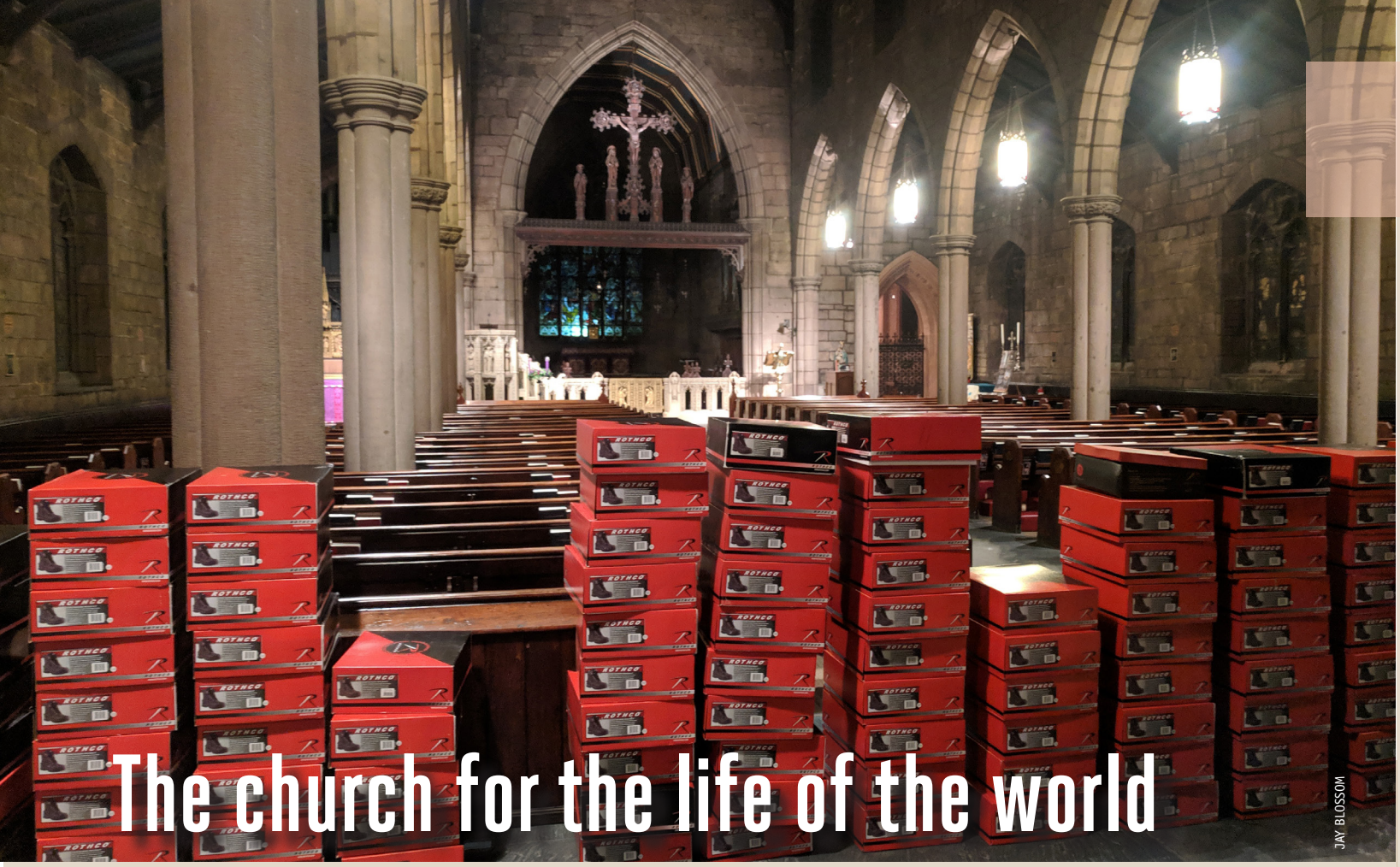

The church for the life of the world

JAY BLOSSOM

"Church as usual" is no longer an option

By Chris R. Armstrong

YOUR CALL TO THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION today is more important, and in some ways may be more difficult, than it has ever been. As it is clearly no longer an option to do "seminary as usual," it is also no longer an option to do "church as usual." I want to discuss a few things about the moment we find ourselves in now — and about the special role that theological educators can play in setting tomorrow's church on a firm foundation.

While American churches today are good at bringing a spiritual message, often the church is too inward-focused, with not much to say about our congregants' daily, Monday-to-Saturday lives. What churches should be doing instead is preparing church leaders to offer love-motivated, Christ-centered attention to the flourishing of all people.

Church as usual is no longer an option because young people are the future of the church. And as ample data shows us, millennials and those even younger are leaving our churches. It seems clear that this loss has at least something to do with our inward-oriented model of church life.

Christian youth today are still looking to serve God, but not solely within the confines of the institutional church. They don't want to be famous evangelists or intrepid missionaries or even giants of the pulpit known for their brilliant sermons. Instead, they want to serve God in the world, where they can address the real needs of real people. They have their imaginations set on ministries of compassion, on nonprofits that rescue trafficked people, on efforts to bring food into urban food deserts. They see that the world's dismissal of the church arises directly from the church's failure to live by the whole Gospel. And they yearn to live that Gospel on the world's stage.

Now, this generation may not yet see how ordinary plain jobs in ordinary plain workplaces are themselves places of mission — places they can do kingdom service through loving action in ordinary work that serves human flourishing. But I believe they are poised to receive that message too.

And for young Christians who do chose to go into church ministry, they may enter a new kind of church,

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The Boot Project, envisioned and organized by Jeremy Hutcheson, a member at Saint Mark's Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, has been going strong for two years. Hutcheson continues to provide the vision for the project, raise support, and organize church members and others to measure the feet of about 200 homeless residents of the city each fall. Brand-new boots and socks are then distributed in the church on a Saturday morning at the start of the winter season. The project is led and staffed entirely by volunteers.

one that is much less beholden to a consumer model but more excited by an outward-facing, equipping model — one that sends congregants out to bless others through all of the many kinds ordinary work in every sector of human endeavor.

We have a tremendous opportunity to support the dreams of future pastors — their dreams of a church that makes a difference in the world. We can help them see that there are in fact no "secular spaces" — that "Christ plays in ten thousand places," as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, if only we have the eyes to see. We can prepare the pastors of tomorrow to show their congregants a faith and a church **for the life of the world.**

For a moment now, I want to look at five themes that are central to preparing leaders for a church for the life of the world. We might think of this as five modes in which all of us must work if we are to foster the full human flourishing of others.

These are:

- **Vocation,** which requires right motivation.
- **Formation,** which requires disciplined preparation.
- **Entrepreneurialism**, which requires creative problem solving.
- **Work**, which requires virtuous action.
- **Economics**, which requires just coordination.

In each of these five modes, loving action serves the flourishing of others.

1. Vocation

As Martin Luther taught us, to discern your vocations is to find the places where you are connected to others and are called to serve them. The vital quality here is love; you must be oriented outward, to others, in love, if you are to effectively discern and live out your vocations. In other words, the Christian approach to vocation is fundamentally opposed to the Disney narrative, which says vocation is all about following your heart, finding your fit, and enjoying your fulfilment when you score the most perfect job for yourself. A Christian approach to vocation is not inward focused, but fundamentally relational. Your callings come *from* God, and they are *for* others.

This concept of vocation may not be something you address in the classroom, but rather in your mentoring of students — both formally and informally. To operate well in the mode of vocation, our students and their congregants must become literate and wise about their own interests, their gifts, and especially their motivations — whether inward and selfish or outward and altruistic.

2. Formation

For your work to best foster the flourishing of others, you must be prepared in both the conventional knowledge of your field of work and in the characteristic virtues required to do that work. The vital quality here is discipline; you must dedicate yourself to preparation that is rigorous and lifelong.

This is an obvious subject of discussion in the classroom and in mentoring — and it flows directly from vocation. Just like someone preparing to serve in any field, your students are engaging in discipline and sacrifice so that they can serve with excellence in the future. They are not just learning new information; they are becoming formed in the virtues necessary to work well in their chosen field.

3. Entrepreneurialism

Though not everyone is an entrepreneur, everyone working in every field must learn to think to some extent entrepreneurially — that is, to see needs and problems and to address them innovatively through creative use of resources.

To operate well in the mode of entrepreneurialism, students and their congregants must become literate and wise regarding the human problems and needs that their kind of work seeks to address, the resources available to address them, and the creative processes by which those resources can be applied to those problems for best effect.

4. Work

This follows from entrepreneurialism. It's great to come up with new, creative solutions to human problems and needs, but then someone needs to get to work implementing them. And to do that work well, we will almost always have to do it within an organizational structure. It is organizations that bring innovative solutions to the world, creating value and fostering flourishing. And here comes the idea of virtue again: In this fallen world, organizations are fallible, corruptible. There is much to lament about so many of the institutions in our lives. There are so many selfish, dishonest, exploitive, broken ways to go about our work — both individually and corporately — so that it doesn't serve human flourishing as well as it could. So one of the most powerful ways to address questions about work from a Christian framework is to highlight and teach virtue — both individual and corporate.

For Christians, virtue is not a do-it-yourself thing. Righteousness emerges from our relationship with God in Christ. So we are to approach work as seamless

The Welcome Church is a worshiping community for people experiencing homelessness. It grew out of The Welcome Center, which was founded by the Rev. Violet Little in 2007 and was hosted at the Lutheran Church of the Holy Communion in Philadelphia, pictured here. In 2012, the Welcome Church was officially recognized by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as a congregation under development serving people in poverty. The church meets weekly on Tuesdays at the Church of the Holy Communion and also in a city park on the on the first and last Sunday of each month, regardless of weather.

with worship — the benediction at the end of our services, sending us out into the working world with (in the words of Wheaton theologian Vince Bacote) imagination, hospitality, and hope.

To operate well in the mode of work, our students and their congregants must become literate and wise regarding organizational and institutional systems and cultures, so that their loving motivations, disciplined preparation, and creative solutions can produce excellence and value when applied within those systems and cultures.

5. Economics

What I mean when I talk about "economics" is simply the ways that we organize the creation and exchange of value for the common good — locally, societally, and globally. We may think of, first, the marketplace and, second, the structures of the state or civil society, from local to global, as the two spaces where all the many kinds of human work are coordinated for flourishing. In both these spaces, the vital quality is justice.

The kinds of vicious patterns I mentioned a moment ago with regard to work — dishonesty, exploitation, and the like — when writ large, become social and economic patterns of injustice, exploitation, and unfairness. Those patterns must be overcome with just ways of coordinating the creation and exchange of value. Every working man and woman in your students' future congregations will be deeply implicated in these large systems and their struggles. Wouldn't it be great if their seminary education would prepare them to minister well in the midst of those realities?

What do any of these modes have to do with the traditional disciplines of a seminary education? Let's consider briefly how this can look in some of these disciplines:

Biblical studies

Three years ago, at a Kern Family Foundation–sponsored meeting of seminary leaders, Paul Williams (then of Regent College) made a convincing argument that in the modern era, the Bible has been treated either as a book belonging to professional ministers — and often enough interpreted narrowly in a spiritualized frame, as having to do mostly with private, personal, pietistic religion — or as a book that belongs to the scholars in their own narrow, technical field of study, largely unrelated to all other fields.

Thus Christians sincerely trying to connect the words of Scripture to their daily life and work face these two significant barriers. Williams argued for a revolution of approach to Scripture, led by theological educators, that would release the Bible from the hold of clericalism and scholasticism, and approach it instead ecclesially and missionally.

We must learn to see the Bible, Williams said, as "God's love letter" to all humanity, entrusted to the whole people of God, and to be embodied by the church, both gathered in its corporate life and scattered in all walks of life.

As for the study of the text of Scripture itself, In the first three chapters of Genesis alone, we find the important themes of God as worker, of humans made in his image and likeness, and of dominion, provision, creation care, and cultivation. We find in Genesis the fascinating phrase "be fruitful," which turns out (as Tom Nelson teaches us) to mean not just "have babies," but do all kinds of creative work. We find the rhythm of work and rest, the impact of the fall on work, and much more.

If you want to do a deep dive into rich connections between the Bible and work, I encourage you to browse www.theologyofwork.org, the most visited faith and work website in the world, which contains a complete Bible commentary on what every book of the Bible has to say to us about work.

Theology and ethics

The disciplines of theology and ethics are also rich fields for exploration of themes related to economic work and human flourishing. For example, you have Jesus' oft-repeated idea about "the kingdom of God." What is that? I find Miroslav Volf's book *For the Life of the World* particularly helpful on this: The kingdom of God means God making his home here on earth, with us. That has been his purpose from creation, through redemption, and it will be fulfilled in the consummation. That is full human flourishing. As God brings things to that fullness, he will make all things right.

But even in this in-between age, through the many ways we work and contribute in the world, God gives us, through each other's work, foretastes of that full flourishing — and we are co-laborers in bringing those foretastes to those around us. For dozens of up-to-date stories that bring this kingdom reality alive, there's no better book out there right now than Amy Sherman's *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good*.

Or what about the mysterious phrase "the image of God" from the beginning of Genesis? Theologians have wrestled with the meaning of this phrase for centuries. But the first thing we see God doing in Genesis is working, creating. And then, after the fall, we see him redeeming. So maybe to bear his image well means we, too, should do in our own limited ways the kinds of creative and redemptive work that we have seen our worker God doing. Maybe our "image-bearing" should lead us to form and shape cultures and communities through wisdom. And maybe it should lead us to create and build things that reclaim the beauty of the world from decay.

If we can grasp this truth, it could radically change how we understand vocation, formation, entrepreneurship, work, and economics. It could give us purpose in the midst of futility and toil.

Spiritual formation

Now we come to an area of seminary study that has grown over the past few decades: spiritual formation. Right thinking about work and flourishing is not enough. The late philosopher Dallas Willard used to remark that we Protestants seem to be not only saved by grace, but also paralyzed by it. That is, we become so focused on the Reformation and Pauline teaching of salvation by grace alone that we never learn how to put faith into action in our spiritual lives.

Willard explored the shape of a truly whole-life discipleship in *The Divine Conspiracy*, which begins by observing that the apparent secularity of, for example, our workplaces is illusory. "The heavens" of biblical parlance are in fact as close as the air we breathe. God is sacramentally present in and through every area of our experience. Given this, we must learn to follow the word of Paul to the Colossians — "Whatever we do, work at it with all our hearts, as working for the Lord."

Of course, this area of spiritual formation is one where there is so much value in going back behind our contemporary authors to older sources of wisdom. We may find wisdom for "practical Christianity" in Dorothy Sayers, William Wilberforce, John Wesley, the Ignatian tradition, medieval lay mystics such as Johann Tauler and the Brethren of the Common Life, and so many more of our wise forefathers and mothers.

One of my personal favorites is the sixth-century pope Gregory the Great, who wrote eloquently on the symbiotic relationship between the active life and the contemplative life, and who presented something often missing in modern faith and work conversations: a realistic spirituality of suffering in our daily life and work, which draws deeply from the Book of Job, among other sources. For the entire medieval millennium, Gregory's Pastoral Rule was given to every bishop upon his consecration. It delves deeply into our heart motives for wanting to enter church ministry, in a way that is still vitally important for people discerning their calls today.

Worship and ecclesiology

Much more could be said, but I want to end this tour of how we can discover teachable materials on work and flourishing within the theological disciplines with a look at worship and ecclesiology.

It may seem ironic to say this in a discussion about faith and work, but one of the dangers of this whole conversation is that in our rush to apply our faith to these important areas of life in the world, we may end up making our religion about nothing more than a laundry list of "things to do," and our church experience nothing more than a pit stop to recharge us for the busy work of being exemplary Christians in our economic and civic lives. To do that is to hollow out our faith and ultimately to separate us from both God and the church.

What's the answer? This: Our work must be anchored in, and flow out from, our worship. We are in danger of bridging the sacred-secular divide, but in the wrong direction; not bringing the sacred to the world, but rather secularizing the church. So a well-anchored and vibrant faith-work integration must be anchored in the life of the church — the life of worship together. Then our work will emerge from our worship. IT

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