

## Editorial

*The Theological Vocation  
and the Economy of Social Life*

The theme of the 2014 Theology of Work and Economics Consultation at the Evangelical Theological Society, which I serve as chair, was “The Economics of the Theological Vocation.” As we have done in previous years, we are happy to include the proceedings of this session in this issue of the journal.

In his book, *Engaging God’s World*, Neal Plantinga, president emeritus of Calvin Theological Seminary, wrote, “It is no more Christian to be a muck farmer than a minister.”<sup>1</sup> Here Plantinga is trying to get at a vestige of the Reformation teaching about the priesthood of all believers, that there is a certain equality of dignity or duty that attends to all Christian callings. While there is a deep truth communicated in this sentiment, there is also a sense in which there remains—even if only in worldly terms—a hierarchy of sorts, whether we call it a hierarchy of authority or responsibility or perhaps even utility. If we consider the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25, for instance, we can see that there is an equality in terms of the duty that is given to each of the recipients of the talents, but there is an inequality in terms of the amount.

The Reformer Martin Bucer (1491–1551) wrote, “Children should be encouraged to enter the best profession, and the best profession is the one which brings most profit to neighbors.”<sup>2</sup> Bucer went on to provide a ranking of what he judged to be the most beneficial professions. At the top are spiritual ministry and secular authority. If children cannot serve in those capacities, then parents should encourage them to engage in agriculture or cattle-raising or other related occupations.

This is an interesting list. We can see here there is a connection of some kind between farming—agricultural activities—and ecclesiastical ministry; some

ranking or some relationship between material and spiritual needs. We can think of the seminary, taken from the Latin *seminarium*, as a seedbed. Likewise, there is an image of the minister as the pastor, a shepherd. Thus there is an analogy and a relationship between the material and the spiritual needs that we need to think about more deeply.

The professor and pastor, Nicholas Steffens (1839–1912), at the end of the nineteenth century in his inaugural speech at a Presbyterian seminary in Iowa, said, “The churches are full of practical work in our day, and we rejoice in it. But they ought not to forget the necessity of developing theology in order that they may have a good theory whereon to build. If I may use the expression they, especially their leaders, ought to work as professionals, not amateurs.”<sup>33</sup> There are many factors to consider when we think about the call to theological learning as a professional endeavor.

Frederick Buechner is famous for articulating both the subjective and the objective dynamics of vocation, which he described as “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”<sup>34</sup> Thus we have to consider not only things such as our dispositions, our talents, our gifts, our interests, and our resources, many of which we have inherited from others, but also what our neighbors communicate to us about their needs. Sometimes they do this overtly in the form of prices or revealed preferences and, at other times, implicitly. Sometimes we can conceive of what the spiritual and material needs of our neighbors are even when they might not realize them.

In addition to those two considerations, our gifts and others’ needs, we do well to think about what God’s will for our lives is, what he is doing in the world, and what we observe there. In this way, we have these three basic dynamics when we consider what the call of our individual lives consists in: our gifts, others’ needs, and God’s will.

All of that leads to questions addressed in the Theology of Work and Economics Consultation session on the economics of the theological vocation. They include questions such as: What role should economics play in deciding which profession profits our neighbor most? Is there a place for academic or professional study of theology in this world? If so, where is that place? Is it in the marketplace? The church? The academy? To build on the organic, agricultural analogy, what kind of soil do we need to cultivate so that the seedbed will be more fruitful and so that those who are called to study theology will both flourish and effectively and faithfully serve others?

These are rich, difficult, and complex questions. Thankfully, we had a panel of experts who brought their diverse experiences and insights to bear. Gregory Thornbury is the president of King’s College in New York City, and his essay, “The

Future of Theological Education,” provided a launching point for the session that focused on economics, education, and theological vocation.<sup>5</sup> Timothy Dalrymple, who might accurately be described as an entrepreneurial theologian, has a PhD from Harvard but is also the founder and CEO of Polymath Innovations as well as lab chief at Patheos Labs.<sup>6</sup> Dalrymple used his expertise and experience for his talk, “Theological Vocation and the Marketplace.” Gerald Hiestand, director of the Center for Pastor Theologians, serves as Senior Associate Pastor of Calvary Memorial Church in Oak Park, Illinois, and is a doctoral student in Classical Studies and Archeology at the University of Kent, Canterbury. Hiestand’s address, “Theological Vocation and the Church,” was a dynamic view of the relationship between pastoral ministry and learned theology.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Marc Cortez, associate professor of theology at Wheaton College, provided a bracing overview of the state of academia in his essay, “Theological Vocation and the Academy.”<sup>8</sup>

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the Dutch pastor, theologian, and statesman Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) argued for the foundation of an independent university to pursue, from a thoroughly confessional Christian perspective, the entire curriculum of human learning. In one of his convocation speeches, Kuyper made clear that “there are three wonderful things about science: it brings to light the hidden glory of God; it gives you joy in the act of digging up the gold that lies hidden in creation; and it grants you the honor of raising the level and well-being of human life.”<sup>9</sup> In this, Kuyper attempted to clearly delineate the uniqueness of the calling to pursue scholarship even as he sought to avoid the danger of unduly separating theory from praxis, the academy from the rest of the world, and theology from piety. A solid understanding of the economics of the theological vocation should thus be situated in the broader framework of the interrelationship and interdependence of the various spheres, the broader economy, so to speak, of social life.

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## Notes

1. Cornelius Plantinga, *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 37.
2. Martin Bucer, *Instruction in Christian Love: 1523 by Martin Bucer the Reformer*, trans. Paul T. Fuhrmann (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1952). See also the discussion in David H. Hopper, *Divine Transcendence and the Culture of Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 124–37. For a popular exposition of the Reformed doctrine of vocation, including the thought of Martin Bucer, see Jordan J. Ballor, “Doing Much Good in the World,” *Christian History*, no. 110 (2014): 26–30. For a contemporary Reformed introduction, see John Bolt, *Economic Shalom: A Reformed Primer on Faith, Work, and Human Flourishing* (Grand Rapids: Christian’s Library Press, 2013).
3. Nicholas M. Steffens, *Christianity as a Remedial Scheme* (Dubuque: J. J. Reed, 1896), 32.
4. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 95.
5. Previously published as “The Future of Theological Education,” *Renewing Minds*, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 17–22. Thornbury also participated in a panel discussion at the ETS session.
6. See also a profile of Dalrymple by Marvin Olasky, “Rising *from* a Fall,” *WORLD*, March 12, 2011.
7. See also Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian: Resurrecting an Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).
8. Particularly on the question of calling and graduate education in the humanities, see the controversy exchange between William Pannapacker and Marc Baer, “Should Students Be Encouraged to Pursue Graduate Education in the Humanities,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 445–72.
9. Abraham Kuyper, *Scholarship: Two Convocation Addresses on University Life*, trans. Harry Van Dyke (Grand Rapids: Christian’s Library Press, 2014), 9.