

Annotated bibliography on the theology of work and economics

Greg Forster, gforster@kffdn.org

October 31, 2014

Core Resources – Seeing the Big Picture

Acton Institute, “For the Life of the World” (2014)

A compelling and imaginative introduction to how Christians can participate in cultural activity – including work and the economy – in faithful and transformative ways. A seven-part series of short videos suitable for small groups, classes and individuals. [Available](#) via internet streaming as well as on disc.

Acton Institute, The Oikonomia Series (reissued 2014)

Economic Shalom, John Bolt (Reformed)

Flourishing Faith, Chad Brand (Baptist)

Flourishing Churches and Communities, Charlie Self (Pentecostal)

How God Makes the World a Better Place, David Wright, et. al. (Wesleyan)

These short books, each written from the perspective of a specific evangelical faith tradition, provide an introductory primer on faith, work, and economics. People can discover the distinctive ideas, history and resources their traditions bring to this conversation. Highly accessible, yet they point to the big-picture questions that are often neglected at this introductory level.

Economic Wisdom Project, “Flourishing Churches and Communities” (2013)

A [vision paper](#) on the need to go beyond theology of work and connect theology to economics. Stresses four big themes: stewardship and flourishing, value creation, productivity and opportunity, and responsible action. Distills these themes into twelve “elements” of economic wisdom for contemporary application, and identifies five ways churches can put them into practice: theology, pastoral care, compassion, the common good, and youth and family ministry. Endorsed by the faculty leaders of the Oikonomia Network.

Made to Flourish, *The Pastor’s Guide to Fruitful Work and Economic Wisdom* (2014)

An anthology of chapters on faith, work, and economics from leading thinkers in this emerging field. Provides an intellectual starting point for the work of the Made to Flourish pastor network. Written especially with pastors in mind, and focused on integrating sound scholarship with practical steps for local church life.

Helpful Theological Background

The Stewardship Study Bible (2009)

A study Bible entirely devoted to the concept of stewardship. While today this concept is usually invoked only as a way of guilt-tripping congregants into giving money and time to the church, the biblical concept is a rich, full-rounded conceptual framework for structuring our entire lives, as stewards of God’s message and of the created order.

Abraham Kuyper, *Wisdom and Wonder* (new translation 2011)

In this first-ever English translation, Abraham Kuyper provides a brief summary of his views on the relationship between the church and human civilization, particularly as manifested in science and

art. Kuyper outlines how God's "common grace" infuses human civilizational activities with experiences of beauty, goodness and truth, and how Christians can participate in these activities without losing their gospel distinctiveness.

Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator* (1998)

While this book concerns the doctrine of creation and is not directly about work or economics as such, Gunton's critique of inadequate Christian conceptions of creation (unconsciously influenced by Gnosticism, unitarianism, pantheism, etc.) has far-reaching implications for work and economics across a number of dimensions. Not everyone will agree with Gunton's approach to relating creation to redemption and eschatology, but the book is still of broad appeal (though dense and not for the layperson).

John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (reissued 2008)

The opening chapter on the mission of the church is a classic introductory essay on the complex problem of relating non-church work to evangelism. Stott argues that the primary challenge facing the church in the coming generation is that we have not figured out how to be simultaneously faithful to the Great Commission (which is currently understood primarily in terms of evangelism) and the Great Commandment (which is currently understood primarily in terms of non-church work).

Russell Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ* (2004)

Dense and heavily footnoted history of evangelical debates over ecclesiology, eschatology, and soteriology, arguing that these debates have hindered the emergence of a unified evangelical witness on public issues because we lack a shared understanding of how the church relates to the world, but that recent trends toward moderation and dialogue on these issues hold out promise that this might change.

Work

Tom Nelson, *Work Matters* (2011)

A good popular introduction to the spiritual significance of work in everyday life. Nelson is a pastor who writes from experience delivering this message in his church, and the clear calling to put faith/work integration into the life of the local church is a strength of the book.

Amy Sherman, *Kingdom Calling* (2012)

Provides a theological framework connecting work, business and the economy to the gospel, the kingdom, the mission of the church and the *shalom* of the community. Interacts with the existing theology of work literature and provides extensive practical advice, especially for local church congregations. See also [Sherman's appearance](#) with Scott Rae at the 2011 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, sponsored by the Oikonomia Network.

Tim Keller and Katherine Leary Alsdorf, *Every Good Endeavor* (2012)

A solid and somewhat challenging introduction to the basics of connecting faith with work for the sake of faithful Christian living and witness. A distinctive of this book is the emphasis on "narrative" and the way it shapes our lives and our work. It also makes some connections to larger issues of how Christianity relates to cultural and economic systems. In terms of accessibility this is somewhat more difficult than the average popular book, but still within most people's reach.

Theology of Work Project

This project has published a complete commentary on work in all books of the Bible, among other resources. All their published work is [available free on the web](#). A key resource.

Lester DeKoster, *Work: The Meaning of Your Life* (reissued 2010)

A very short and exceptional book introducing the layperson to how Christianity can and should completely transform our perspective on everyday work, ranging from the daily experience of the line worker to the civilization-building power of human labor. Emphasizes bringing Christian hope to the brokenness of ordinary work. DeKoster's writing style is a strong taste that some love and others don't care for.

Gene Edward Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (2002)

Outstanding summary of how the doctrine of calling (or "vocation") can be the organizing principle of an entire Christian life. Includes applications for work and economics as well as church, family, civil responsibilities, etc. See also [Veith's lecture](#) at the 2010 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, sponsored by the Oikonomia Network.

Michael Wittmer, *Heaven Is a Place on Earth* (2004)

Outlines the goodness of the material world and its implications for the Christian life, including work. Similar to Cosden's *Heavenly Good of Earthly Work* (below) but with broader appeal and less heavily eschatological.

Darrell Cosden, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work* (2006)

A distinctive perspective on the biblical significance of work, with an eschatological focus. A popular introduction, complemented by Cosden's more scholarly book *A Theology of Work* (below).

Darrell Cosden, *A Theology of Work* (2004)

One of the most scholarly and densely researched examinations of biblical theology of work in the last generation. Cosden focuses on eschatology, emphasizing the "new creation" in Christ that begins to unfold in the lives of Christians in the present day.

William Placher (ed.), *Callings* (2005)

Collected readings on the idea of "calling" from the last two thousand years. An excellent way to get up to speed on the history of this idea in the Christian mind, and a great resource.

David Miller, *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith at Work Movement* (2006)

Outlines and analyzes various Christian efforts to develop a biblical perspective on work in the 20th century. Very influential and useful, although Miller's four-point rubric for analyzing the theology of work reflects some limitations arising from the uneven quality of the work he is surveying.

Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit* (2001)

Volf attempts a comprehensive theology of work and economics. Some pieces are valuable, such as his emphasis on the role of the Spirit in equipping us for work. However, Volf's uncritical assimilation of profoundly anti-Christian Marxist and Weberian economic and political theories badly taints his analysis.

R. Paul Stevens, *Work Matters* (2012)

A good introduction to why this subject matters so much. One strength of the book is that it interacts with scripture more extensively than most books on this subject.

Ben Witherington, *Work: A Kingdom Perspective on Labor* (2011)

Reflections on the theme of work in scripture and how it could apply to our culture. Witherington's scriptural engagement is scholarly but accessible at the same time. However, his applications to contemporary culture and issues is often lopsided, reflecting unexamined economic assumptions inherited from figures like Weber, and a lack of appreciation of the continuing importance of the cultural mandate for economic growth.

Steven Garber, *Visions of Vocation* (2014)

A series of compelling stories about Christians who have lived out their vocations in their work, tied together by an equally compelling question: "Can we know the world and still love the world?"

Business

Kenman Wong & Scott Rae, *Business for the Common Good* (2011)

Offers an academic framework for understanding business ethics from a Christian perspective. Business activity is good when it is oriented towards its proper end: productive contribution to the common good of the community. See also [Rae's appearance](#) with Amy Sherman at the 2011 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, sponsored by the Oikonomia Network.

Jeff Van Duzer, *Why Business Matters to God* (2011)

Connects business both to a theological framework and Niebuhr's famous five-point typology of models for integrating Christ and culture.

David Gill, *It's About Excellence* (2011)

An outstanding practical book of business ethics, written for use by real-world executives. Its author's Christianity is kept implicit, but is powerfully impactful on the book's approach.

Michael Novak, *Business as a Calling* (1996)

Introduces the non-business reader to what the life of a business leader is like, considered from a theological perspective.

Acton Institute, *The Call of the Entrepreneur* (2007)

A video on business leadership from a Christian perspective, with an emphasis on how entrepreneurial human action cultivates blessings that lie dormant in the creation order.

General Economics

Victor Claar & Robin Klay, *Economics in Christian Perspective* (2007)

Two Christian economists offer the layperson a step-by-step introduction to the field of economics, as seen through the lens of theological concerns. A terrific introduction to how dialogue between the academic disciplines of theology and economics can look from the economic side.

Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches* (2000)

A standard introduction to biblical theology of property and economic systems. Blomberg's exegesis is generally excellent. Unfortunately, his applications of the biblical teaching to present-day issues

tends to pay attention only to concerns raised from the political left, dismissing other concerns without serious consideration and neglecting the ways in which his own biblical exegesis points to the legitimacy of some of those concerns.

David Baker, *Tight Fists or Open Hands?* (2009)

Systematic overview of all provisions in the Old Testament law dealing with work, property, and other economic elements of life. Includes analysis of both scriptural texts and their historical/cultural contexts.

Bruce Longenecker & Kelly Liebengood, eds., *Engaging Economics* (2009)

Anthology examining a variety of questions about the economic context of the New Testament, connecting New Testament texts to their historical/cultural contexts.

Wayne Grudem, *Business for the Glory of God* (2003)

Excellent little book on how economic phenomena manifest the image of God. Very good introduction to the overlap of theology and economic activity. Each chapter ties a specific element of the economy to a theological basis in God's attributes.

John Schneider, *The Good of Affluence* (2002)

Biblical exegesis arguing that economic flourishing is part of the *shalom* of God. For all its dangers and temptations, wealth creation is a good part of God's created order, and the Bible offers a portrait of how we can live in a godly way without insisting that everyone become poor.

Austin Hill & Scott Rae, *The Virtues of Capitalism* (2010)

Shows how economic activity is necessary to form critical virtues such as honesty, diligence, and concern for others' needs. Includes discussion of the larger social structures necessary to facilitate this virtue-forming dynamic.

Jay Richards, *Money, Greed and God* (2009)

Richards argues against seven common "myths" or inadequate approaches to economics among Christians. The common thread of the book is that the social system of economic activity is intrinsically good, despite the moral failures that disrupt it. Richards will strike some as overly eager to defend capitalism; he has "the zeal of a convert" as a former opponent of capitalism who has changed sides.

Shawn Ritenour, *Foundations of Economics: A Christian View* (2010)

Extensive introductory text on the academic discipline of economics written for a Christian audience. The approach to economics is distinctively and strongly of the Austrian school, which will limit reader interest. The opening and closing chapters provide a useful theological context by grounding economics in the cultural mandate, but otherwise there is little attempt to address overlap between economics and theology, and such attempts as are made are superficial and unsatisfying. This is basically a standard undergraduate textbook in Austrian economics, sandwiched between two chapters on theology.

Stephen Grabill, ed., *Sourcebook in Late-Scholastic Monetary Theory* (2007)

Original source texts (1556-1609) from three authors developing monetary theory in the scholastic tradition. Mainly of interest for the introduction, which provides a thorough and eye-opening review

of how economics as a field of inquiry began among medieval theologians as a branch of moral philosophy, and why the intersection of theology and economics still matters.

Steven Hayward, *Mere Environmentalism* (2010)

A short primer on economic growth and environmental issues, with special attention to a biblical understanding of how human beings relate to their physical environment and what this implies for economic and environmental issues.

Poverty

Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts* (2010)

In this short and powerful book, a Christian community development expert and a Christian economist discuss the extensive damage done to communities in the developing world by well-meaning western relief efforts. Offers a new framework for thinking about helping the poor that defines poverty in terms of broken relationships rather than mere material deprivation. This helps us distinguish between three types of economic need – relief, rehabilitation and development – and points toward more effective ways of working with the poor to help them rise out of poverty.

Robert Lupton, *Toxic Charity* (2012)

A firsthand account of how one Christian anti-poverty ministry in Atlanta came to recognize that its efforts to help the poor were doing more harm than good, and undertook extensive reforms. Christmas toy giveaways became a low-priced toy shop; the food pantry and clothing ministry became a low-cost restaurant and clothing store employing poor people. Lupton's emphasizes how systems of economic exchange recognize mutual dignity in a way that indiscriminate one-way giving does not.

Wayne Grudem and Barry Asmus, *The Poverty of Nations* (2013)

An exhaustive overview of issues connected to poverty at the national level in nations around the world. The policy analysis of what nations can and cannot do to alleviate poverty is outstanding, although occasionally reflecting too much of an individualistic social hermeneutic. Some biblical and theological references are included, but this side of the book is less fully developed, examining passages that support the authors' views but few of the passages critics would have pointed to.

Chris Horst and Peter Greer, *Entrepreneurship for Human Flourishing* (2014)

An overview of how entrepreneurship is the key to helping people around the world emerge from poverty, with an emphasis on firsthand stories. The authors head a Christian international organization that fights poverty by encouraging and empowering entrepreneurs.

Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (reissued 2008)

Documents how in the 20th century the holistic model of care for the poor, rooted in historic Christian teaching, was replaced (both in the church and in society at large) with a handout-only model that creates a debilitating dependency.

Institute for Faith, Work, and Economics, *For the Least of These* (2014)

An anthology of chapters by various authors arguing against large-scale government redistribution and in favor of freer markets as a way to help the poor. Careful discussions of contested biblical topics such as the Jubilee and the *koinonia* of the Acts church are very helpful, and the policy prescriptions are mostly sound. However, the narrow emphasis on a single dimension of public

policy will disappoint readers seeking a broader vision of how we follow the imperative to help the poor.

Economics & Society

Dallas Willard and Gary Black, *The Divine Conspiracy Continued* (2014)

One of Dallas Willard's two final books, this provides a daring vision for taking the spiritual formation movement out of the private realm and into the public square through faith/work integration. The chapter on economics and politics contains extensive material from Willard's [talks on economic wisdom](#) at the 2013 Oikonomia Network faculty retreat.

Peter Baehr and Gordon Wells, "Introduction to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*" (2002)

Baehr and Wells demonstrate the deep flaws of Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic*, a book in which Weber's ignorance of Christianity and ignorance of economics compete fiercely for dominance. Few books have done more damage to our understanding of the relationship between Christianity and economics than Weber's toxic brew of Nietzschean value relativism, gnostic metaphysics and petty bigotries. The summary judgment on the bottom half of page xxix is not to be missed by anyone who wants to understand the real reasons Weber's intellectually bankrupt book has received so much attention for so long.

Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason* (2006)

Traces the history of capitalism from its roots in 12th century Italy through its development into modernity. Stark argues that capitalism arose from Christian commitments to the dignity of the individual person, and the power of image-bearing human beings to produce economic growth through their work. While the historical narrative is oversimplified at points, it provides an invaluable corrective to the gross errors of Weber's narrative (above).

Peter Wehner & Arthur Brooks, *Wealth and Justice* (2010)

A short statement of the moral basis of "democratic capitalism" as a social system. The authors argue that the model is ultimately based on the view that human nature is both good and bad, over against romantic optimism and cynical pessimism, both of which end in dehumanizing social systems. They pay particular attention to the question of justice for the poor. The book also addresses the limitations of democratic capitalism, although some readers will wish the authors had said more on this topic.

Edd Noell, Stephen Smith, and Bruce Webb, *Economic Growth* (2013)

A brief introduction written by three Christian scholars to a vitally important topic: the sources and impact of economic growth. The authors defend the goodness of economic growth against perspectives that argue growth is morally bad for us.

Abraham Kuyper, *Advice for Christian Engagement in Government* (new translation 2013)

This book was originally the campaign manifesto of Kuyper's political party. It addresses a variety of economic topics, and although the policy particulars have changed over time, the principles will still be of interest. Even more valuable are the opening chapters, which lay out a general overview of the relationship between Christianity and social order in light of the dilemmas we face in modern society.

Os Guinness, *The Call* (2003)

A very good layperson's introduction to the doctrine of calling and its implications for society, in history and today.

Os Guinness, *Entrepreneurs of Life* (2001)

Argues that all people should live daily life with an entrepreneurial spirit and informed by entrepreneurial virtues. A practical book written for group use.

Samuel Gregg, *The Commercial Society* (2007)

Historical overview of the emergence of "the commercial society" – especially as manifested in the contrasts observed by Tocqueville between American democracy and the aristocratic systems of Europe – and reflections on the challenges facing this social model in the contemporary world.

Jennifer Roback Morse, *Love and Economics* (updated 2008)

A Christian economist offers an extensive argument, with supporting data, for why a flourishing economy requires, but cannot by itself produce, strong traditional families.

Important but Less Faith-Oriented Books

Douglass North, John Wallis, and Barry Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders* (2009)

A dense scholarly book with a critically important thesis: that the key development in the modern world, which made the Industrial Revolution possible, is a transition from the "limited access order" that had prevailed in all times and places until modernity to an "open access order." The limited access order is based on unequal dignity of elite and lower classes, granting full rights of political, economic, religious, educational and other activities only to members of the elite class. The open access order is based on equal dignity and upholds the same rights of social participation for all members of society. This book neglects the religious contribution to the transition, interpreting the behavior of social classes exclusively in terms of selfish interest-seeking, but it provides a critical framework for understanding the social dynamics of economic systems before and after the Industrial Revolution.

Hernando de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital* (2003)

Based on extensive data-gathering in developing countries and research on the economic development of America in the 19th century, de Soto shows how economic flourishing requires not just pro-development policy at the top of society but a deep, pervasive set of social structures in which everyone's property and businesses (especially those of the poor) are protected from theft and abuse. The book is naively dismissive of the role of culture – de Soto himself has acknowledged this flaw – but its insight on the role of other social structures is invaluable. The book is about economics but is accessible to the non-economist.

Gary Haugen, *The Locust Effect* (2014)

Written by the head of the International Justice Mission, this book is in some ways a more popularly accessible version of the argument Hernando de Soto made in *The Mystery of Capital* (above). Haugen demonstrates that protecting people from violence and theft is an essential starting point for all forms of social flourishing, including economic flourishing. The primary factor that keeps people in poverty is the fact that in much of the world, the rule of law is weak or absent, and the powerful can prey upon the weak with impunity.

Deirdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois Dignity* (2010)

An ambitious historical analysis of what caused the Industrial Revolution. Considering and rejecting a wide variety of other theories, McCloskey concludes that the extension of social recognition of dignity, and therefore rights, from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie was the essential catalyst. McCloskey downplays the role of religion in this transition, but her emphasis on the change in our understanding of human dignity is a major contribution. Also noteworthy is her emphasis on the constructive social role of the middle class.

Charles Murray, *Coming Apart* (2012)

A pathbreaking analysis of the central problems facing American civilization. Murray shows how the upper and lower socioeconomic halves of the country are being pulled apart by a variety of forces. The core virtues of American society – work, marriage, church and community – are damaged but intact among the upper socioeconomic half; they are in freefall among the bottom half. Murray correctly sees that the only solution is for the upper half to “preach what they practice,” setting the expectation that all people ought to do what they themselves in fact do to flourish. At stake is the uniqueness of the American experiment: a society in which all people have dignity rather than only the upper class.

Joyce Appleby, *The Relentless Revolution* (2011)

A history of capitalism that emphasizes the role of technological development and the complexities of the interplay between society’s moral concepts and its institutional structure. While Appleby can sometimes neglect the role of religion, her focus on how technology both disrupts traditional norms and creates opportunities to build new institutions that embody them is very fruitful.