

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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THE CALLING

by Gary North

"The Protestant ethic." We hear that phrase all the time. Usually, people speak of the Protestant ethic as something that belonged to the American (or British, or Dutch) people generations ago, but which is dead today. In fact, the only place it still seems to flourish is in Japan, except that the Japanese are not Protestants. But whatever it is, or was, most people are convinced that it is a thing of the past, another feature of Christian civilization that is gone forever.

We have to say in all honesty that the remnants of the older Protestant ethic are threadbare in our day. Humanism was progressive from the period of the 1860's through the 1960's, but then the stolen capital of Protestant culture began to run out. The drug culture, the counter culture of the hippies, the collapse of public school performance results, the apathy of workers, and the increasing hostility between generations all combined to shake people's faith in humanist culture, yet they have not returned to the faith of their great-grandparents, orthodox Christianity. Labor output has fallen. Productivity is at an all-time low in American and British history. What can we do to reverse these trends?

The obvious thing to do is to preach a full-orbed gospel of redemption: personal redemption, economic redemption, and cultural redemption. The law of God applies to all spheres of life. The blessings described in Deuteronomy 28:1-14 are still available to a society which repents. The work ethic is a product of Christian faith; where faith is restored, that ethic will reappear.

The problem we face today is this: even those who express their faith in Jesus Christ have no understanding of the calling. The calling was a basic component of Protestantism, and especially Calvinism, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. People knew what the word meant. They no longer understand.

Calling: General and Special

The Bible teaches us that there is a special calling of God to His people. He calls them to faith in Jesus Christ. This involves a turning away from the evil life style of the past. God calls men to a new way of life. He restores them to full ethical sonship (John 1:12). This is the doctrine of **adoption**. "Call upon the name of the Lord," is a familiar biblical phrase. Christ said, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw [literally: drag] him: and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:44). God calls His people to faith in Christ. This is sometimes called the "effectual call," and it is also referred to as the "special call." It is a call to salvation.

The general calling refers to men in general. Each man is called to subdue the earth to the glory of God (Genesis 1:28). This is a call to labor under the general sovereignty and providence of God. It is man's assignment to exercise dominion. The general calling is a man's **vocation** ("vocal," or "voice"). A man's vocation is his life's work, a form of service to God,

whether he recognizes that he is under God or not.

The general calling took on great significance during the Protestant Reformation. Luther and Calvin stressed that all godly, honest labor is acceptable to God, and that there should be no distinction of an ethical nature between the minister and the farmer. There are functional distinctions, of course, which is why the Bible establishes certain personal requirements for men to serve as church leaders (I Timothy 3), but there is no ethical distinction. No man is more holy in the sight of God because of the kind of job he has.

This doctrine freed men from the psychological suppressant of feeling inferior because of their work. If any man's labor is acceptable to God, then it pays a man to work as well as he can. God honors competence, and grants more competence, to those who humble themselves before Him and who try to improve their performance. A good plumber gains more respect from his work than a lazy preacher. The question relates to **diligence**, not the kind of work performed.

This is clearly a liberating doctrine. It calls all men to labor hard and honestly. It teaches men that no matter what they do for a living, it is worth doing well. This, in turn, increases economic output, for men strive to work more intelligently and less wastefully. They strive to give a good account of themselves before God, and in doing so, they give a good account of themselves before men. This means greater wealth for all members of the market, for everyone is a beneficiary of efficient labor—everyone except those who are inefficient, lazy, or incompetent, who face greater competition than before. They deserve what they get.

The general calling is universal. All men will be held accountable for their work, and they will be rewarded in heaven, or cursed in hell, in terms of their general callings (Luke 12:47-48; I Corinthians 3). This kind of moral obligation to work hard and honestly pressures men to improve their performance. It is a form of **self-government**, and society does not have to impose direct sanctions on men in order to reap the rewards of self-government. The widespread conversion of men to a form of Christianity that preaches the binding nature of the general calling will produce increased wealth per capita in that society. People work harder, and people work smarter.

Which Calling?

I have been economically successful so far in my life. Because of my outward, visible success, I am often asked by men, especially younger men, what I think are the rules of financial success in life. The Christians who ask me this question sometimes ask me what I think they ought to do for a living.

I have a stock answer. It relates to the biblical doctrine of the calling. It is not a complicated answer, and most Christians see the truth of my advice. The astounding thing in my mind is that they never have heard anything like it before. No pastor has counselled them. No parent has sat down with them to talk to

them about these basic rules of thumb for a Christian's occupation. Here they are:

- 1) Evaluate your capacities accurately
- 2) What is the most important job you can perform?
- 3) What is the most important job you can perform in which few men can replace you?

A man who has even a vague idea of the answers to these three surveys has a good grasp of what he ought to do with his life. It is not easy to conduct such a survey, but it is vital. God calls each man to make this survey.

Capacities: The more you have, the harder the decision. The man with limited capacities except for one skill has a much easier time of it. He knows what he ought to be doing. But someone who has multiple talents—and this includes most men—has some hard evaluating to do. "What kinds of work appeal to me? What are the ones I do best? What are the ones I would be willing to do for the remainder of my life? What are the ones that I could not stand to do for very long. What skills should I seek to improve, if I am given the opportunity?"

You must be rigorously honest here. You should probably consult others: teachers, parents, pastor, employer, and even a professional testing service, if necessary. You must come to grips with yourself. You must also come to grips with other people's evaluations of you. You will be serving a market, after all. Get used to the idea of having to take seriously other people's opinions of your talents.

Job importance: If a man can do several things well, he will then have to face the problem of meshing his skills with an occupation. If he can speak five foreign languages fluently, what should he do with his talent? Teach school? At what level? Translate for a multinational corporation? Translate for a Federal bureaucracy? Do book translations for a publishing company? Join a Wycliffe Bible translating team? There are several possibilities. Salary levels are only one way to make the decision. There are others.

I tell people to use this rule of thumb in making a decision. Try to peer ahead 40 years, or whenever you think you will be too old to work at this job. When you look back at your life, what will you think of your work? Was it God-honoring? Did you leave a large inheritance behind for your children? Did your children grow up with the moral training to handle their inheritance in a godly way? Did you give a lot of money away to charity? Did you give your life away in service rather than money? Was it a good decision when you accepted this calling as your life's work? If you even try to answer these questions in advance, you are far more likely not to be disappointed when you ask them again in 40 years.

Replaceability: This is something few men consider in advance. They should never stop considering it. It is not enough to select the most important job you can do. You have to ask yourself this question: "If I were to quit, or die, would the job be rapidly filled by someone just as effective as I am, and at the same wage?" If the job is easy to fill rapidly and at the same wage, then the person who now holds it has not distinguished himself by the level of his performance. If a humanist could do a Christian's job just as well, then there is something wrong with the Christian's work. If his work is good, then there is probably some other job that he could do that God wants to have filled by a Christian.

Today, few Christians operate in terms of the doctrine of the calling. They do not think about how important they are, as Christians, in their calling. They do not understand how they

should provide unique, exclusively Christian services to their employers. In short, they do not think as Christians.

The job a man does may be important in his own eyes, or in the eyes of others, but if by remaining in what appears to be the most important job, when God could use the same skills to a better advantage in another job, then the employee is wasting his talents. Any man who cannot say that he, as a Christian worker, is not uniquely suited to his job, should consider finding new employment. If he is easily replaceable, then he had better look around and see if there is some other important job available to him in which he would be more difficult to replace.

In short, go where there is not much competition. Go where your presence in the field will elevate that field. Go where you, as a Christian, will generate imitators, even among non-believers. Go where you will have an opportunity to train others in their callings. If you are not now in such a position, but you could be, then you are not in the proper calling. Replaceability is one way of testing your place in life. You do not want to be just another cog in a vast, impersonal economic machine.

The 40-Hour Work Week

No Christian should work only 40 hours a week unless he is physically impaired in some way. Few men ever get rich or famous working only 40 hours a week. Few people ever become outstanding in their professions working only 40 hours a week. Six days shalt thou labor—and not 7 hours a day, either. Work 9 or 10.

Now, I think that under normal circumstances, salaried people should work no more than 40 hours for an employer. Since so few men will work 60 hours a week, you are giving your time away (selling it too cheaply) if you work for a salary over 40 hours a week. That extra 10 or 20 hours should be invested in church service, or in the establishment of a family business, or in getting a better education, or in community service. I am not speaking of men who work on commission, or junior men in a professional establishment who may be able to become partners if they work hard enough. But a man who is willing to work 60 hours a week should work at least 20 for himself. Use the salary to feed the family; work the extra 20 to build up a capital base, either for retirement, or for launching a family business. I became financially independent by doing just this. I strongly recommend it.

A salaried job is seldom a full calling. It may be a means to a calling. A man may be a skilled craftsman in a field that does not pay well enough to support him full time. He uses his 40-hour a week job to support him in his calling. That is what I do with my economic newsletter, *Remnant Review*. The income from that venture allows me to donate most of my time and energy to the Institute for Christian Economics, from which I receive no salary or other compensation (except psychological). My calling is my Christian economic work. My source of income is my economic newsletter. I distinguish the two jobs.

Only in those rare jobs, such as pastorate, where a man is salaried, yet called upon to give more than 40 hours a week, should such a calling be considered. Even in this case, the man is really giving those extra 20 hours to God. He is not giving them to some employer who is converting that extra labor time into profits for himself or the corporation. No one with good sense works a 60-hour week for someone else, just for the money. There are better ways to make a buck: more productive, more rewarding, and more profitable. Also, more pleasing to God. Never give away to an employer what you should be giving away to God, especially time.

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