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Schende's "Calling and vocation: From Martin Luther to the modern world of work" (book review)

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Book Reviews



Schende, G. (Ed.). (2017) *Calling and vocation: From Martin Luther to the modern world of work*. Translated by Ray Cunningham. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt. 102 pp. \$12.00. ISBN 9783374052257

This slim but dense volume hails from ‘across the pond,’ published by the Evangelical Church of Germany (Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, or EKD). It is a fitting tribute to the Protestant work ethic in this 500th year anniversary of the Reformation, and to Luther specifically for his theological contributions to the concept of vocation as meaningful work for oneself and others to the glory of God, the idea of the sacralization of all aspects of life. The book contains an introductory essay by Schendel, and two longer essays: the first regards the historical and theological foundations of the Protestant understanding of “vocation” and how it is distinct from “calling” (by Gerhard Wegner); and the second essay (by Schendel) treats the phenomenon of Workplace Spirituality (WPS). Scattered throughout the work are 10 portraits of Germans in various vocations who have answered survey questions about the meaning they find in their work. The authors define vocation as a “given task, meaning the fulfillment of the purpose of being a Christian in this world;” and second, vocation is a means of discovering one’s “personal calling” as a Christian (p. 80).

The book does not emerge from a vacuum, but is rather situated in a stream of thinking in the broader culture (especially professional management culture), and indeed is part of an international conversation about the meaning of the terms “vocation” and “calling.” Schendel and Wegner do not focus exclusively on Germany, and this feature makes the book relevant for the American context as well. The authors indicate that part of the renaissance of interest in vocation stems from the legacy of Luther’s thought, while also being bolstered by a crescendo of more recent voices protesting the negative and mechanistic anthropology advanced by advocates of the “Scientific Management” school of thought, like Frederick Taylor and Henry Ford, at the turn of the 20th century when industrialization and capitalism reigned supreme. While these men valued work and profit, they nonetheless “reduced” their employees “to appendages of the machines” (p. 53). The “Human Relations” movement emerged in the 1920s in reaction to the devaluation of the individual worker and his or her ability to creatively self-express. This school of thought

persisted into the 1990s, revitalized through the work of Henry Mayo (p. 70). In addition, the Millennials (Generation Y) increasingly require tasks and careers which they find meaningful and fulfilling, rejecting the prospect of work as alienating (pp. 16–17).

The authors make a great point about individualism and self-expression, namely that with increased autonomy and creative freedom comes enjoyment of work which can ironically result in increased pressure, self-exploitation, burnout, dependence on work for meaning, mental illness, and work-related pathologies (p. 64). I think in theological terms this situation would constitute making an idol out of work, although the authors do not put it quite this way. Another irony of the book is that in the first essay, monastic spirituality, self-focused interiority, and a notion of “self-sacrifice on the altar of Work” are negatively portrayed (p. 56), whereas in the second major essay on Workplace Spirituality, (Benedictine) monasticism and its concept of a balance of work and prayer in the Christian life seem to be cited as a positive example (p. 94).

The second essay moves from Germany to the American context, as Workplace Spirituality seems to be the culmination of the movement to value the individual, and grant her or him increased freedom (within a structured but hierarchically “flattened” or “bottom up” organization) to take initiative, collaborate, and find meaning in work. But a more acute sense of vocation as expressed through the WPS movement (both secular and faith-based) not only desires a connection to the Transcendent, but also reaches out horizontally to the community. For Judeo-Christians and Muslims, this would constitute connection with both God and neighbor through one’s vocation, perhaps attending chaplain-led scripture study at work; while for unbelievers this may manifest in the practice of yoga or meditation at work, and reaching out to do good in the surrounding community. In all cases, WPS ideally finds its culmination in the transformation of society and a striving for global social justice, akin to the Christian concept of *missio dei*.

The authors are to be congratulated for their dense and deep wrestling with concepts which go beyond the academy and the seminary, even beyond church walls and into the marketplace. They have accomplished their set task of demonstrating the continued relevance of the Reformation concept of vocation as applicable to “all vocations and occupations” (p. 24). This book is recommended for church libraries, and undergraduate programs which focus on economics, faith and work, administration/ leadership, human flourishing, and chaplaincy.

Reviewer

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