightly even in matters of nature and society. Instead, in various ways he completely distorts this light, whatever its precise character, and suppresses it in unrighteousness. In so doing, he renders himself without excuse before God (emphasis mine).

Article 16 says:

However, just as by the fall man did not cease to be man, endowed with intellect and will, and just as sin, which has spread through the whole human race, did not abolish the nature of the human race but distorted and spiritually killed it, *so also this divine grace of regeneration does not act in people as if they were blocks and stones*; nor does it abolish the will and its properties or coerce a reluctant will by force, but spiritually revives, heals, reforms, and — in a manner at once pleasing and powerful — bends it back. As a result, a ready and sincere obedience *begins* to prevail where once the rebellion and resistance of the flesh were completely dominant. It is in this that the true and spiritual restoration and freedom of our will consists. Thus, if the marvelous Maker of every good thing were not dealing with us, man would have no hope of getting up from his fall by his free choice, by which he plunged himself into ruin when still standing upright (emphasis mine).

To paraphrase and apply to the present discussion, in the beginning God created humans in his image, and they were very

good. But at the “devil’s instigation” and of their own free will, humans sinned against God. This sin corrupted their human nature; in fact, it corrupted the nature of all humans to come. In particular, this sin distorted even the judgment of human beings. In fact, this sin corrupted not everyone but everything that was touched by humanity. Therefore, one can rightly argue that the station of middle management and the economic system of capitalism are corrupted by sin, that ephemeral (and even essential) products are corrupted by sin, and even that our consciences are impacted such that they can mislead us. At the same time, however, there is “a certain light of nature remaining in [humans] after the fall.” In addition, among those regenerated by God’s divine grace, reformation has begun. It is possible, in other words, that there is good in the station of middle management, in middle managers themselves, in the economic system of capitalism, in products essential (and ephemeral), and in that “little voice inside us.”

Conclusion

The Doctrine of Total Depravity tells us that people,

places, and things are evil and good; what is evil and what is good about them is debatable. The articles by Klay et al., Porter, and Smith continue the important debate over what is evil and what is good about middle management. In particular, they rightly argue that middle managers are important extensions of God's providential hand and that middle management is a calling (Klay et al.). But they also rightly argue that the station of middle management and the economic system of capitalism is corrupt because of the immense disparity of wealth they create, among other issues (Porter). They even discuss what types of products are corrupt (Smith).

As teachers in Christian colleges, we must find the good in all things and accentuate it; at the same time, we must point out the evil. It is our responsibility to encourage good and discourage evil so that our students not only have a map when they enter the "City of Man," but also that they are wired for discernment. Rather than tripping and falling or getting lost, we would rather our students further God's Kingdom as members of the "City of God." These articles, taken together, can help us do that. We must keep the debate going.

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