

WORK

Week 11: The Theory and Practice of Reformation through Work (Part 2)¹

In Philemon 1:13-16, Paul could have executed a **revolutionary** overthrow of slavery. Instead, he **reforms** at the root: If Onesimus and Philemon are brothers, how can one enslave the other?

"If we seek reform that is radical, not revolutionary, we must work with existing leaders" (185).

In the 16th century, Protestants were subject to intense persecution at the hand of Catholic kings. While Luther never advocated military resistance to persecution, Calvin took another tack. When a king was persecuting the citizens of a lesser magistrate, he pressed upon the lesser magistrate to stand up to his superior—or else be guilty of participation in the violence.

How does Calvin's approach demonstrate a reformational rather than revolutionary objective? There will be times when we can take the lead, fill an elected office, or have the power to enact sweeping change. Most of the time, we will have to appeal to the best elements of our surrounding culture and identify leaders with a sense of justice in order to press for reform.

"Efforts at reform start with individuals. Ideally, they find a group, with partners and mentors. Reformers see how sin affects us all and bring light and justice to their age . . . Believers turn to God both for the grace that empowers our labors and for the grace that forgives our failures" (187).

Food for Thought:

Where has God's common grace enabled you to make common cause with an unbeliever with whom you shared a goal?

Have you seen economics or politics overwhelm other aspects of life? What happened?

As we continue our study in reform *through* work, let's consider Adam Ross, CEO of Brick Corps (\$7 billion in sales annually). In the construction industry, it is typical to use layoffs to maximize profits, especially in lean years.

Adam is different: "Layoffs are one way to do business, but it's not the way we operate." While remaining a highly profitable company, Brick Corp maintains attractive workspaces, provides a well-equipped gym and personal trainer for employees, and works hard to take care of their staff. Why? **Brick Corp believes that people are its chief resource.**

During a down cycle, the entire staff decided to take a 10% pay cut rather than layoffs. In one annual review, Vice President Michelle was told she needed to work *less*: "We can't let you burn out." Adam seeks to model reform on a personal level as he tackles his own sins and flaws.

Not despite—but because of—these things, Brick Corp is an industry leader. **Can you think of a business that has risen to the top of its industry precisely because it does not put profits at the top of its priorities?**

"Thus, in a market economy, businesses must be profitable, but profit must not be the sole criterion for success" (179).

CONDITIONS FOR REFORM

In terms of sphere sovereignty, these are essential for reform:

- 1) Leaders learn the boundaries/norms that govern their sphere.
- 2) Authorities within the sphere promote and defend those boundaries and norms.
- 3) Leaders in diverse spheres must grow to respect one another when their responsibilities overlap.

¹ This study is a distillation of Daniel Doriani's *Work: Its Purpose, Dignity and Transformation* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2019). It is meant to be taught in conjunction with the book, not as a replacement.

DISCOVERING THE RULES

Ok. Every endeavor in work should be guided by love, justice, and faithfulness. *But what that looks like in a specific sphere?*

Consider the sphere of athletics. **How might love, justice, and faithfulness act as guiding principles for an athlete?**

- A **loving** athlete respects his opponents both in speech and action, seeing them as human beings made in the image of God and not merely as someone to beat.
- A **just** athlete always competes according to the rules, never seeks unfair advantage, and respects the referees who enforce the rules.
- A **faithful** athlete recognizes her responsibilities to coaches, teammates, and her Lord to give her best effort even when she feels tired or no one is watching.

Or, consider the sphere of food production. **How might love, justice, and faithfulness help a food producer discover the *rules* for work?**

- Food producers who **love** their customers will not only provide daily bread but seek to enrich their lives through attention to taste and visual appeal. They will not seek to take advantage of customers by provoking addictive behaviors.
- **Justice** in food production means charging a fair price, not discriminating but treating each customer with dignity. Justice also demands the willingness to pay back clients for unsatisfactory or recalled food.
- A **faithful** food vendor provides its products to underserved neighborhoods even if it means slimmer profit margin. It understands the supply chain and takes into account those will be most vulnerable during food shortages.

How can we be sure that we arrive at principles in our sphere that will actually accomplish love, justice, and faithfulness? Because Christian wisdom gained in the workplace is a gift from God:

- James 1:5
- Isaiah 28:23-29
- Prov 1:2-9

Scripture and wisdom are accessible, but work is complicated. **Expect errors and be open to correction!**

SEEING EVERY SPHERE AS SACRED

If it really is true that we have been made a “royal priesthood” (1 Peter 2:9), then all of our activities and spheres of responsibility have been sanctified. We make offerings to God whether in the office, the home, at church, on the baseball field, or the classroom.

There is no such thing as “secular” for the believer. A kingdom transfer has happened (Col. 1:13), and we serve our King wherever we go.

We often create a false dichotomy in our work:

- A car dealer’s work is **secular** when selling cars but **sacred** when lending the youth group a free van for a mission trip.
- A cook’s work is **secular** when serving plates on a Friday night but **sacred** when giving away plates to the poor on a Saturday morning.

Rather, all work guided by love, justice, and faithfulness is a sacred offering to the Lord. The only secular work is godless work—work that seeks to degrade mankind, exploit creation, and promote immorality.

Can you think of an example of *godless* work? Read Colossians 3:23-25. If this truth guided your work, what might change?

“But how might we resist systemic evils? What if evils are entrenched and biblical wisdom enjoys little support? What if great powers stymie all efforts at reform”—both personal and collective?

“Sensible reformers will identify the common ground that they share with potential allies, whatever faith commitments.” (184)

Consider the local football league. How might a Christian seeking to make football safer for the players seek common ground with non-Christians to bring change?

REFORM AS RADICAL, NOT REVOLUTIONARY

“The goal is reform that is *radical*, not *revolutionary*. Biblical reform is not violent; it goes to the root cause, believing that steady effort may eventually bring lasting change” (185). Christian reform presupposes God’s intentionality in creating spheres, the transformative power of the gospel, and the real possibility of doing good in each sphere. Lasting reform does not seek merely to mitigate symptoms, but seeks to identify and treat the disease. Such diagnosis requires Biblical wisdom.