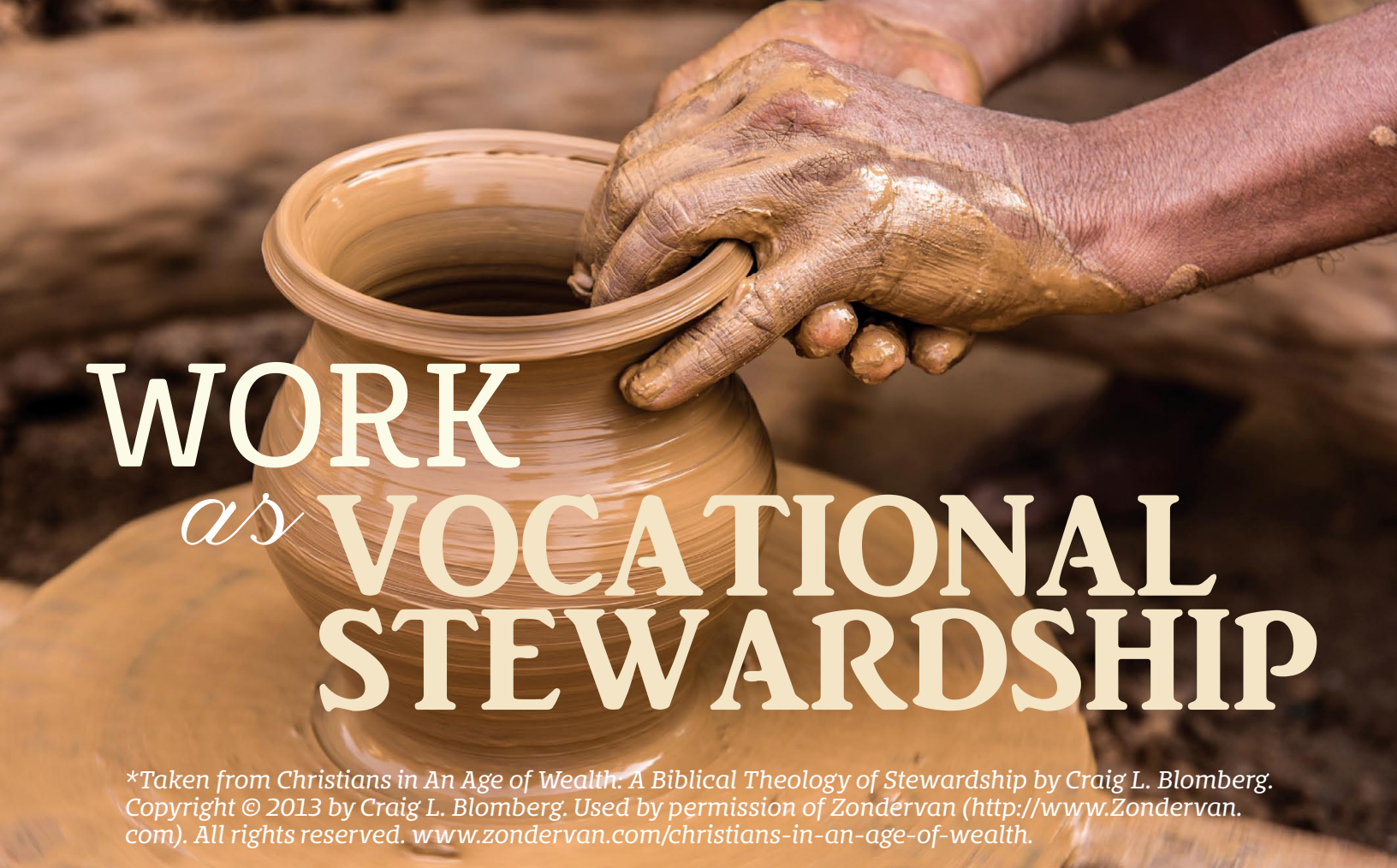




WORK *as* VOCATIONAL STEWARDSHIP

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by Craig L. Blomberg

A Note from the Editors

To many Christians the concept of Stewardship is synonymous with money and tithing. Yet the Scripture is unequivocal about our accountability in the end that covers all that we have done with our resources, money included (2 Corinthians 5:10). Dr. Craig Blomberg, in his excellent treatise on the believer's financial accountability to his calling in an age of wealth, reminds us of another important aspect of stewardship: work. We are therefore excited to reprint excerpts of Chapter 7 of Blomberg's book to help set the tone for the discussions in this Stewardship issue. We greatly appreciate the author and Zondervan for the permission to reprint this material.

As long as we think in terms of stewardship as giving away a fixed percentage of our income, we will always be tempted to imagine that we are free to do whatever we want with the rest of our material resources. But biblical stewardship is whole-life stewardship.¹

We need down-time and fun-time activities that renew and refresh us, if at all possible. Stewardship does not mean

workaholicism, not playing with family or friends, not relaxing for reflection and meditation. But it does mean undertaking everything in life, including our spending, thoughtfully.

We take breaks from work because we need them to refresh ourselves and/or build relationships with God and others, not because we are inherently lazy and happy to sponge off of others. Except in unusual times of prolonged unemployment completely outside of our control, or during periods of injury or infirmity, much of our lives should be occupied with work. Even in retirement or as homemakers, we should be active in meaningful service — to our families, our churches, our communities. What constitutes genuine work is not determined by whether it is remunerated. This leads us to our next topic — the need to view all our work as stewarding the gifts and abilities God has given us.

“But doesn’t stressing the intrinsic value of work play into the hands of the cage? Won’t it make the squirrel wheel spin even faster? No. It will actually slow it down. If work has intrinsic value, one will resist the pressure to produce frantically and instead take time to delight in work.”²

Another entire book would be needed to develop a “biblical theology for life” for the topic of work.³ Far too many Christians throughout history have viewed it more as a necessary evil, to provide for themselves and their families, rather than as inherent, God-given calls on their lives. But if our primary purpose as God’s vice-regents created in his image is to “till the garden” of this planet we call Earth, then we must develop a sense of work as a vocation.⁴ Of course, many people struggle and some may never succeed at landing a job that simultaneously pays their bills and proves personally fulfilling. In these instances, we need to recall Colossians 3:23 – 24: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.”

Using a narrower sense of the word “vocation,” especially when occupations do not allow us much opportunity to exercise our gifts and passions, we must agree with Tom Sine that “the primary vocation for every believer is not what we do to earn a livelihood but how we devote our lives, as Christ did, to seeking to advance the subversive purposes of God’s kingdom.”⁵

A different kind of trap involves viewing professional ministry as somehow superior to “secular” work. A natural offshoot of this false premise is that we ought to be paid for exercising our spiritual gifts, especially those of leadership. Perhaps we will be fortunate enough to find such a situation, but God makes no promises. Ours is an increasingly bi-vocational world, even for church ministers, and all signs suggest it

will only move further in this direction in the near future.⁶ In the Majority World, it has been the norm for some time.

A second debilitating corollary for those in secular employment is to think that they are functioning as Christians in their workplace only if they witness to others of their faith, lead a lunch-time Bible study, or get to know their colleagues bet-

ter during off-hours so they can invite them to church. All of these can be excellent activities, but if God created us for work (within healthy limits), then the car manufacturer must ask how she can help create and produce the best quality, most useful, most environmentally friendly vehicle possible. The nurse must ask himself how he can put his heart and soul into ministering to patients with love and care, with the highest level of integrity in keeping records and making the rounds for anyone on his shift.

All workers should familiarize themselves with their organizations’ goals, policies and practices, and ethics (or lack thereof), doing everything possible to promote God-honoring behavior throughout their company. Often this means little more than holding people accountable to well-established standards for “professional ethics,”⁷ though in today’s scandal-ridden corporate world, “little more” takes on new meaning. If necessary, after all proper channels of dealing with in-house matters have been exhausted, be willing to be a whistle-blower if a company is intransigent in its illegal or immoral behavior. Count the cost along the way, however (Luke 14:25 – 35).

Business as mission is a growing and encouraging trend in numerous parts of the corporate sector.⁸ One need not operate from explicitly Christian presuppositions to recognize the value of not making shareholders’ profit level the true “bottom line” that determines every decision that is made. Not only must quality control offset the temptation to cut every possible corner in production costs, but concern for quality of human lives, including the lives of one’s employees, must also take center stage. We must pay our workers and give out benefits at a little higher standard than the competition in order to attract and retain better employees. We should factor in the

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effects on a local community of a plant move or closure. We can locate companies and build offices in those parts of cities that need renovation and renewal and hire from the local community whenever possible. We may prioritize the unemployed or underemployed, giving them the necessary job training whenever required.

Overseas, business as mission may mean identifying which entire neighborhoods or subcultures are without adequate work opportunities. Who would love to work and work hard, but is currently unable to find employment and thereby provide for themselves or their families? Target and train those likely to succeed and give them new skills or new opportunities to utilize the skills they already possess.

If you offer your talents or services to fellow Christians, either as part of your regular job or on the side during off hours, become known as the people in your industry or vocation with the highest standards of ethics and integrity in the business. Do the best possible work you can, and do it on time. Pay your bills on time. Tragically, Christians have often developed the reputation of being less trustworthy than non-Christians either on or off the job, because they assume their fellow believers will be understanding and forgiving. This is nothing but the sinful manipulation and abuse of others' good will.

About the Author



Craig Blomberg is Distinguished Professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary in Littleton, Colorado. Craig is the author of fifteen books and has co-authored or co-edited seven more, along with 140 journal articles and chapters in multi-author works. His books include four on the

historical reliability and interpretation of parts or all of the Bible (esp. the Gospels), two on interpreting and preaching the parables, three commentaries (on Matthew, 1 Corinthians and James), a textbook on Jesus and the Gospels and another on Acts through Revelation, a handbook on exegetical method, and three books on material possessions in the Bible. Blomberg holds a Ph.D. from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland.

Notes

¹ Randy Alcorn, *Managing God's Money: A Biblical Guide* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2011), 13 – 20.

² Miroslav Volf, "In the Cage of Vanities: Christian Faith and the Dynamics of Economic Progress," in *Rethinking Materialism: Perspectives on the Spiritual Dimension of Economic Behavior* (ed. Robert Wuthnow; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 187.

³ For an excellent start, see Ben Witherington III, *Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); and Darrell Cosden, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006).

⁴ See esp. Steve Walton, *A Call to Live: Vocation for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 1994). Cf. Amy L. Sherman, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

⁵ Tom Sine, *Mustard Seed vs. McWorld: Reinventing Life and Faith for the Future* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 161.

⁶ Bob Smietana, "More Preachers Need a 'Day Job,' Too," *USA Today* (June 29, 2010), at www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-06-21-preachers20_ST_N.htm (accessed April 27, 2012).

⁷ Many good works on business ethics exist. Among recent, distinctively Christian ones, see esp. Kenman L. Wong and Scott B. Rae, *Business for the Common Good: A Christian Vision for the Marketplace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011). Cf. also Lloyd E. Sandelands, *God and Mammon* (Lanham, MD: "of America, 2010); Jeff van Duzer, *Why Business Matters to God (and What Still Needs to Be Fixed)* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010); and Fleming, *Profit at Any Cost?*

⁸ For a distinctively Christian take, see C. Neal Johnson, *Business as Mission: A Comprehensive Guide to Theory and Practice* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009). Cf. also Steve Rundle and Tom Steffen, *Great Commission Companies: The Emerging Role of Business in Missions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003); and Tom Steffen and Mike Barnett, eds., *Business as Mission: From Impoverished to Empowered* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2006).