

Flourishing Faith: A Baptist Primer on Work, Economics, and Civic Stewardship

Chad Brand. 2012. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press. ISBN 978-1-938948-15-2. \$9.95 (paper).

How God Makes the World a Better Place: A Wesleyan Primer on Faith, Work, and Transformation

David Wright with Rebecca Whitesel, Christin Taylor, Patrick Eby, and Keith Reeves. 2012. Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press. ISBN 978-1-93848-17-6. \$9.95 (paper).

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In 2011, at the annual meetings of the Association of Christian Economists, Paul Oslington and others continued ACE's ongoing discussion of "the nature and legitimacy of a distinctly Christian economics" (Oslington, *et al.* 2011). Oslington notes, and readers of the *ACE Bulletin* in 1994 may recall, that this 2011 Symposium reprises an earlier ACE exchange of ideas on the question: *What Should Christian Economists Do?* (See Paul Heyne 1994, J. David Richardson 1994, and John Tiemstra 1994¹). Both the 2011 and the 1994 discussions addressed how Christian economists should reconcile seeming disparities between secular economic thought and Christian theology. Each also focused on two crucial questions. Does a distinctly Christian *economics* exist? How should Christians think about *economic thought*?

Authors David Wright, *et al.* and Chad Brand have written brief and highly readable books that address two closely related but distinctly different questions. First, is there a distinctly Christian *economy*? Second, what should Christians *do* in the *economy*? Both books address the biblical perspective on working in the market place while living lives of biblical holiness and Christian belief. Wright does so from the Wesleyan tradition and Brand does so from the Baptist tradition. As primers, each is intended as an introduction for non-specialists to economic, theological, and ecclesiastical issues of work, saving, investment, and giving. The books are among six currently offered in a series sponsored by the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty.

Each author expresses a perspective on economic freedom that we might compare with what Samuel Gregg has explained as "integral liberty" (2003). This is the freedom to do what we ought, in contrast to mere positive and negative liberties to be empowered to do what we want, and to be free of constraints (Gregg, p. 9). More specifically, this would

be economic freedom within the bounds of Christian belief and behavior, in which we are free to do right things. Brand and Wright therefore are addressing the question, regarding work, income, and wealth: what are those right things to do with our liberties?

Brand on Work, Stewardship, and the State

Zorro's alter-ego in *The Mask of Zorro* (1998), a young man allegedly of privileged Spanish birth, expresses during a dinner party his disdain for the "sweaty pursuits" of common labor. Chad Brand notes that this view and its corollary, that *slaves* and *servants* were meant for work, found earlier expression in Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and most of the ruling elite (Brand, pp. 1-2) in Jesus' time. In contrast, Brand affirms God's call for all of us to work, to "tend the garden." Chapter 1 of his book explains the dual call to worship God and to do work. "Jesus was a laboring man" (p. 5). "In his parables, he often spoke of work ... as honorable" (p. 6). The Apostle Paul taught "the Thessalonians to be hardworking people... 'as unto the Lord'" (p. 7).

Even entrepreneurs can serve God. While Jesus condemns "materialistic" owner-employers, he also "praises other rich men for their honesty and justice" (p. 7). A "faithful disciple" who is an owner-employer will treat "workers with respect and honor," rewarding them appropriately (p. 8). The remainder of the book develops these joint themes of work being an honorable mandate and offering employment to others as another honorable pursuit when done honorably. It also expresses the view that Baptist theology, being independent of any state Church, historically has held to the view that the state, while legitimate, should be limited in its influence over religion and also private economic activity.

Chapter 2 develops a "Theology of Work" as it emerged in church history, especially in ideas and practices of early monastics and of reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin. Brand traces the influence of Calvin through the Puritans to New England, where their hard work and trust in God's provision and direction caused them to thrive. After the Revolutionary War, Brand traces the history of 19th-century migration, innovation, and revival that spread into the American Midwest, which combination also caused believers to thrive. "Out of [the revivals]... the Baptists and Methodists would grow to be the two largest denominations in America by 1850.... The primary approach to ministry by the Baptists was the farmer-preacher" (p. 21). The joint call to preach and farm is notable. Innovation fed industrial development as well, and by "the time of the Civil War there were over 150,000 manufacturing facilities in

America” (p. 22). Railroads extended the reach of American economic development further to the west. Excepting for the system of slave labor, Brand calls this development “America as the Engine of Vocation” (p. 22), referring to the system by which so many individuals could fulfill the call of God to productive and enterprising work.

Chapter 3 develops a “theology of wealth,” reporting “what Scripture and the Christian tradition have had to say about how to put [wealth] to use” (p. 28). The Christian economist will recognize key themes: God created wealth; certain faithful servants of God “flourished” according to OT and NT accounts; certain other wealthy men of the OT and NT were unfaithful to God; “power politics” and “greed for wealth” (p. 30) went hand in hand in Jesus time, as they do today; the poor in spirit, those humble toward God, and those who store up treasures in heaven, will be blessed; serving the Lord comes before all else, including wealth and its pleasures; and we are to keep free from anxiety about wealth, income, and our daily provision, trusting in God to supply our needs. Name-it-and-claim-it theology is out, as is hoping to hide away in a monastery to avoid the work world.² Jesus’ teachings on wealth in the parables and the later NT epistles confirm these general ideas. Jesus also address the spiritual rewards of forgiving debts and of being generous to the poor, as well as the errors of hoarding wealth and of acting unjustly toward workers. Brand then highlights the sins of the wealthy merchants who are called out in Revelation. The chapter concludes with contrasting views on wealth held by “church fathers,” by Aristotle, and by Calvin. This includes Calvin’s defense of receiving interest payments on risky loans to potentially sinful borrowers, but not of excessive interest.

With these helpful introductions to work and wealth in place, Brand turns to broader questions of the nature of the just state and of a biblical view of political economy. Chapter 4 surveys the development of a Christian political theology, from Augustine’s contrast of the “City of God” with the “City of Man” to the Puritans settlement of New England. Aquinas held that a king could lead a Christian state, but Calvin asserted that a Christian state must be democratic, led by wise and godly men, with the state supporting an official church. The Puritans followed Calvin, while Roger Williams left due to his support for a church separated from and independent of a “free state.” Evangelical revivals in the decades prior to political freedom in 1776, led by George Whitfield, created a new group of Americans who were Christian by “new birth” and of mixed denominations, thus ready to put aside narrow beliefs and to adopt the theme of liberty for all in the new nation. Brand quotes historian Paul

Johnson: “The Revolution could not have taken place without this religious background” (p. 65).

Chapter 5 explains that government must be limited in its scope because it is playing with “Other People’s Money.” The chapter rejects programs to redistribute income to achieve equal outcomes, while Brand does favor minimal support for those in need. He is especially favorable to the 1996 reforms to U.S. welfare programs passed by President Clinton and the Congress, reforms that emphasized moving able-bodied recipients from welfare to work. He is against corporate welfare that goes toward crony capitalists, such as a leader of Solyndra who bundled political gifts for a presidential candidate, after which Solyndra received guaranteed loans at tax-payer expense. This is but one example of the overly strong state giving other people’s money to what regulators knew to be a failing enterprise. Brand labels Rome and 17th century France as fascist, with increasing state control and taxation of not only enterprise but of other weaker states as well. He then expresses a fear that “America may be going the same way, unless we have ... change at the top” (p. 85).

Chapter 6, on “Political Economy,” contrasts a laissez-faire state that will “simply let the economy alone” with other state forms through the last 2000 years. He explains how the overly large fascist state of Rome failed, leaving Europe first with a system of small manorial states in the feudal era, followed by the rise of mercantilist nation states in the 1500s. Then came Adam Smith in 1776 explaining his notion of the minimal state and a system of “natural liberty” with “free markets.” Brand explains that Smith’s minimal state coincided with rapid economic development, invention, and innovation in England in the late 1700s and 1800s. Yet Smith’s system required “a general commitment to moral transactions” and a “shared societal ethic” regarding “honesty in advertising, integrity in business, fair treatment of employees, and other kinds of moral [commercial] standards” (p. 98). Emerging after Smith are Marx and Keynes, whose views Brand explains and dismisses. As proof that a redistributive ethic and a Keynesian stimulus program do not work, the author points to the sluggish recovery in the United States from the 2008-09 recession, pointing to a worsening unemployment rate after January 2009. He compares this “massive overreach” to “Solomon’s and Rehoboam’s attempts to create a great and magnificent administrative state” (p. 106). Brand fears the “loss of our souls and the souls of our grandchildren” apparently due to the loss of a work ethic and to the ongoing trade of freedom for “security” (p. 107).

Chapter 7, “Baptists and Flourishing,” asserts that Baptist churches and their associations have grown due to their adherence to biblical principles

that are consistent with innovation, productive labor, private charity, and limited government. Brand also asserts that the Baptist “free church” flourished spiritually and numerically because its organizational structure was superior to the bureaucratic state-church form. In short, consider this comparison. Official state churches are as inflexible as the Hudson Bay Company trappers were due to their bureaucratic control by company officers in London who were thousands of miles and six months away by boat. On the other hand, independent Baptist churches and independent Methodist churches were as flexible as the Northwest Trading Company trappers whose entrepreneurial form of independent owner-trapper-traders out competed Hudson Bay’s trappers, in spite of geographical and cost disadvantages.³ In any organization, entrepreneurial leaders can respond more rapidly than bureaucratic followers to changing circumstances. All well and good when change is in a beneficial direction.

Wright on Work, Conversion, and God’s Call to Transformation

David Wright’s book develops its ideas on work, wealth, and transforming culture from a step-by-step explanation of Wesleyan teaching and practice. The purpose is to show that God makes the world a better place as converts to the faith hold more closely to John Wesley’s teachings on earning, saving, and giving money, and on the call of converts to transform society. Our work is not merely a personal good. As a social good, our work makes *others’* lives better while we also benefit materially and spiritually along the way.

Why a theological explanation of work? The “Introduction” lists four reasons: we spend more time working than any other activity, most of our personal resources for living are rewards for work, we bless others primarily through our work, and work either promotes our sense of wellbeing or erodes it. Wright and his co-authors “are writing specifically for those whose faith has been shaped in the Wesleyan tradition.” The authors also “offer these principles of whole-life discipleship to the whole body of Jesus followers” (Wright p. xv). At the heart of the Wesleys’ belief is that “people are created in the image of God,” which image “was damaged in the fall” (p. xvi). Three principles emerged in the Wesleys’ ministry of “caring for people that had been forgotten.” First, our “personal commitment to spiritual well-being” welcomes personal “discipleship” and encourages our “works of piety.” Second, through our “personal intervention with social systems,” we “improve the lot of our community’s least powerful members.” Third, through our “personal engagement with the needs of others,” we engage in “works of mercy,” following “Jesus

command to love our neighbor” (p. xvi-xvii).

How does this Introduction to works of piety and works of mercy engage the market economy? In the second principle, Wright, *et al.*, state the following:

We are concerned not only with the poor, but the structures that promote a healthy community where people can overcome poverty. These social systems include legal, political, and economic systems that enable the creation of well-being for all. The vast system of exchange that we call “the economy” is a critical element of the stewardship position God has given us. Like work, economic exchange doesn’t just move goods around; it creates value and well-being because we are serving one another’s needs (pp. xvi-xvii).

What will the book’s perspective on wealth be? Consider the Introduction’s quote from John Wesley: “[Wealth] is an excellent gift of God, answering the noblest ends. In the hands of his children, it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, raiment for the naked” (p. xvii).

The book and its cases are organized into four Parts, with Parts Three and Four containing three chapters each. While the chapters of Brand’s book emphasize church history and political economy, chapters of Wright’s book include current and historical case studies of notable people who illustrate how precisely God has used converts to make their world a better place.

“Part One: Why Work and Economics Matter,” for instance, begins with the story of a woman working in “Britain’s halls of power” who finds herself unemployed (p. 1-3). As she struggled with impacts of “redundancy” or unemployment on her life, she reported comprehensive effects on “my identity, my faith, my income, my home, my diet, my health, my wardrobe and my self worth” (p. 3). The lesson? Work “mattered ... to every aspect of her well-being” (p. 5). Moreover, her work before and after unemployment contributed to the wellbeing of others, which effect was lost during unemployment. Two of Wesley’s insights, closely related to this case, emerge in the rest of the book:

First, [Wesley] knew that ... the transforming power of Jesus Christ would give individuals strength and dignity in the face of these cataclysmic economic events. ... Second, he also knew that our experience of work is embedded deeply within the larger social network of the economy, which in turn is shaped by the legal and political

structure of society (p. 7).

Therefore, Wesley was concerned with introducing people to Christ and with reshaping economic institutions and organizations to promote others' wellbeing. What should be the role of government in promoting people's wellbeing?

John Wesley knew that government helps the economy flourish when it safeguards the rule of law and personal liberties, ensures fair play, and expands opportunities for people to become self-supporting and successful (p. 8).

In short, our work keeps us well while also making others well. So the church and the government should promote work and those systems that enable work on behalf of the wellbeing of those least able to provide for themselves.

"Part Two: How Conversion Transforms the Way We Work" begins with a scientific observation that an expert's ability to apply knowledge skillfully, compared to the novice relative inability, "has less to do with innate talents of the experts than it does with long immersion in their chosen activity" (p. 12). Would it take anything less than long immersion in the practice "to become an expert disciple of Jesus Christ"? Wright argues for Wesleyans to become experts, not only at their work, but also as disciples by investing the requisite "ten thousand hours in spiritual activities like Bible reading, prayer and worship" (p. 13). Jesus' disciples should also be willing to use their time *at work* to "learn and apply godly principles to [their] life's work." Conversion should change how we approach work as well as worship. This is part of "whole-life discipleship."

"Part Three: Who God Has Called Us to Be" explores further this idea of whole-life discipleship. It begins by accepting the "message of personal conversion through faith in Jesus Christ" (p. 17). Conversion is not getting ready to go to heaven. It is a "present thing" that changes us now. Conversion from who we were to who we are called to be is prior to our work as transformers of the culture and the economy. We are called to "perfect love of God and perfect love of neighbor" (p. 20). Personal conversion, supported by systems of personal accountability developed in the Wesleyan "method," prepared converts for works of service that then changed England and the world. How does conversion affect our work? "When we walk in company with Jesus we begin a life of complete transformation that leads to peace within ourselves, and love of God and our neighbors. ... We come to work as changed people, and work comes to us in a whole new way" (p.24).

What kinds of people are Christians called to be and how do those

characteristics affect economic activity? Chapters 1, 2, and 3 of Part Three develop three character traits to which converts to Christ are called, to be: people of assurance, people of integrity, and people of authenticity. Assurance of God's calling overcomes the "[i]nsecurity and fear [that] are terrible burdens to carry into our work" (p. 28). In a "world ... awakened to the desperate need for the renewal of ethics," personal integrity is most welcome (p. 35). Authentic Christians, who are true to the character of *Jesus Christ*, the original ideal for us, are an antidote to those people who seek to be authentically true to their *own* selfish hopes and misguided desires.

"Part Four: What God Has Called Us to Do" explores the effects of Christian converts in the work place, as they serve as "salt and light" (p. 50). Converts would not only be transformed in their hearts, but then, being "zealous of good works," would also act in such ways as to transform the societies around them (p. 52). Membership in Wesleyan Society had responsibilities: "to do no harm by avoiding evil, ... to do works of mercy, ... [and] to make use of the ordinances of God ... public worship, public and private reading of the Bible, taking the Lord's supper, praying, and fasting" (pp. 54-55). The "discipleship challenges" of the Wesleyan movement are "to become holy people" and "to make our homes, ... communities, ... and society ... holy" (p. 56). We who "enjoy the great benefits of political liberty" are more free to shape our society and "to do so overtly as a holy people, the people of Jesus Christ" (p. 57). We will "use our influence to shape communities that honor fairness and justice as well as compassion and mercy" (p. 57). We will "care for those most vulnerable, ... most in danger of being destroyed by their own personal failures and the broader forces at work in society" (p. 57).

Here are specific economic challenges of participating in Wesleyan Society. We are to promote "values of freedom, access, fairness, and dignity for all" (p. 58). We are to be more industrious, creative, disciplined, and thrifty (p. 58). Out of those personal habits will flow wealth that we can then use "to ensure the well-being of others, not simply to collect the wealth into great personal estates" (p. 58).

What is the role of government legislation in this effort to improve persons? Wright is unenthusiastic about legislation:

Lifestyles don't change because of legislation.
 Legislation, by itself, will not make a community holy. If
 lifestyles change, they change because our hearts change.
 Our hearts change when we encounter Jesus Christ, and
 embrace a life of loving, meaningful service to others
 (p. 58).

Instead of legislation, Wright points to the role of discipleship in directing our selves and our communities toward biblical economic virtues of “honesty/integrity, prudence, ... frugality/thrift, contentment, ... industriousness,” and away from vices of “coveting, greed, idolatry, partiality” (p. 56). While we can legislate thrift, success in encouraging thrift requires a “system that allows and rewards thrift” and “a people whose hearts are motivated to pursue thrift” (p. 56).

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 complete Part Four by exploring three callings. These are to do three sorts of work: “work that promotes personal wellbeing” (Ch 5), work “that promotes social and economic wellbeing” (Ch 6), and work “that is an expression of Christian compassion.” Each of these chapters further develops the themes in the introduction to Part Four. Chapter 4 includes a thoughtful discussion of making the workplace a healthy place, especially psychologically. Fair pay and fair treatment are minimal requirements. More is needed. For Wright, a “‘covenant relationship’ with our work” is superior to the usual mere “transactional relationship” (p. 66). He also addresses problems of bullying in the workplace, and urges us to be peace makers there (pp. 80-81). In Chapter 5, Wright combines his personal experiences in Haiti with a discussion of why some nations are rich and others poor, concluding that legal and moral institutions matter (pp. 95-101). Chapter 6 highlights our call to be compassionate with the proceeds of our work and reminds us of John Wesley’s teaching to earn, save, and share as much money as we can (pp. 113-114).

The final section of the book, “Conclusions”, contrasts an unconverted will at work with the converted will at work. While we may wish not to work at all, we are not freed by conversion from work. Instead, we are freed to enjoy work, “to experience work as the expression of all that is most beautiful and magnificent about us” (p. 122). Instead of a “lifetime of self-centered pursuit” (p. 123), Wright encourages us to “use [our] influence to nurture the kind of economic and legal systems that favor meaningful, rewarding work” (p. 124).

Summary Thoughts

Brand’s and Wright’s discussions of economic virtues and vices are especially instructive for students of business, economics, and sociology who are unfamiliar with new-institutional writing on the role of formal legal institutions and informal moral institutions in promoting trust in commerce. The ideas are simply expressed here, as they have been elsewhere, with no graphs or algebra! Economic growth depends on

a foundation of formal constitutional protections of rights, economic liberties, and the rule of law. Good informal institutions, however, also promote economic development and poor relief through social systems of steady, productive work and voluntary exchange.

These two books add to Douglass North's (1990) description of the economic effects of informal institutions of 19th-century Americans on their high rate of economic development. As North put it, "Effective traditions of hard work, honesty, and integrity simply lower the costs of transacting, and make possible complex, productive exchange patterns" (1990, p.138). North, however, pointed to an uncertain and long evolutionary process by which successful institutions developed (1990, p.138). Brand's and Wright's discussions of work ethic and integrity explain what North left out: a precise historical source for such trust-enhancing, transactions-cost-reducing informal economic attitudes. For them these efficient informal institutions emerged in widespread Wesleyan, Baptist, and more broadly Evangelical experiences of spiritual conversion, belief and commercial practice.

What independent evidence supports Wright's claims, for instance, that Wesleyan influence improved the working class in England? The secular French historian, Elie Halevy, reported that by the early 1800s, the work of Wesleyan ministers had reformed the English work force, preparing it for the challenges of daily productive work in factories and the mines. In addition, Halevy asserted, the Methodist movement saved England from the tragedies of the French revolution.

Each of these two books is well suited as a non-technical introduction to biblical and theological aspects of work, wealth, church history, and economic systems. Brand is broadly biblical and historical, offering a Baptist perspective on religious and economic freedom, and on related matters of recent U.S. economic history. He addresses questions of political economy, including the development of church-state relations and the administrative state. Wright draws specifically from the Wesleyan tradition regarding conversion and discipleship and shows their practical potential to influence the work place for the good of all. Wright also emphasizes private personal and social assistance for the poor as part of the holiness tradition. Together, the authors assert that economic and religious liberty are consistent with and important to Baptist and Wesleyan traditions regarding work and private commerce with others and compassion for others.

Each could be a primary reading in a small-group study, a supplemental reading in relevant college business courses (i.e., management and

human-resources) or in economics, sociology, or church-history courses. Wright especially hopes to influence teachers and pastors, and both books would be helpful for pastoral staff as they wrestle with questions about government policy, private enterprise, religious and economic liberties, and how to foster economic change for the better. How might Christian college students react? In a small seminar on economics, two of four students indicated, after reading earlier versions of this review, that they would like to read the books for themselves. These two books may well generate important discussion among those in the Baptist and Wesleyan traditions about beliefs that they hold on work and economics, as editors of the series intended.

Endnotes

- 1 A discussion of their articles follows in the 1994 *ACE Bulletin*, 23, 37-44, with comments by John Anderson, Robin Klay, and Kurt C. Shaefer. A copy of that issue of the *Bulletin* is available online at: <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/economics/faculty/bios/Schaefer%20docs/Discussion%20of%20Tiemstra,%20Heyne,%20Richardson%20on%20Christianity%20and%20Economics.pdf>. As the “Announcements” (*Bulletin* p. 2) explains, the articles and comments emerged from papers and discussion delivered at an ACE workshop held at Gordon College, on January 1st and 2nd, 1994, and sponsored by Gordon’s Economics Department. Papers were to address the question: “What Should (Christian) Economists Do?”
- 2 Brand had already noted in Ch. 2 that monasteries were, rather than refuges from work, medieval centers of hard work, industry, and productive innovation (p. 16).
- 3 On the comparison of trapping companies, see Milgrom & Roberts (1992), Ch. 1.

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