



Eccentric Wisdom: The Basis for Centered Life

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THANKS BE TO GOD FOR WORLDLY WISDOM

Centered Life is an initiative of Luther Seminary to strengthen the callings of God's people in the world.¹ This work of Christian wisdom—equipping all God's people for their work in the world—has been identified as “the unfinished Reformation.” Communities are being challenged to discipline their lip service with practices that honor the priesthood of believers. One of the saints said, “Every week we are sent to ‘Go in peace! Serve the Lord!’ But next Sunday who even thinks to ask how it went?”

As *Christian* wisdom this initiative relies on God's gospel promise for sinners and for the world, including us. Some traditions primarily teach disciplines of human spiritual ascent or define ideal characteristics of people who lead holy or purposeful lives by the biblical rules, but Centered Life begins with God as the active subject and ultimate cause of every blessing in and through our lives. The mission we serve is God's.

¹For an overview of the work of Centered Life, see the article in this issue by Jack Fortin, “The Centered Life Initiative: Equipping the Saints,” *Word & World* 25/4 (2005) 363–372.

Centered Life is based in the biblical wisdom that centers the calling of the Christian outside of the self in the mission of God for the sake of the neighbor; that welcomes the positive contributions of “worldly” wisdom; that appreciates the earthly character of human life. Centered Life leads Christians to ask, wherever they are, “What is God doing in this place?”

Still, to speak of the work of Christian *wisdom* is to remember that ancient biblical wisdom made use of the broad cultural resources of the Babylonians, the Persians, the Egyptians, the Greeks, and the Romans. Contemporary Christian wisdom also draws deeply from the springs of worldly knowledge. A chemist at a Christian college does not learn Christian science, but seeks to understand the natural order with a holy regard for its complexity. For the world to be trustworthy and explored in the splendor of its diversity, some of us need to learn about electronics and heart disease and economics and Bach concertos. Or to get down to particulars, my mother-in-law was amused and impressed when a grocery clerk advised her, “Lady, there’s a lot to know about pickles!” Respect for what other people know and do expands our visions of God’s work in the world.

In the present North American context, the “how-to” bookshelves are filled with remarkable proposals for greater productivity, effectiveness, and achievement. Rich in practical counsel, they focus on the practices that will best embody enduring values for those who are exercising influence in their communities. The demand for this worldly wisdom increases with the accelerating rate of change, reinforced by a performance-driven culture. Some best-selling books appeal directly to our ambitions to *Swim with the Sharks without Being Eaten Alive*. Others define the principle-centered practices of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Rick Warren’s book on *The Purpose-Driven Life* has touched many lives with his self-consciously Christian wisdom about the power of purpose.²

As one who needed help in a leadership role, I found three authors whose wisdom has almost theological clarity, although they all refrain from faith claims: Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*; Ron Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers*; and James C. Collins, *Good to Great*.³ They have systemic insight as to why organizations and communities thrive with good leadership. None of them lists the attributes of heroic leaders. Senge’s description of the *metanoia* or “change of mind” in learning organizations resounds with biblical uses of this word as “repentance” or even “conversion.” Heifetz respects the courage and even the suffering required of leaders during profound or “adaptive” change.

Collins studied good companies that became great while facing major transitions, and he found what he called “Level Five Leadership” at the helm of every one of them. These were not high-profile figures with large egos. Instead, “they were self-effacing individuals who displayed the fierce resolve to do whatever needed to be done to make the company great.” When Darwin Smith of Kimberly-Clark was asked to describe his “management style,” Smith “just stared back from the other

²Harvey Mackay, *Swim with the Sharks without Being Eaten Alive: Outsell, Outmanage, Outmotivate, and Outnegotiate Your Competition* (New York: HarperBusiness, 1988); Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989); Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

³Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 2000); Ron Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1994); James C. Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap, and Others Don’t* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001).

side of his nerdy-looking black-rimmed glasses. After a long, uncomfortable silence, he said simply: ‘Eccentric.’”⁴

His “eccentricity” was not mere peculiarity. His management style was “ec-centric” because he was centered outside of himself. It wasn’t about him. It was about the company’s mission and the work of its people serving others. His practical wisdom resembles the earthy characters in Jesus’ stories, even the “dishonest manager” about whom Jesus said, “[T]he children of this age are more shrewd [prudent/wise: *phronimos*] in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light” (Luke 16:8).

Smith’s remark also recalls the self-deprecating wisdom of the Apostle Paul. Especially in his letters to the church in Corinth, Paul made repeated comments about the weakness and foolishness of his ministry. In other contexts, it is clear that Paul was not unduly burdened with modesty. Even in these letters, his protestations of weakness and foolishness are part of an ironic or even cynical attack on his adversaries. In his verbal volleys against the “super-apostles” (2 Cor 10–12; esp. 2 Cor 11:5), he is practicing the bites and barbs with which the Cynic and Stoic preachers of his day publicly jabbed each other.

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But Paul’s wisdom runs deeper, confident in the God whose wisdom was enacted in the foolishness of the cross. His ec-centricity is not mere peculiarity. It means standing with his Christian companions outside of themselves. “If we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ urges us on,” causing them to regard others no longer “from a human point of view” (2 Cor 5:13–21). Paul is “ecstatic” in his awareness of the Spirit bearing witness with his spirit. Paul is “eccentric” in the sense that his life is not centered in himself, but outside of himself in Christ Jesus.

The Centered Life initiative is an engagement in God’s mission to reconcile the world to God in every earthly domain where God’s people go every week. In the midst of the many arenas of worldly wisdom, Christians are confident, but not only in themselves. Their wisdom is “ec-centric,” centered outside of themselves in Christ for the world, and “ec-static,” alive to the Spirit’s agency in and through them. “So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us” (2 Cor 5:20).

This work is neither evangelism nor social action in the contemporary sense of those terms, but it will make a congregation attractive to those who yearn to bring their lives to God, and it will help every disciple of Jesus be of earthly good. Nor is this traditional stewardship education, but it does define

⁴Collins, *Good to Great*, 18–21.

the work of the congregation in terms of honoring, even stewarding, every Christian's holy callings in home and family, public life, paid and unpaid work, and church work for the blessing of the world.

ON HOLY GROUND

Biblical wisdom understands the whole world theologically. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge," announces the book of Proverbs (1:7). This means that Centered Life invites a theological exploration of God's creation, a discernment of God's ways in the world, and an understanding of why callings involve suffering.

"the psalmist's conviction opposes the spiritualities of every age that seek to ascend above earthbound human life"

Psalm 24:1 resounds with the Bible's pervasive affirmations of creation: "The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." This conviction opposes the spiritualities of every age that seek to ascend above earthbound human life. Some gnostics taught that the earth was created by a malevolent demiurge so that human souls were trapped to procreate in material existence, but the scriptures of Israel not only declared the creation to be good (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31), but identified wisdom as God's companion in the whole venture: "I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race" (Prov 8:30–31).

Christians have often been tempted by cultic and apocalyptic hatred of the world, wringing their hands in self-righteous despair over evil and abdicating their calling to the stewardship of God's creation. Some even legitimize their private exploitation of the earth's resources in order to hasten an Armageddon of divine judgment. But self-centered salvation is a perversion of biblical wisdom.

Since the world and its people are the handiwork of God and God's wisdom, the investigation of both nature and culture is profoundly theological inquiry. All the disciplines in a university have worldly wisdom to bring: mathematics and physics, literatures and languages, psychology and athletics, biology and anthropology, music and art, economics and political science. None want to be absorbed into the religion department or treated as subjects of medieval theology, the "queen of the sciences."

But every arena of life is not defined only by its own protocols, as if good corporations could be identified solely by the growth in their market shares. Other criteria are legitimately invoked: Is the customer being well served? Are the employees treated fairly? Is the society benefited? In biblical wisdom, God's love and justice are not abstract principles, but divine agencies. This is holy ground because God is

at work. Thus to be theologically interested in people's work requires respectful attention to both the particularities of their enterprise and to its contribution toward making the world more trustworthy, perhaps even a more merciful place, as the world God created was good.

Biblical call stories are alive with God's impassioned commitment to the world and its people. None of them has a detached sense that "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world." Some of the called were children: Miriam standing guard at the river (Exod 2), Samuel sleeping in the temple (1 Sam 3), David in the sheepfold (1 Sam 16), and Mary in Nazareth (Luke 1). Many are dramatic displays of divine engagement. Neither Moses keeping the flocks on Mount Horeb (Exod 3), nor Gideon at the winepress (Judg 6), nor Isaiah in the temple (Isa 6), nor Peter in the boat (Luke 5) had already decided to act for God. In each case, God was disclosed down to earth, in the ordinary. The ground on which they stood was holy because God was present, and the stories end not with translations into heaven, but with commissions into the troubles of the world.

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Biblical wisdom never regards a "vocation" as a cultural accoutrement to which only professions like teaching or medicine or the ministry can aspire. The danger faced by Jesus' mother, Mary, was close to the plight of a single parent on welfare. A "calling" is not a layer of meaning on top of mundane tasks. A call is a possession more in the sense of being possessed by it than in possessing it. As Tevye says in *Fiddler on the Roof*, "Lord, I know we are the chosen people, but couldn't you choose someone else for a while?"

Campaigns and crusades of many kinds have been as misguided in their self-righteousness as the Blues Brothers on their "mission from God." Saul the Pharisee was zealous in his persecution of the church (Acts 8:3). When the Lord appeared in a vision to Ananias in Damascus, Ananias had reason to resist his calling to go find Saul. But Jesus' vocation for Saul would turn him around: "[H]e is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:15–16).

Several attorneys met for a few years with members of the Luther Seminary faculty in what was called "The Law and Gospel Forum." What began as a continuing education program proved to be a wake-up call to the seminary through the adversarial relationships and negotiated truths these Christian lawyers experienced in their daily practices. In the face of all the "lawyer jokes," few of their congregations asked them for anything more than their financial support. One notable exception was a pastor who was genuinely and theologically interested to understand

where God was at work in the practice of law. Surely, this ground is holy because God's mission of reconciliation in Christ Jesus was wrought in a travesty of justice, an execution where God showed mercy to the godless.

CONNECTING MONDAY TO SUNDAY

Never in history have as many Christians been in as many places of influence and authority as right now. Especially with the dramatic growth of the churches of the two-thirds world, hundreds of millions leave Sunday worship on every continent with more or less awareness that their lives are "hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3). The "unfinished Reformation" is about more than reminding people of their personal callings. It is not another massive program. It is about discerning God's work in the world, stirring the worshipping communities to their own *metanoia* (repentance, conversion).

The diagnosis of sin as being "turned in on oneself" also fits the church. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus began his ministry in Galilee with the message, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). With all the capacity the Lord has entrusted to it, the repentance of the church in this time is the work of the Holy Spirit to call, gather, enlighten, and sanctify the church in its calling outside of itself into the world God loves, where the people of God already are. Believing means faith in callings God has already given to people who are in the world.

A favorite television personality used to interview local people about their lives. Whenever someone mentioned their work, he would say, "Oh, that's a good job." Many of the jobs were menial or even miserable, but he would then recall a time when people had no work, adding, "As my dad said in the depression, 'My job is better than none!'"

Similar insights could be offered concerning people's families or their civic work. Worldly wisdom already knows that the one thing more difficult than the conflicts in families is not having any, and those who neglect their responsibilities to discuss the issues or to vote also relinquish their voice. But something more profound is at stake. God's calling in these arenas gives distinctive responsibilities for the well-being of the neighbor, especially for those who cannot represent themselves.

When a high school shooting makes the news, the youth leaders in every congregation could lead the prayers on the following Sunday for the Holy Spirit to comfort all adolescents and their families. Someone then needs to tell the congregation what it is like to be a Christian in the daily life of a high school, identifying whatever suffering that vocation entails. The teachers in communities around Columbine, Colorado, discovered that when the therapeutic counselors left, their deepest convictions about God were proved in their love for their students. Their vocations were no longer abstract.

A dear friend who is a scientist and a strong advocate for Centered Life won-

ders, “How can I bring all that I am about to the Lord on Sunday?” He is not opposed to “connecting Sunday to Monday” as an objective of making the faith relevant to life, but he is suspicious of one more scheme cranking out Christian answers to life’s questions. His question echoes the faith of the Offertory, “We offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us—our selves, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love.”⁵ Monday through Saturday are thus connected to Sunday when one’s whole life is brought to God in its imperfection as well as its achievement, confident of God’s redemption.

At Calvary Lutheran Church in Golden Valley, Minnesota, lay leaders have been trained in the discipline of intercessory prayers, which they offer during worship every Sunday for those who write their requests. The requests are specific, arising from the struggles and joys of people’s lives, requiring confidentiality and occasionally inviting pastoral calls. The practice seems obvious, but it is rare, although other ministries of prayer and healing are growing. It is remarkably personal in a large congregation. This is an exercise of faith in a God who hears prayers and a profound source of spiritual renewal in the congregation.

How could a similar expectation of faith that God is at work in people’s lives be practiced in communities of faith? The celebration of vocations in Sunday worship is a good beginning, when people are asked to worship in the uniforms they wear to work. Then the listening needs to follow. The old pastoral question had its theological wisdom: “How goes it in your walk with God?” In the unfinished Reformation, the eccentric wisdom of biblical faith wants to know, “What is God doing in your place?”

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people work and play and live”*

It will be important to go to the actual places where people work and play and live, but this is not first a mission with another message. This is a discipline of the repentance and faith of the Christian community, with hearts and ears open to God. As Yogi Berra used to say, “You hear a lot just by listening!” So much the more when listening for God!

“So this is the workbench where you make those widgets. What kind of holy ground is this?” “This is the house where your family lives. What blessing could we offer for all who come and go from here?” As a community of faith practices this listening, someone needs to listen for the answers and bring them back for the Offertory.

Connecting Monday to Sunday is another form of “eccentric wisdom,” where Centered Life moves from the outside world into the assembly of public worship.

⁵*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1978) 67, 87, 108.

Its disciplines of listening are consistent with biblical confidence in the blessings of worldly wisdom because God made the world good. Without denying the reality of sin or the brokenness of our mortal lives, these practices are also confessions of faith. This community of faith lives in joyful hope. God calls mere mortals to bless the world and our neighbors, and we are enacting this priesthood of believers in the holy name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. ⊕

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