

WORK

Week 9: The Roots of Reformation at Work¹

Hospitals and schools have also sprung from initial ad hoc responses to a basic need in the community. **Can you think of an example of a large-scale Christian institution that began “accidentally”?**

VACLAV HAVEL (1936-2011): CONTAGIOUS IDEAS

Václav Havel was a Czech playwright and essayist under communist rule in the mid 20th century. Through years of imprisonment and intimidation, he managed to inspire a nation to cast off a totalitarian regime.

In his poignant 1978 essay “The Power of the Powerless,” he depicted a local grocer who displayed a green sign in his front window that read, “Workers of the World Unite!” The demoralized shopkeeper didn’t display the sign because he believed in communism but because the sign came from headquarters—along with his supply of lettuce, carrots, and onions. No sign, no produce—and no way to support his family.

Havel’s grocery was “living with the lie.” Instead, he sought to inspire fellow citizens to abandon the lie and live within the truth. In the truth, the government did not own its citizens or have the right to control their lives.

He urged people to start organizations outside the grasp of government control: sports leagues, music troupes, philosophy clubs, publishers—all acts of quiet resistance. If one citizen resisted, he was squashed. If all resisted, the government would have to relent. By 1989, communism had fallen, and Havel was chosen as prime minister of a free Czech Republic.

Reform often begins spontaneously—even accidentally—but lasting reform requires organized faithful effort by Christians who are willing to work with allies to promote change.

Food for Thought:

What does God require of you at work? Has he given you gifts, a cause, a position, or allies that give you a position to effect more reforms? Does he expect more of you?

Have you worked with unbelievers on a significant social cause? How did the experience compare to working with fellow believers?

In the previous chapters, we have discussed the roots of evil and breakdown in the workplace. Some are the result of intentional wickedness and sin, others negligence or societal shifts, and all can have both personal and structural facets. **What are at least three different elements that have ill effects on work, workers, or the workplace?**

The next two weeks will propose both a *theology* and a *plan* for social reform through work.

Many reform movements seemed to arise spontaneously, almost accidentally, at the time. However, in hindsight we often see the clear hand of God:

“Rebecca Green reformed her school library. She expelled books that seemed detrimental to her students. Eventually, she developed a list of criteria for her decisions, and they became school policy. But if she publishes her criteria, she might initiate a movement...” (147)

Often we feel powerless to change broken systems. However, we all ought to endeavor to *good work*—and good has an eternal effect:

- Patience in well-doing leads to eternal life (Romans 2:6-7)
- Good overcomes evil (Romans 12:21)
- Healthy trees bear good fruit (Romans 7:4-6)
- We are to seek opportunities to do good (Galatians 6:9-10)

SPONTANEOUS FRUIT

“Christians act spontaneously, but leaders are also accountable to make plans” (Romans 12:8). Inasmuch as the devil is constantly hatching schemes for evil, God’s people should be conspiring to dismantle wickedness and do long-term good. **Can estate planning be a scheme for doing good far into the future?**

Read Isaiah 31:1-8. If this is a prophetic picture of the Kingdom of Christ, what noble plans do you envision?

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.

CLAY PORTER: HOSPITAL REFORM

Clay Porter was a cancer researcher, physician, and chair of a prestigious research hospital who trained dozens of residents and traveled the world doing surgical demonstrations.

“Among North American believers, the propensity to individualism can blind us to opportunities to lead. We instinctively think we do good at work in private, solo acts . . . At work, we have the most skill and training, the most resources, and the strongest teams, so we multiply our capacity to love people” (149-150).

In his studies of soft tissue cancers, Porter noticed that while many patients were cancer free and functioning after surgery, additional post-op treatments like radiation and chemotherapy were robbing patients of that functionality—damaging lungs, saliva glands, and throat muscles.

In his study, Porter decided to investigate: *How many lives do extra treatments save when applied to critical soft tissues? Might people trade a slightly elevated risk of cancer returning if it meant vital organs continued to work well?* **Such system-altering questions can be controversial. What hurdles might Porter encounter?**

“Porter faced opposition. This is typical. Reformers must expect opposition from those who are well served by the status quo. In large institutions, reformers need determination to fight through inertia, but they also need allies in positions of authority” (151).

- Less treatment would mean less revenue
- Shift in treatments might make specialists obsolete
- Pharmaceutical and tech companies could decrease funding
- Ethical dilemma of allowing patients to risk death in exchange for higher quality of life

Dr. Porter had to move to a more supportive hospital where he continued research and created new protocols to improve the lives of cancer survivors. Eventually, other institutions corroborated his findings. While his work proceeded in strict scientific and medical terms, faith shaped every step:

- Love for his patients and desire for their best possible lives
- Belief in a Divinely-designed immune system, which chemo and radiation compromise
- Biblical ethics that prevented him from stretching data findings or bowing to political or economic pressures
- Christian understanding that preventing death is not the sole measure of successful medical treatment: “A believer who anticipates the resurrection might choose a better life, at the risk of a shorter life” (152).

“So a spontaneous insight led to organized changes” (153).

Dr. Porter’s research illustrates the twin roots of reform through work. First, his project **spontaneously** began with recognizing needless suffering and seeking ways to provide better post-operative care options. However, it led to **organized** acts and long-term changes in protocols.

Clay Porter illustrates the four common traits of a reformer:

- **Principle:** the big idea to do good in the world
- **Passion:** the drive to implement the principle, including winsomeness, tenacity, urgency, and willingness to take risks
- **Position:** the social location with authority to be heard and obtain resources
- **Perseverance:** the ability to push through resistance, missteps, and messiness to accomplish the principle

Which of these four do you most lack? Which is your strongest?

“The Lord knows we are finite and cannot solve every problem. But we can engage the problems we see, problems that draw our attention, that lie within reach, problems we are equipped to solve” (155).

LIVING LIVES WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL

“The separation of faith and social action is a rather recent phenomenon” (155). Many Christian orphanages began with the spontaneous willingness of a Christian couple to take in one child.