

1

The Primacy of Receiving

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HERE IS A CONSIDERABLE AMOUNT OF LITERATURE on the spirituality of work. And within that trove there is even more that has been written on the spirituality necessary for the business person to connect his or her faith with the work of business. In addition to these writings, a new entry at the gate of theological and religious reflection is the issue of calling, of being called to do the work one does, more specifically, of being called to a career in business. Is there such a thing? Is God interested in the world of business, so interested that “He” would call one to such a career? This volume has assumed that the answer to these two questions is affirmative. I want to concur with that judgment but with a caveat.

My hesitation is not with the idea that God would call people to the work of business but with whether the foundation of this calling is understood by the Christian business person. To be baptized into Christ is to become part of a new creation. The challenge this brings to believers is to bring the work they do in the old creation into that newness. As Catholic Christianity has understood this, baptism generates three new energies in the baptized, traditionally called “the theological virtues” of

PART I: BUSINESS AS A CALLING

faith, hope and love. The newness the Christian is called to bring about is dependent on these three energies or virtues being exercised.

These theological virtues were given by God to the baptized in order to change the old creation into the new. The transformation is affected by believers' actions undertaken in faith and hope and love. I will elaborate on only one of these actions, the act of believing that being in Christ places one in the new creation and thereby makes us "his own" and brings us out of a condition of decline and death into a condition of progress and life, unending life in fact. The emphasis here is on God's initiative beginning with the Word having been made flesh and culminating in that Word being crucified. What's important about the believer's part in this is the act of believing in these actions of God in Christ and making this doctrine one's own by faith. Evidence of this ownership is its presence in one's consciousness with such frequency and conviction that it affects all one's other actions, indeed one's very identity.

What is incumbent on Christians for their part in making over the old creation into the new is that their regular, secular to speak, actions are done from faith and hope and love. Yet the most unique thing about such actions is that they are co-authored with God as their initiator. Before they are ours they have been "done unto us." This uniqueness was voiced by Mary when she was addressed by the Angel Gabriel. In effect what her words mean is 'I don't really understand what you are saying to me, but be it done unto me according to thy word.' (Lk. 1:38) The Word received grew into an infant, a child, a man, and our salvation was the result. The most important of human achievements begin in the heart of God but have to be received in human hearts and enfleshed in action. The primacy of receivment is the hardest lesson for modern culture to understand. Wanting in this, moderns are sure to overestimate their own importance and actions or underestimate those which are undertaken from faith, hope and love. If this is true for others, it may be especially true for those in business whose success is subject to constant scrutiny and whose failure is broadcast widely.

I want to flesh out the implications of the difference between initiating an action and being the recipient of God's initiative and acting on it. The differentiation I am making here is between what I call a receivment and an achievement wholly self authored. Among other things, understanding this distinction can take the monkey off the back of the Christian business person, or any Christian for that matter, about success or failure, either in their own or others' eyes. I will take just one line from the New Testament, one from the Letter to the Hebrews to be more precise, to show more clearly what I mean

PART I: BUSINESS AS A CALLING

and its implications for the disciple of Christ.

This letter is best understood if the reader has some knowledge of Jewish worship and its liturgical rites, of its ritual sacrifices in particular. The author (unknown) contrasts the efficacy of the rites performed by those under the old law with the situation of those who have been brought into the new creation by their belief in Christ. The former had to make themselves righteous again and again by their liturgical actions, or so the author thinks, whereas the latter have to adhere to the belief that perfect worship has been offered to God by Christ Jesus once and for all. The remarkable contention that is being made here is that by adhering to Christ in faith, one participates in the efficacy of the perfect worship he enacted and offered to God.

The immediate context of the passage is about worship and the effort of the Jewish worshipers to be right with God by their worship. They did this through “sacrifices and offerings, holocausts and sin offerings.” But the author is convinced Yahweh eventually “neither desired nor delighted in” these. (Heb. 10:8) Hence a new way of being right with God is devised, a new covenant or way for God to embrace a people and make them “his” own. That new way is through Jesus and his worship. And the means he used to offer God this worship was himself. He thereby “takes away the first covenant to establish the second.” (Heb. 10:9) As a result “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” (Heb. 10:10) The specific verse that must be pondered and made one’s own by Christians one by one is this: “by this one offering he has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.” (Heb. 10:14) The Holy Spirit testifies to the truth of this and would bear witness to believers one by one that this is true and true of them. The effect? “Their sins and their transgressions I will remember no more...once these have been forgiven, there is no further offering for sin.” (Heb. 10: 15-18) From now on the achievement route to righteousness has been pronounced closed, futile, a cul-de-sac.

So where does this leave the idea of being called? Christ’s followers are called not first and foremost to do anything, but to make their own what has been done unto them. They are to make room in their minds and hearts for this foundational action done on their behalf and on behalf of all peoples and to pin whatever hopes they have for the whole human enterprise on this act of God in Christ—these are the primary activities of one who would respond to their calling. Faith is not now up in the air, but on the ground of history and in the historical person of Jesus and his relationship with God whom

PART I: BUSINESS AS A CALLING

he described with the parental term of “father.” And hope is neither in a nirvana nor for a utopia, but is rooted in two “persons,” God and Jesus, who inaugurated the manner of this transformation. And love is the response one will come to if one comprehends the present and future import of this past event.

But more unpacking of the verse needs to be done. The strong claim that Christ’s offering of himself to God “has forever perfected those who are being sanctified” cannot be glossed over since there is much about the assertion that is counterintuitive. The experience of having been perfected is probably as rare if not rarer than the experience of being sanctified. There is an already component here, it has been done (“forever perfected”) and a still in progress, not yet completed activity (“being sanctified”) that the author is connecting to Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection. Holy with God’s holiness or perfected so as to be right with God—these are horizon changing, identity transforming claims. Or they would be if they were personally appropriated. Part of the evidence that they are seldom so appropriated is the amount of concern there is in followers of Christ to succeed at whatever (even their own spirituality) or the amount of tension they can generate about not failing at whatever. How is this self assessment contrary to the claims of the text? Because, if “forever perfected” means anything, it means that you have already succeeded, you are already a success, and you don’t have to prove yourself to anyone, including yourself, since you have already been “perfected.” You can’t improve on perfect by anything you can do other than believe it. It would be naive to deny that the psychic debris in most of us is mountainous and the very notion of participating in God’s holiness is difficult to fathom. How to fathom it? Maybe the best means is the *epiklesis* prayer, the prayer that asks the Spirit to come upon the gift of holiness God has already conferred so that they might recognized and accepted by their recipients. “The Spirit scrutinizes all matters, even the deep things of God.”(I Cor. 2:10)

One cut into this matter that is closer to the experience of most of us is the paradoxical statement: already holy/not yet holy. It is important to notice the not-yet-finished point in this verse, the still-being-sanctified part. It is on-going, incremental hopefully, progressing also hopefully. How can one have been perfected already and not yet fully sanctified? We need only heed our experience of ourselves to answer the question. The realm of God and the things of God can often seem remote. So, yes, we experience ourselves as both believing but lacking in strong belief, and loving but not always with a selfless love and hoping but not without doubt and uncertainty. This on-going sanctification—such as it is—is a matter of God’s initiative, but it doesn’t take place without our concurrence. It is an

PART I: BUSINESS AS A CALLING

interactive kind of thing between the Spirit and our spirit, with the circumstances through which our sanctification takes place partly of our own making and partly beyond our control. Suffering is often the way we come to see our need for God and our total dependence on God for life and well being. We go through many permutations in our desires before we even know what it is that makes for our spiritual well-being.

The meanings we attach to the people, things and circumstances that touch our lives are very much a part of this matter of sanctification. The Spirit's meanings are learned slowly. It is very easy to assume that the meanings we and our culture attach to things are the same as the meanings God assigns to them. To be in Christ can be experienced superficially as, for example, belonging to a Church or being raised in a faith. The fuller meaning of such a belonging is not plumbed thereby. One can live one's whole life as a Christian and never personally attain to a relationship with him. T.S.Eliot has an apropos comment from another context that expresses well the difference between these two conditions. "They had the experience and missed the meaning."

I have used the verb 'to appropriate' several times so far. The components of what goes into an act of appropriation are salient here. First of all, the person must be attentive to their own affects in relationship to their Christian faith. These can be an experience of allegiance to a creed and to the institutions that have grown up to house that creedal system like their parishes. Or their affect can also be of a personal experience of the person of Christ. Beyond these, there is the act of trying to understand all of this, and here specifically understanding what is being claimed by the text we have been examining. It is that Jesus' relationship with God and us is such that God could and did accept Jesus' self emptying as having the meaning that has been given it in the tradition. To understand is prior to judging its meaning to be so, to be true, and to be true for me; these are necessary steps for appropriation though they may not be experienced as temporally distinct. And, finally, beyond judging the truth of it there is the judgment of the value of the truth. Is it judged to be of such a value that other valued things are considered to be pearls of lesser worth? The radicality of the truth of the doctrine of redemption cannot remain simply cognitional. It must be acted on.

But the first action to be taken, ironically, is to rest in the appropriated truth. Resting in a truth is alien to activists and natural to contemplatives. Since there are few of the latter it would be helpful to pause and look at the act of resting in a truth. Israel's practice was to spend one day a week keeping holy

PART I: BUSINESS AS A CALLING

the Sabbath day. The order of the day was no work, not working, not doing what filled up the other six days. To what end? To re-cognize and savor who was taking care of them the other six days of the week.

To rest in a truth requires that one has set aside or distanced oneself from all the work one has to do to keep body and soul and family and life together. Less arcanelly, to rest is to pray... not busy prayer, rote prayer, wordy prayer, hyper-active prayer...rest prayer.

What clinches the process of self appropriation is the celebration of the truth of the perfection/sanctification process we have already examined. The celebration is done personally and collectively. It is done in the quiet of one's room with the door to other activities shut. No less important is the celebration by the community of disciples who believe similarly, not once, but with regularity. If Eucharist means anything, it means this action of God in Christ on our behalf is what is celebrated and celebrated not by privatized loners but by the community of those who understand that they have been the blessed recipients of this act. The social confirmation of the personal conviction is essential to its being personally deepened and carried on from generation to generation. And, as has already been indicated, this whole process of appropriation whether by the individual or the community is not guaranteed without the Spirit's direct assistance. It is by God's Spirit that we come to know the things of God.

It would be helpful to look at the opposite of self appropriation. Intellectually or spiritually it would be something like: 'fine, if you say so.' Or 'I'll take your word for it.' Or 'I'll go through the motions but I am clueless as to the meaning of the (liturgical) motions.' This indolence would count as a form of ventriloquism in the world of entertainment but in the world of spirituality it is a form of irresponsible, imitative behavior. Laziness might explain the lack of appropriation. Or, indifference might explain it. Distraction might explain it. Idolatry might explain it. The effect of any or all of these is aptly described in the parable of the wedding banquet where the invited guests were uninterested in the invitation. "Then he said to his servants: the banquet is ready but those who were invited were unfit to come."(Matt. 22:8) They all had other more important things to do, thank you.

St. Paul hints at a way of assessing where one is in this matter of the appropriation of the fact of Christ's victory on our behalf. His insight was that from the work of the Spirit in a person, more than cognitional change would happen. He names the behavioral changes in the person who has housed the Spirit of Christ. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith,

PART I: BUSINESS AS A CALLING

mildness and chastity.”(Gal. 5:22) Absent these and the evidence will be anti-social behavior (“hostilities, bickering, jealousy, rivalries, dissensions...Gal.5:20”) that contrasts sharply with the socially desirable benignities that the Spirit generates in those who are attuned to it. The fruits of the Spirit are derivatives from according room to act of redemption in one’s sense of self. The fruits of the “flesh” are derivatives from a life focused on achievement and autonomy and self sufficiency. The way Paul uses the symbol of “flesh” is not to equate it with sin but with an identity that is not accompanied by God in its deepest reaches. The result is disastrous for community in its most local instantiations, like a business, as well as in the larger reaches of neighborhood, city, society, whole cultures.

We need now to go back to the vocation or calling of the business person who believes in Christ. It will always be very particular and protean. Like the vocation of the married person, it will entail so many particulars depending on so many contingencies that it can only be well discerned by the individual Christian *ambulando*. Granted, much help in doing so can be assisted by theological and religious means, and much obscurity about issues that arise in business can be clarified by business ethics. But the main reason for this essay is to give a foundation to the vocation of the Christian business person that can be easily overlooked or taken for granted both by the individual business practitioner and by those who write about the subject. The point of the essay is to suggest that neglect of the centrality of receivement as it has been developed here seriously undermines the potential of a spirituality of a business person to attain to any depth. It would also make it inevitable that he or she would assign a greater importance to achieving success in business than the primordial truth elaborated here contends. Whatever it takes to house this truth in one’s heart and mind relativizes and makes secondary all other actual or potential activities the would-be Christian business person will do in their whole careers in business. To not know this is to misconstrue one’s calling.

Like good Americans we have to come to the ‘so what?’ part of this article. What am I to do with this information? The answer is to believe it and rest in it. Ponder these things in your heart; give thanks alone and with others to the God who has saved you from the onus of having to be self perfecting and autosalvific. It would also seem necessary to repent of the times, possibly even the majority of time, that this truth has been ignored by me especially those times when my own heart has strayed from the dignity of being a temple of the indwelling Spirit. Resolve to judge my own success in business, as also in other matters, by this measure rather than by any of the secular measures of what

PART I: BUSINESS AS A CALLING

constitutes a successful person. And finally have the freedom to announce to others' one's belief and relief and freedom from anxiety as a result of this unmerited receivement.