Part 1 of 2: Challenges to the Faith and Work Movement
with
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Welcome to The Table, we discuss issues of God and culture and today our topic is Economics, Theology that Works, and our guest is Greg Forster who probably has racked more time on The Table podcast than any other single expert that we have interviewed up to this point. This is I think our fifth in a series of theology of work podcasts Greg and we really do appreciate your willingness to be part of this.

Well I've had a great time and I appreciate be on and I'm looking forward to some sort of pin or something that you can give me for achievement.

That's right, yeah, so many hours I guess, frequent flier miles I guess is kind of the equivalent but anyway –

There you go, frequent talker miles.

That's right, our goal today is kind of wrap up this document that we've been through in multiple parts and to kind of pull everything together, this is part of the Economic Wisdom project, it is a part of the Oikonomia Network and the Kern Family Foundation and just to remind people, when we talk about economy we're talking about a term that comes from a Greek word, oikonomoeo or oikonomia depending on whether you want the noun or the form of the verb and it basically means to manage the house, to take care of the household. And you've got suggestions right here at the conclusion about things that the Theology of Work Movement hasn't done, so why don't we do a little summary here, where in your mind does the Theology of Work Movement stand and what does it need to kind of move into a more robust and mature kind of engagement?
Well I think it is at an impressive point where for about a century it has been growing in response to both religious changes, in the American and English speaking worlds as people have grown more and more concerned about secularization of public spaces, that underlying sort of anxiety that faith is being relegated to a private realm. And as the sort of dilemmas and the pressures have pushed people more and more to challenge the model of the church that we've inherited in which religious professionals deal primarily with church-related activities and don't speak very intentionally into the issues of work and the workplace. So I think after a long period of gestation it is now blooming in a really impressive way, a lot of people who are not traditional faith and work people are beginning to realize the importance of this agenda, they're beginning to embrace it, they're seeing that it's about much more than just sort of five bullet points for how to do your work in a different way. But it really, it gets to very deep issues of the kingdom of God and how we manifest our faith in all of our lives. And I think this is challenging the movement with some very significant growth needs that I think it is beginning to realize it has but that we're not really on the radar even five years ago or ten years ago when the movement was not yet blossoming in this big way. I think one of those major needs is to speak to a wider variety of workers. So in the past the faith and work movement has mostly attracted white collar, middle class management, and a middle management and above-type workers and it has mostly grown to serve them and that was a natural result of the situation historically. Those were the people who were able to create and sustain the movement, those were the people who had opportunities, and honestly a lot of the movement sustains itself through things like book sales and so if that's where your sustenance is you kind of have to serve that constituency.

But I think there's a growing appreciation of the fact that the movement does not adequately serve blue collar workers and people who are in non-traditional areas of service. It doesn't speak very much to people who don't think of themselves as in the "marketplace" traditionally understood, so teachers for example and stay-at-home moms, are not well-served in most cases by existing forms of the faith and work movement because the faith and work movement talks about the marketplace and many of them don't think of themselves as part of a marketplace. And the movement has simply not thought about stay-at-home moms as a faith and work arena but it very much is. So that's one major need and I think that we're just at the beginning point of people attempting to reach those audiences and we have not yet discovered I think all the issues that are gonna be involved in making those connections.
We're starting to. One thing that I've been concerned about is that the faith and work movement has very much followed a method of starting with kind of God Cares About Your Work 101. You know work is good, work is an opportunity to serve God, God is with you in your work, work was there before the fall, work is not a curse, and it's just, it's very, it's optimistic, it's hopeful, it's got lots of sort of bright positive stuff about work, and a lot of people when they hear that they just roll their eyes and say, "Yeah that sounds like a nice theory but you should try doing my job." Their experience of work is very negative, it's broken, they're dealing with all kinds of just wrong situations, toilsome situations, suffering, and I think the faith and work movement without losing its grounding in the Christian virtue of hope which is essential, and that sort of theological imperative to affirm the goodness of the creation order. Because if you don't affirm the goodness of the creation order you're going to go down all kinds of wrong theological roads and that ends very badly. But without losing that we need to find better ways to speak to people whose starting point is brokenness and toil and darkness and in many cases evil and injustice, that they experience in their work. We have to be able to start there with people.

*Dr. Darrell Bock* Yeah it's an interesting question. You know I'm reminded of the video that I just got that I think you all were partially responsible for helping produce called Going on Vocation and the interesting thing about that is just to show you the array of vocations that were discussed in that video, it seems to me I remember there was a bee keeper in that group, there was a stay-at-home dad, say we don't talk about stay-at-home moms much less stay-at-home dads. And a lot of discussion about kind of the average everyday worker, I think there were waitresses who were interviewed who do, who just wait tables and that kind of thing, kind of an example of filling in the gap that you're talking about here.

*Greg Forster* Yes and I was very pleased to see that, I take that as an example of the movement branching out in new ways and finding new ways to do these kinds of things.

*Dr. Darrell Bock* So if someone were interested in getting a hold of that video because I do think it's a nice little summary of Theology of Work kind of looking at it from the worker's point of view, how would they get a hold of that video?
Just Google Going on Vocation and you may have to correct Google, it might think you were looking for Going on Vacation but the title is Going on Vocation, there's a website, it should be available through all the major sellers, Amazon and all those services.

Okay so we've dealt with one aspect which is this including all workers, another category that's pretty significant is what you have generically called in the piece economic wisdom, but actually you're talking about economic systems, you're thinking about thinking about the economy not just in individualized terms but in more corporate and social and systemic terms, right?

Yes, and it's important to realize when we talk about the economy we don't mean numbers on spreadsheets, we don't mean talking heads on TV yelling at each other over public policy. You know spreadsheets and numbers and graphs are really important and I'm all for that, I'm a social scientist myself, that's where my training is, and political issues, you know, public policy issues is important and legitimate and we need to have all those discussions. But the economy is not fundamentally those things, the economy is millions of people exchanging their work with each other and when we do our work we are embedded in this big web of relationships where I do my work and you purchase the product and you do your work and I purchase the product and we're connected to each other through economic exchange. And this is one of the primary ways that God connects us to other human beings is through our work, through coworker relationships and also through marketplace exchange.
And the faith and work movement has partaken of a general tendency towards individualistic experience where we want to think about how do I experience my work and how do I serve God with my work and how do I deal with my problems in my work which is all, those are all legitimate questions but we need to understand that we are social creatures, we're made to be embedded in these relationships, we're made for culture and we're made for society. And so when we work we are a part of these systems of exchange and that's a really fundamental part of how we work and why we work. We don't just want the person on the factory floor standing there pulling the lever on the machine thinking about how do I do my job with honesty and diligence and virtue and all those things. We also want that person to be asking what does this lever do, how does this lever have an impact on my community, and if you know what the product you're making is and why people want to buy it then you can evaluate is this a good thing that I'm doing, am I involved in contributing value to my community through the product or the service that I'm helping to provide.

And then if technological change or globalization takes that job away from you, if you are able to think in terms of how you serve customers and how you serve the community you'll be much better equipped to ask okay the previous situation I was in, the job that I had is gone but my vocation to serve the community has not been taken away, my occupation, my job is not the same as my vocation which is the calling to serve God and neighbor. So how can I now think about other opportunities I might have to contribute value to others? Seeing that system that we're a part of helps us to recover from disruption and from the just general environment of fast-paced change and in many cases seeming chaos which is going to be continuing to be a part of our experience of work for some time to come.

*Dr. Darrell Bock*  
Now when we think about this what does this actually require, I mean I don't see theologians necessarily writing in these areas, it seems to me this is a request for Christian economists and Christian sociologists to kind of chime in and apply their expertise to these areas that they understand in a way and study in a way that others don't.
Yeah I think we need both, we need theologians to write thoughtfully about economic systems and practices and realities, and we need Christian economists to consider and write about the theological, moral, and metaphysical roots of their discipline. And in the Oikonomia Network we've begun some of those conversations and it's still at an early stage but I'm very encouraged about it. We're doing some important re-integrating of intellectual questions that have been separated into different silos in a way that harms both fields. And so I think on the one hand we need to take seriously the moral and transcendent nature of the universe we live in that all human activity is morally freighted, there's no morally neutral activity, there's morally neutral social systems or institutions.

And in fact the unseen world has a dramatic affect on our daily experience and we need to understand scripture and we need to understand the natural revelation as well and understand our lives in that light. On the other hand we need to take seriously the integrity of the creation order that God has given us so we need to see economists not as sort of bean counters who are wedded necessarily to a truncated metaphysic and sort of dismiss their contribution on grounds that many of them in the past have been sort of aggressively resistant to theology and metaphysics. But we need to recognize that many of them are not that way and that many of them welcome a theological and metaphysical perspective on their discipline. And because God has created the creation order with integrity, that it is not chaotic, that it is, it works in a way that's rationally intelligible, the human mind is able to explore and discover how creation works and the human will is able to take meaningful action within that creation order. And that means that science is an important part of how we discover what God has done and is doing in the world because science's job is to investigate that creation order which does have an intelligible orderliness to it. And bringing together the people who have a systematic knowledge of God's word and the people who have a systematic knowledge of this particular aspect of the creation order that is economic activity is I think going to produce major fruit for the church in the generation to come.
You know I attended an event at Southwestern Seminary; this has now been oh probably a year and a half ago, again something sponsored by the Kern Family Foundation in which there were economists and New Testament scholars meeting together, talking about how scripture handles the topic of money and possessions. And the economists who presented because they a theological interest really made for a completely kind of difference than most of the conferences that I attend because of the way in which money and the impact of money and the impact of thinking through what an expanded economy does for people. One of the presentations was a discussion of distinguishing between greed and self-interest versus flourishing and how possessions can help with that and the way in which since the industrial revolution really our economic world has expanded in a way that has given access to more people. All of that is stuff that I don't remember ever having a class in seminary that ever discussed any of those topics or made us think about them at all but they're very, very; it's a very important practical angle on the conversation it seems to me.

Yes and one thing that has encouraged me very much both from that and a number of other conferences that we've been involved in – in the Oikonomia Network, I've talked to people who've tried to start these conversations in the past and they are reporting that more recent conversations have been much more fruitful, that ten years ago when economists and theologians got together they talked past each other a good deal, that they were using the same words to mean different things and it was very difficult to even have a real meeting of the minds even so far as to disagree fruitfully because they were just speaking different languages and their worlds, their mental worlds were not intelligible to one another and so it was very slow going. And people who have been involved in these things over time are reporting that the more recent conferences have been a lot more fruitful, that we're overcoming some of these language boundaries and we're having a lot more fruitful discussions so I'm very encouraged about that.

Yeah, it is an interesting development. Now the third emphasis that you bring that obviously is part of why we're doing these podcasts and having these discussions is to pull in pastors and local churches into the conversation to make sure that they are contributing what they have to offer, as I would see it as part of an extension of almost thinking about discipleship, is that the point of this third area with pastors and local churches?
I think that's a large part of it, this is central to discipleship because work and the economy are so central to our lives that if that part of our lives remains secularized or unconverted then Christianity as I've said on many occasions borrowing from Mark Green, "Christianity becomes a leisure time activity." something that we do in our off hours, a few hours a week. I think that getting the local church and the pastor involved is a absolutely critical turning point in the history of the faith and work movement, I can't say enough about the importance of that. And let me give you a quick anecdote that I think illustrates how important this is, I was at a conference last year where a significant leader in the faith and work movement talked about how in the 1940s and 1950 after World War II, teenagers and adolescents became a big part of American culture, we had this sort of radical new direction in American culture where teenagers, it was a thing now that it never was before. You were expected to have extraordinary experiences during that part of your life and people, the church didn't know how to deal with it, it caught the church completely by surprise and so during that period and shortly after large para-church organizations grew up to serve that portion of God's people, all the youth oriented organizations –

Yeah Youth for Christ, Young Life, Campus Crusade all of those –

Campus Crusade, yep, they all grow up at that point because the local church did not know what to do but then later you saw the emergence of something called the youth pastor and this was a critical turning point you said when the local church began to get it's feet under it in terms of how to deal with people as they go through this tumultuous period of life. And the energy and the growth sort of switched not that these para-church organizations became unimportant but that they didn't, they were not longer growing the same way because the growth in how we deal with this shifted to the local church.
And he said now I run a para-church organization for faith and work and the only reason my organization exists is because local churches are not helping people make this faith work connection, said that's what I really want to see, I don't want my organization to keep growing, I want the local church to take that growth away from me, I want the local church to figure out how to do faith and work and then I won't be needed anymore, I want to be put out of business by the local church. I was very, very encouraged by that and so when my turn at the conference was to get up I talked about what we're doing in seminaries and local churches, we're working hard to put him right out of business, that's our goal. And he had this big smile, ear-to-ear smile across his face, he loved it, so I think this is, you know the local church and the pastor are central to how God equips his people, this is the design, this is how it's supposed to work, not that we want to fall into a sort of worship of the local church or an idolatry of the local church but there's also a danger of neglecting the central of the pastor and the local church. Now when we first started pursuing this I got warned by a lot of people, now watch out, the faith and work movement has a lot of anti-clerical people in it, a lot of people who have a chip on their shoulder about the local church because they feel like the local church looks down on the non-clergy, on the people who have business professions, and they feel neglected and they feel wronged and you're going to encounter opposition.

I have to tell you I have not encountered that, what I have encountered are people who feel alienated or estranged from the local church but when they see the local church coming to the table and saying hey recognize this as a growth area that we need to get on the ball here, we need to do this, that there has not been resentment, there has not been resistance, not much, I mean I won't say it's perfect but I've been very, very encouraged by the willingness of people who have been estranged from local churches and from pastors essentially to let the past be the past and start looking at how do we re-grow the connections between economic professionals and religious professionals. It's a major problem in the church that large numbers of economic professionals are estranged from the local church, this is hurting both the church and the economic professionals but I'm very encouraged that I've encountered very little resistance to the need to bring those parties back together.
Dr. Darrell Bock: Yeah and here I think the example of work like Tom Nelson in Kansas City stands out where here's a pastor who's made, who's really taken the initiative to connect with his work people to make sure that his messages connect to life in the workplace in a significant kind of way, drawing them in and drawing the energy that that brings to a local church much less to the health that that gives to the people who are in the workplace, creating a nice synergy between the church and life and things like that. And so his work is I think one example of the type of thing that you're talking about.

Greg Forster: Yes and I think part of the key, the two, say the two key things that Tom models that I have also seen in a number of other pastors who are successful in this, one is that he begins by acknowledging that this is something the church ought to be doing and is not doing or is not doing well. And I think that overcomes most of the potential ill-will on the other side, essentially to come to the table and say you know what, this is the church's job and we have not been doing it or we have not been doing it as well as we need to be doing it. And that's all it takes –

Dr. Darrell Bock: That's right –

Greg Forster: And I think that that's, an admission of that kind is essential to reconciliation in any situation where people are hurt. Another key to what I think Tom and other pastors are doing is they're investing time, that is a costly investment to spend your time going to people's workplaces and talking to them and listening to them. And that investment of time is always respected, particularly I think economic professionals understand the value of time, they understand that if you're willing to put your time into this you are paying a price for it and they will recognize that and acknowledge it and I think that has been part of the secret sauce for the pastors who are doing this well.