Gene Ahner

Where in the World? Business as a Vocation

The task entrusted to a group of five seminaries/schools of theology and ministry by a grant from the Lilly Foundation is to engage seminary education in the process of preparing ministers who can nurture Christians for their “callings in the world.” Equipping the ministers has been our focus. We have examined better training methods, personal integration, greater emphasis on the pastoral and personal applications of the theological disciplines, and a broader sense of vocation. Perhaps, as a consequence, less focus has been given to the second word of that phrase, “callings in the world,” the “world” in which Christians find themselves. That world, for better and/or worse, is dominated by market economics. For the planet earth, it has resulted in a totally new reality in the history of the human race, a phenomenon we generally refer to as globalization. As a result of market driven technology, there is no nation and no person who remains unaffected by the actions of others. The characters “www” do not just signal access to the internet but a genuine worldwide web that embraces us all. For the individual, a market-driven economy calls for careers in business and other professions that have become front and center. One’s work or profession is no longer just a way of making a living. Rather, it is something that takes up most of one’s time, energy, and talent. In addition it has become the instrument for developing personal gifts, leadership skills, and morals that have become a source of great personal achievement. This is becoming as true for women as it is for men. Yet, it is probably the most neglected and most misunderstood part of seminary training. How to get from Sunday to Monday needs more than a general exhortation to put faith into practice or to leave one with a theological abstraction about the Kingdom of God at work in the world. How do we, as ministers, meet the Christian at work with something more than the moralisms of “don’t lie, cheat, or steal” and “give generously”? Have we ever met the Christian business person at his or her place of work? How about lunch?

Role of Faith in Business Life

In order to explore some of these assumptions, Robert Wheeler, head of the Catholic
Theological Union (CTU) contingent for this study, and I had in-depth interviews with people who are practicing Catholics and business professionals. This included several entrepreneurs who developed businesses that eventually grew to over 100 employees, a partner in a law firm, and a dentist who developed a large practice. Our questions centered on four topics:

(1) How have you become successful, and what does it mean to you?
(2) What has been the role of faith in your business life?
(3) What is the role of church and ministry in your business life?
(4) What suggestions would you have for training future ministers?

Some of the more interesting conclusions we drew were:

• All felt that in their business/professional lives they are doing something good for society.
• Integrity and personal relationships are keys to long-term success.
• Personal prayer and reflection on scripture are important.
• None had heard a sermon or any other word that directly related to their work.
• They have never gone to a priest to help them resolve difficult moral dilemmas in their work.
• “Vocation” referred to priests and nuns. After Vatican II, the word sometimes referred to church work that was done by laypeople, for example, religious education or help with the liturgy. But vocation did not apply to their business/professional life.
• Priests would talk to church ministers about their work, but they would talk to business professionals mostly on a social level.
• Vocation was not something that referred to what they did, although they did think they were doing good for society.
• Seminary training should include a good basic understanding of how a market economy works as well as some longer immersion in the actual life of a business person as is done for a practicum in social issues or hospital ministry.

We hope that this exploratory study will help us create a more general questionnaire that will go to a larger group of business professionals.

Shortly thereafter, at the 2011 gathering of the five seminary grant recipients, I gave a short questionnaire to all the participants. If we are preparing plans for future ministers to support the Christians’ calling in the world, then we need to reflect on our own attitudes about business and a market economy. Indeed, our own attitudes would also deeply affect our students in what became identified as “cultivated instincts.”

The questions probed some of the negative assumptions about business in general. Respondents were asked for their assessment of the statements from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” This was not designed as a scientific study but rather as a step to illustrate how even a very informed cohort of theologians viewed business. The questionnaire included ten statements, of which only a few are highlighted here.

• 75 percent agree or strongly agree with the statement that “A market economy, especially capitalism, is driven primarily by greed.”
• 75 percent agree that “Business is primarily concerned with maximizing profits with no real concern for social justice.”
• 90 percent agree or strongly agree that “Multinational corporations become rich by exploiting the poverty of other nations.”
• In a forced ranking of four public institutions for moral sensibility and ethical performance, business barely beat out government for the third place. Church was first and academia was second.

Most striking between our earlier interviews of business/professional people and the results of the questionnaire is the huge disconnect between the attitude of business people about what they are doing and the general assumptions of those who are training the next generation of ministers “to equip the laity for their calling in the world.” The results are not surprising. David Miller, author of God at Work: The History of the Faith at Work Movement, has clearly pointed to the same findings in studies of ministers and academics. Economic conditions are perceived generally through a Marxist or Socialist lens, and the study of social justice is pursued with scant attention to any underlying economic analysis (Miller, 79–103).

The real question, then, becomes “How do ministers help the business person find a larger framework of meaning and Christian identity in their work, if the ministers themselves look at business and market economy not only with deep suspicion but with strong negative attitudes about what the business person is doing?” Until there is some appreciation of the “doing good” that business people think they are about, then there will be little common ground on which both can stand to move forward. And without some common vision of how faith and work interact, both sides become impoverished. Business becomes “just business” and remains compartmentalized from the larger world of Christian beliefs and values, while Christian faith remains a Sunday practice isolated from an area of life that consumes so much of each person’s time, talent, and energy.

The Larger Context of Christian Vocation

I believe that a way forward lies with an enlarged understanding of vocation. That understanding, however, depends on a positive and not just a neutral or negative appreciation of what business and a market economy are about. It must do more than put a moral gloss on grubby business. Once a person’s work can be embraced within a larger context of Christian vocation or calling, then several things become possible.

• Work is seen in a larger and enriching context of the meanings and values of the Kingdom of God and God’s work in the world.

• The relation of faith and work has a common basis.

• Each calling carries responsibility and accountability for its actions.

• A larger sense of the variety and richness of vocations becomes apparent.

• The meaning of vocation is open to further reflection and understanding.

Recently, an executive vice president at a major U.S. corporation explained at a convention how she came to a realization of her work as a vocation and how it changed the way she looked at her highly successful career. She summed up her realization in three phrases:

• Can do—the talent and ability to do the job

• Want to do—the desire and passion to do well

• Led to—deeper discernment of purpose that ties into a larger picture of self and the world.

Her personal realizations about her vocation resonate well with what Michael Novak describes as the characteristics of a vocation
or “calling” as he prefers to name it (Novak, 17-40). They are as follows:

- Each calling is unique to each individual. If each individual is unique from DNA through layers of race, culture, and history, then a calling is also unique, never to be repeated in exactly the same way in history.

- A calling has preconditions. We do not simply make a neutral choice for whatever we fancy. We need to recognize and develop our talents, gifts, and charisms. (Can Do)

- A calling becomes manifest in the enjoyment and renewed energy that it brings. While the work may be difficult and stressful, it also is a source of energy. (Want to)

- A calling is often difficult to discover. It may well involve false starts, illusions of grandeur and failures. Discernment is required.

- The cultivation of character, virtue and moral sensitivity occurs at work at least as much as in the family, community, and church.

- A calling brings wholeness and purpose. (Led to)

Theology has done a reasonable job at incorporating the best findings of psychology and culture into theological reflection. The world of business and the dynamics of a market economy still remain largely unexplored territory. There are so many different areas that need much more study, including a broad range of other types of workers. Here, I have highlighted one area—business professionals—that would be helped by a broader understanding of vocation. There is much that can and must be done in schools of theology and ministry to meet the challenge of preparing for ministering to the Christian called to serve in the world (Hahnenberg, 3–46).

References

