

# Reformed Business Ethics—A New Approach to How Organizations Can Flourish

CHRISTOPHER D. STEED

## Abstract

In light of the workplace crisis and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, this article aims to provide perspectives on how organizations can flourish. Reformed business ethics (e.g., John Calvin and Abraham Kuyper), with its notions of work ethics, common grace, and sphere sovereignty is uniquely positioned to address these concerns. The author develops an approach to wise leadership that strives not only for quantitative and financial success but also for qualitative values—organizations that value individuals in their relationships with the help of three principles: look, involve, and dignify (LID). Finally, Reformed theology reinforces and enriches this approach with its recognition of human fallenness and the restoration of the image of God in union with Christ.

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**T**he modern workplace is a highly driven, stressful environment. For high flyers and millions with mental health problems alike, it is an insult to body and soul. If you cannot handle the stress of working in a low-pay world, it is always and only your fault. It is time that that presumption change. Culture is fundamental. Businesses with positive cultures enjoy larger profits, better performance, and happier employees. But how do you create this kind of culture? The

zombie workforce, an army of employees who are failing to find inspiration at work, are the “working dead,” haunting offices and factories where once they were valuable staff members, full of life and great ideas. There are legions of them. According to an annual study by the consultancy Aon Hewitt, less than one-quarter of the world’s employees are classified as “highly” engaged in their jobs, while only forty percent admit to being “moderately” so. Disengagement among workers seeps out to infect society at large. When engagement levels among employees are low, businesses report a higher staff turnover, greater absenteeism, and lower customer satisfaction. Turn that around and a five percent increase in staff engagement results in a three percent increase in revenue.<sup>1</sup> Lack of dignity and respect also has a strong impact.

We will explore a new approach to making organizations positive places and seek to bring that under the remit of a business ethics that can be described as Reformed. The approach is part of an innovative project—the Shared Business Value Initiative—to articulate how the value and worth of human beings can function as a social dynamic, traced through domains such as economics, social theory, leadership, and psychology. In the area of management and leadership, my *Smart Leadership, Wise Leadership* articulates three principles for people to flourish in the workplace: look, involve, and dignify (LID; see under section III).<sup>2</sup>

Business can be a positive agent in society. Christians ought to value the transformative action that business can provide. Relevant to this, there has been a strong tradition in Reformed theology to stress common grace arising from the work of Abraham Kuyper and grounded in John Calvin. Business is not neutral. It is the arena in which most of us make a living and find the work that sustains life. As the Shared Value Business Initiative proclaims, to do well, a business has to do good. What is a good place to work or be in? What does it mean to be a good person? What are enduring qualities and not just transient skills? How do societies nurture the empathy and creativity that industry leaders say will survive the technological weather? These are valid questions because they undergird how human societies work. The perspective in this article is that the value and worth of human beings can be operationalized—“given legs” as it were, rather than just function as ethical aspiration. The recovery of degraded and devalued humanity in the

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<sup>1</sup> Aon Hewitt, “Trends in Global Employee Engagement,” 2011, [http://www.aon.com/attachments/thought-leadership/Trends\\_Global\\_Employee\\_Engagement\\_Final.pdf](http://www.aon.com/attachments/thought-leadership/Trends_Global_Employee_Engagement_Final.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Christopher D. Steed, *Smart Leadership, Wise Leadership: Environments of Value in an Emerging Future* (London: Routledge, 2017).

image of God is fundamental to redemption. Reformed commentary on business ethics has been mainly about recognizing business as a legitimate sphere of human action under the authority of God. What does this mean for the culture of an organization?

## Introduction

It is commonplace knowledge that the Protestant work ethic made Western capitalism successful. The idea that accumulating wealth arose from hard work and self-denial was conceptualized by the German sociologist Max Weber and associated with Calvin's religious revolution. Released from the crushing burden of commending oneself to God, the converted soul could demonstrate election by immersion—immersion in good deeds and works of grace, immersion in application and dedication. Business was a legitimate sphere for activity by the godly. Attention is paid these days to business ethics, that is, it matters *how* one makes money. Business ethics is generally concerned about the validity of means. Responsible business means ethical investment, not going into an enterprise that is damaging or potentially dangerous to human beings. Acting ethically means acting honorably and to the highest standards of scrutiny. It means too that the culture of a business or organization is conducive to human flourishing. This is not just about acting honorably in the sense of acting honestly but setting up cultures where humanity can flourish under God.

### I. *Reformed Perspectives*

All this matters hugely on the contemporary scene, but is it distinctively Reformed? We do well to quote Calvin here:

Still, the surest and easiest answer to the objection is, that those are not common endowments of nature, but special gifts of God, which he distributes in divers forms, and, in a definite measure, to men otherwise profane. For which reason, we hesitate not, in common language, to say, that one is of a good, another of a vicious nature; though we cease not to hold that both are placed under the universal condition of human depravity. All we mean is that God has conferred on the one a special grace which he has not seen it meet to confer on the other. When he was pleased to set Saul over the kingdom, he made him as it were a new man.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (1845; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 2.3.5 (252–53).

Although some have critiqued the view that Calvin held to general natural endowments that enabled human society to flourish, Calvin answers that objection and rejects it. The work of God in the world does not lose its capacity to generate recognition and praise because it results in prosperity. God is the author and source, though so often unacknowledged despite such palpable demonstrations of his providence, as the commentary on Psalm 107 indicates:

But prosperity, and the happy issue of events, ought also to be attributed to his grace, in order that he may always receive the praise which he deserves, that of being a merciful Father, and an impartial Judge.<sup>4</sup>

Only the elect are favored with the grace of regeneration, yet Calvin could not see any reason why

[God] should not grant the reprobate also some taste of his grace, why he should not irradiate their minds with some sparks of his light, why he should not give them some perception of his goodness, and in some sort engrave his word on their hearts.<sup>5</sup>

Fresh from the Geneva school, John Knox taught that

the Holy Ghost maketh a plain difference betwixt the graces and mercies which are common to all, and that sovereign mercy which is immutably reserved to the chosen children.<sup>6</sup>

What purposes God is working in the world that do not lead to faith and salvation has been the subject of considerable discussion. Contemporary Christians have much to say about the scope of the kingdom of God and not just the church. Although the theological language has changed, this emphasis on saving some room for divine grace has been there in Reformed theology from early on. For example, the Westminster divine Robert Harris said,

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<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Edinburgh: Printed for the Calvin Translation Society, 1847), 4:245.

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews*, trans. John Owen (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 138 (commentary on Heb 6:5).

<sup>6</sup> John Knox, "On Predestination," in *The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing (Edinburgh: James Thin, 1845), 87.

There are graces of two sorts. First, common graces, which even reprobates may have. Secondly, peculiar, such as accompany salvation, as the Apostle has it, proper to God's own children only. The matter is not whether we have the first sort of graces, for those do not seal up God's special love to a man's soul, but it must be saving grace alone that can do this for us.<sup>7</sup>

"Common graces" (note the plural)? The language has mostly been expressed in terms of "common grace." Glenda Mathes summarizes some of the history:

In 1924 ... the Christian Reformed Church Synod determined that, in addition to the saving grace imparted only to the elect, there exists a "common grace" which is manifested to all people in the bestowal of natural gifts, the restraining of sin in human affairs, and the ability of unbelievers to perform deeds of civic good.

The reaction against their "Three Points of Common Grace" led to the formation of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America, which affirmed that these "Three Points" were contrary to Scripture and the Reformed Confessions. The issue never went away. In a more recent debate about this in 2003 at Sunshine Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the question "Is the doctrine of common grace Reformed?" was standing room only.<sup>8</sup> Speaking in defense of the doctrine of common grace was Richard Mouw. "When we show compassion to the unbelieving," he said, "we are expressing a love that flows out of the heart of God." He cited the example of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem as "a profound glance into the heart of God." Richard Mouw's book *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace*, sums up his stance.<sup>9</sup>

As a fair summary of what common grace denotes, Louis Berkhof suggested that it

curbs the destructive power of sin, maintains in a measure the moral order of the universe, thus making an orderly life possible, distributes in varying degrees gifts and talents among men, promotes the development of science and art, and showers untold blessings upon the children of men.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "The Westminster Standards and Divines on Common Grace," Reformed Books Online, <https://reformedbooksonline.com/topics/topics-by-subject/common-grace/the-westminster-confession-on-common-grace/>.

<sup>8</sup> Glenda Mathes, "3000 People Attend a Debate on Common Grace," *Banner of Truth*, December 5, 2003, <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2003/3000-people-attend-a-debate-on-common-grace/>.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Mouw as quoted in Mathes, "3000 People Attend a Debate on Common Grace." Cf. Richard Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 434–35.

Is not everything in that list applicable to business? The answer must be a resounding yes! Business is more than an alien activity practiced by unscrupulous people. It is the lifeblood of humanity. It is where the common wealth (I use the term on purpose) is created. Before we go to a key reference point on this in Reformed theology, Kuyper, some context needs to be given regarding the contemporary business context and how these proposals relate.

## **II. *The Present Climate***

The world stands at the dawn of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. It is a transition to a network economy that has become social, to networked individuals, “to a new set of systems, bringing together digital, biological, and physical technologies in new and powerful combinations.”<sup>11</sup> Much will change fundamentally in the emerging network economy, including organizations and the role of their leaders in the nurture of enabling environments. Henrik Storm Dyrssen states, “The challenges of our time require strategies and solutions that span private, public and civil sector spheres.”<sup>12</sup> According to Keith Breene, “Digital technologies are unleashing new economic and social dynamics.”<sup>13</sup> A country’s industrial might no longer determines its future. The prizes will go to highly adaptive leadership, leadership with spirit, leadership with purpose.

The leadership for this day and age is the leadership of cross-sector experience and collaboration. ... But where will we find these leaders when our universities still offer siloed professional programmes such as business, engineering, law or medicine? How will such medical schools train the doctors needed to develop user-experience-design for medical technology that will make many doctors obsolete? What business school programme helps students acquire the socio-political business savvy needed to develop legitimate participation for private enterprise in welfare sectors without sacrificing trading quality for profits? What about the socially conscious engineers needed to develop scalable technologies to support social development and catastrophic relief efforts?<sup>14</sup>

Equipping organizations to tackle the future will require a management revolution no less momentous than the one that spawned modern industry.

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<sup>11</sup> Keith Breene, “What Is ‘Network Readiness’ and Why Does it Matter?,” World Economic Forum, July 6, 2016, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/07/what-is-networked-readiness-and-why-does-it-matter/>.

<sup>12</sup> Henrik Storm Dyrssen, “How Millennials Will Save Us from Our Broken Economic System,” World Economic Forum, April 15, 2016, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/04/how-millennials-will-save-us-from-our-broken-economic-system/>.

<sup>13</sup> Breene, “What Is ‘Network Readiness’ and Why Does it Matter?”

<sup>14</sup> Dyrssen, “How Millennials Will Save Us from Our Broken Economic System.”

As Gary Hamel described in his “Moon Shots for Management,” most of the fundamental breakthroughs in management occurred decades ago.<sup>15</sup> “Work flow design, annual budgeting, return-on-investment analysis, project management, divisionalization, brand management—these and a host of other indispensable tools” were all part of the application of scientific principles to management. Yet “management, like the combustion engine, is a mature technology that must now be reinvented for a new age. With this in mind, a group of scholars and business leaders assembled in May 2008 to lay out a road map for reinventing management,” charting a new, communitarian approach to capitalism that will work as long as leaders imbue it with a social purpose. The assembled leaders asked, How in an age of rapid change do you create organizations that are as adaptable and resilient as they are focused and efficient? How in a creative economy where entrepreneurial genius is the secret to success do you inspire employees to bring the gifts of initiative, imagination, and passion to work every day? Their answer: “To successfully address these problems, executives and experts must first admit that they’ve reached the limits” of the industrial age paradigm “built atop the principles of standardization, specialization, hierarchy, control, and primacy of shareholder interests.” Further, “tomorrow’s business imperatives lie outside the performance envelope of today’s bureaucracy-infused management practices.” Chief among the tasks of revisiting the philosophical foundations of management is the reality that “in tomorrow’s interdependent world, highly collaborative systems will outperform organizations characterized by adversarial win-lose relationships.”

As a *Harvard Business Review* article points out,

Leaders find it tough to ensure that their people adhere to values and ethics. The prevailing principles in business make employees ask, “What’s in it for me?” Missing are those that would make them think, “What’s good, right, and just for everyone?”<sup>16</sup>

The notion of “the wise leader,” not just a “smart leader,” is receiving more attention today, though this attention is hardly mainstream. In addition,

people behave less ethically when they are part of organizations or groups. Common rationalizations, such as that you are acting in the company’s best interest, or justifications, such as that you will never be found out, lead to misconduct.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Gary Hamel, “Moon Shots for Management,” *Harvard Business Review*, February 2009, <https://hbr.org/2009/02/moon-shots-for-management/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi “The Big Idea: The Wise Leader,” *Harvard Business Review*, May 2011, <https://hbr.org/2011/05/the-big-idea-the-wise-leader>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

“Capitalism” and “the free market, with its gospel of globalization and the primacy of growth and GDP as a measure of happiness,” is under siege.<sup>18</sup> Against the background of the 2008 global financial crisis and its aftermath, the questions keep coming.

The impact of the global financial crisis has not only been profound, but enduring. The crisis has not led to any fundamental reappraisal of the nature of capitalism, or how to “govern” it. For the majority in work conditions have deteriorated, while those without employment have been subject to ever more punitive sanctions. Inequalities are increasing and working lives becoming more precarious.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps it took the crash and crisis to create the conditions of mass youth unemployment, austerity, poverty, and growing inequality that arguably were the precursor to the new business models of digital start-ups and sharing economy platforms. I argue elsewhere that for the future societies to work, we need to get rid of our endemic emphasis on what work and jobs mean to our self-worth.<sup>20</sup> Yet for all the talk of the meaning and purpose of our jobs being a prime means through which we are validated through the dignity of work, most employees see them just as a means to an end. According to a massive global survey by Gallup, only 32% of employees in North America say they are engaged (worldwide, the number is 13%).<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the very nature of work that allowed families to prosper and individuals to build a sense-of-self is under attack. Work might be losing its value to people. Yet it is undoubtedly a sphere from which human beings derive tremendous value (or not).

Even in a high-tech age, leadership remains vital. As the developing Fourth Industrial Revolution transforms the technological foundations of global enterprise, the phenomenon of firms growing at extremely rapid rates has become unprecedented. What is labeled “hypergrowth” has moved out of Silicon Valley and gone global, from high-tech start-ups to companies both old and new. Challenges facing hypergrowth firms have a huge impact in today’s global economy. Yet from talent shortages to regulatory impediments, growth challenges are a consistent management priority. “According

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<sup>18</sup> Dyrssen, “How Millennials Will Save Us from Our Broken Economic System.”

<sup>19</sup> British Sociological Association, “Work, Employment and Society 2016 Conference: Abstract,” University of Leeds, 2016, <https://lssi.leeds.ac.uk/events/work-employment-and-society-conference-2016/>.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher D. Steed, *A Question of Worth: The Quantification Principle* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Annamarie Mann and Jim Harter, “The Worldwide Employee Engagement Crisis,” Gallup Workplace, January 7, 2016, <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/236495/worldwide-employee-engagement-crisis.aspx>.



to *Mastering Hypergrowth*, the World Economic Forum's study of nearly 200 companies around the world, over half (55.6%) of CEOs say that finding, motivating and keeping the best people is one of their most pressing challenges."<sup>22</sup>

How can we ensure that organizations are engaging places, not the kind of toxic environments that are all too frequent?<sup>23</sup> And how can we continue to ensure that organizations are humane places when the future of work is an issue that becomes hugely challenging in the wake of the gathering flood of what may well be the job-killing Fourth Industrial Revolution? What kind of smart leadership is needed to cultivate the human dimension in a digital era? What does it mean to cultivate "leadership with spirit"? Can wise, ethical, and responsible leadership that is not off-balance become the default position and not just "smart leadership"? We will explore the idea that leaders should be wise, lifting organizations to a higher dimension than just the technocratic through engendering humane environments that, under certain conditions, best translate the value of people into their collective endeavors.

This article presents a new construct about leadership and how organizations flourish. It is the task of leaders to facilitate a workplace culture where the value of people is best expressed. Our term for this will be an "environment of value," an organizational "community of practice" that draws out the inner value of its participants and translates that into external, added value for the enterprise. It acts as a catalyst for the conversion of internal value into the purposes of the organization. It seeks to build value precisely because it works with the conditions by which a valuing environment can be cultivated. An environment of value therefore digs into motivational drivers because it mobilizes the factors that will encourage people to give of their best.

New perspectives on creating positive organizational changes are much needed. As I write, Siemens has just offered a report about the reasons for the productivity puzzle in the United Kingdom: United Kingdom workers seemingly produce for longer hours than the United States or European counterparts, but their output is up to 20% less. Siemens suggests that 75% of the deficit is due to poor leadership and practices that do not make the most of the potential of their staff.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> "Which Regions Will Build the Silicon Valleys of the Future," World Economic Forum, 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/06/what-is-standing-in-the-way-of-hypergrowth-in-your-region/>.

<sup>23</sup> Oliver James, *Office Politics: How to Thrive in a World of Lying, Backstabbing and Dirty Tricks* (London: Vermillion, 2013), 92.

<sup>24</sup> "The World at One," BBC Radio 4, July 14, 2016, [www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/worldatone](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/worldatone).

A generation ago, Peter Drucker, the leading guru of management, argued that we were in the middle of a great social transformation akin to the Renaissance. The computer was the symbol of this immense change whereby the primary resource is no longer capital, land, or labor, but knowledge (hence “post-capitalist”). Drucker argued that knowledge had become the means of production, creating value by “productivity” and “innovation” when applied to work. The new class of post-capitalist society was now made up of knowledge workers and service workers. This presented a significant challenge for society. How should we preserve the income and dignity of service workers (who cannot become knowledge workers but constitute the majority of the workforce)?<sup>25</sup> Many lament that there are no quality jobs anymore.

More recently, the financial journalist Paul Mason wondered if we are not on the brink of a change so big, so profound, that this time capitalism itself has reached its limits and is changing into something wholly new. It is the information technology revolution, Mason argued, that has the potential to reshape our familiar notions of work, production, and value utterly; and to destroy an economy based on markets and private ownership—in fact, he contended, it was already doing so.<sup>26</sup>

As the Age of Capitalism yields to what is called the “knowledge society” and now to the digital economy, the radical affects it will have on society, politics, and business now and in the coming years are far reaching. Now that far fewer people in the West have been working in factories since about 1980—and even China is busy de-industrializing—we have already moved from a society based on capital, land, and labor to a society whose primary source is knowledge and whose key structure is the organization.

In the digital future, environments of value will be different from the old industrial era institutions that created public services. It will not necessarily be the case that an organization that is well managed is also well led. Future organizations will not be cranking out just quantity but also quality. Creativity and empathy have not been really needed except for the creative or caring industries. In the future, they will be vital for all enterprises. The leadership needed to foster such environments will be different from the old top-down style in which instructions are given. They will be open, transformative processes, where we no longer speak about bosses and workers, processes based on subject-object relations, but creating space for

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<sup>25</sup> Peter Drucker, *Managing the Non-profit Organization* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 63.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Mason, *Post Capitalism: A Guide to the Future* (London: Allen Lane, 2015), 79.

all involved, if not in equal relation then in creative dialogue. This is surely the workplace of the future, not one that follows old hierarchical models but one in which creativity and empathy fuse to generate all-around shared value. The future of work will still entail successful organizations, those employing worthwhile people doing worthwhile jobs and tasks.

Values-driven ethical leadership, not just technocratic competence, is emphasized in the leadership literature of recent times. What that needs to be complemented with is the dimension of spirit and soul that translates managerialism from smart leadership into wisdom for rushing executives whose own inner world is so often off-balance.

Axiomatic in what follows is that human beings are strongly shaped relationally not only by their own agency, but by their social environment and by forces that structure their life and work. A workplace is a very particular form of social environment. If the circumstances and context are right, people will give of their best. That seems commonplace until it is realized that the experience of so many is that the organizational environment and culture is not conducive to human flourishing. Rather than engendering engagement, it is demotivating and devaluing.

### III. *A New Lens on Human Action*

This article is based on a theological reflection on the experience of participants in the workplace. It is based on client experiences at work and the way they reflect bigger, deeper questions about what it means to be human. There are strong lessons to be learned about the contribution that theology, specifically an applied Reformed theology, makes to the common grace of how people thrive in the contemporary workplace. Hopefully, this breaks new ground, following my *Smart Leadership, Wise Leadership*.

Some years ago, I engaged in a research exercise that illuminates the factors that generate inner worth being drawn out and harnessed (or shut down, as the case may be). Crucially, looking at issues of human worth through their contrast—what it means to be devalued or trashed in the workplace—lent greater analytical clarity. Empirical observation in therapeutic contexts and organizational study of both the popular and academic literature showed me that circumstances giving rise to reports of feelings of devaluation can be summed up as threefold through the experience of being diminished, of being disregarded, and of not being given dignity:

- *Lack of purposeful engagement (indifference)*—not being seen, noticed, recognized or listened to

- *Lack of honor (inequality, insult)*—being diminished rather than enlarged through discriminatory practice; not having one’s full humanity included
- *Being invaded (indignity)*—being assaulted or set aside
- Lack of involvement, inclusion, and dignity results in a deficit of the significance that people look for in the workplace.

### Case Study

Whose fault is it if you cannot cope with the stress of work? The answer used to be simple: “It is yours, and you are probably a shiftless weakling for even asking the question.” But a landmark case in France has shifted public opinion:

Following an inquiry into the suicides of more than 30 employees at France Télécom (now Orange) between 2008 and 2009, prosecutors in Paris have recommended that Didier Lombard, a former chief executive of the company, and six other senior managers be put on trial for psychological harassment. Union officials and prosecutors have suggested that France Télécom’s strategy may have been designed to nudge employees into quitting of their own accord, sparing the company the expense and bad publicity of laying them off: workers were shunted from office to office, forced to work long, impractical hours, and subjected to conditions that few employers would risk in a nation with relatively easy access to firearms. Instead, facing unemployment in a recession, employees continued to work, and dozens killed themselves. ... These managers saw little wrong in pushing their employees to the brink of breakdown in the name of profit. That this case may be taken to a criminal court is far more shocking than it should be.<sup>27</sup>

We are dealing with the black box of applied power. Reformed people surely need a fine-grained concept of power and how sinfulness operates through cultures of all kinds. When it comes to corporate culture, there will always be problems between managers and employees, even in the most benign situation. Many difficulties are the result of people’s responses to authority and stress. Some difficulties are the result of company policies. There is, as observed, much good management and leadership out there. Nevertheless, experience shows that people keep coming back to these same factors *again and again*. Moreover, statements in practitioner literature indicate that these can be replicated. There does seem to be an issue not just with narcissistic managers but with the culture of many organizations. It is the culture and practice on the ground that shapes behavior and nearly

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<sup>27</sup> Laurie Penny, “For Millions with Mental Health Problems, the Modern Workplace Is an Insult to Body and Soul,” *New StatesmanAmerica*, September 9, 2016, <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/economy/2016/09/millions-mental-health-problems-modern-workplace-insult-body-and-soul>.

always vitiates against “official” strategy and so often makes it practically irrelevant. Discerning such negative factors for disvaluing environments leads to turning these back on their head “to lift the LID” on an organization, release dynamism and address disengagement through a positive workplace culture:

- Honor humanity—**L**ook, learn, and listen
- Engage with purpose—**I**nvolve and include to elicit significance
- Set up a nonintrusive environment—**D**ignify

This awareness translates into direct benefit to leaders and managers to understand how to build a strong culture in their organization in which people can flourish. Using these principles, *Smart Leadership, Wise Leadership* has been translated into a seminar series used at an MBA graduate college. It is therefore useful knowledge precisely because it goes with the grain of what makes for human flourishing. This is where theology meets organization theory and psychology. And why not, if we truly claim to have profound insight into human behavior on account of our reading of Scripture?

There is psychological theory here relevant to our inner motivations and the circumstances in which people thrive.<sup>28</sup> The grounded theory is this:

- There is a strong association between the sense of inner world value held by staff or workers as they participate in an organization *and* the added, external value they generate that furthers its purpose, whether financial or not.
- Wise leaders understand it is in the interests of the organization to optimize those factors (proposed here as essentially threefold) that enable a valuing environment to translate inner value into added value.

This is profoundly theological. Under common grace, the worker translates his or her value into the dignity of labor. The craftsmanship reflects the person who crafts; ultimately, it reflects the Maker. Kuyper would no doubt approve.

At first glance, this is about how organizations flourish. There is, however, a construct being developed here that potentially provides a lens on the drivers of human action. Getting the best out of people, not just extracting the most, requires attention to the circumstances in which their sense of themselves and their value is translated into their projects.

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Steed, *Smart Leadership, Wise Leadership*.

What advantages are there to employers and leadership in commercial, nonprofit, or faith-based organizations in setting up work environments where the primary goal is not making money and optimum performance? After all, the law does not say leaders must look after their staff and make them feel valued. However, it is surely a strategy of self-enlightenment to discern what the ingredients of a high-value environment are. Even when ratios of capital to labor shift, about 90% of the overhead of an organization is still staff salaries. People continue to matter—to both the workforce and God.

But if my proposal is theological, can it claim to be Reformed in any sense?

#### **IV. Business Ethics through a Kuyperian Lens**

Following Calvin, the reference point in Reformed circles is usually that of Kuyper, and it is through his lens that the rest of this article applies common grace to the culture of business. This scholar-minister, who founded the Reformed Church in the Netherlands as well as the Free University of Amsterdam, was also Prime Minister from 1901 to 1904. Kuyper contended vigorously that theological modernism would eventually prove as useless as “a squeezed out lemon peel,” but traditional religious truths would survive.<sup>29</sup> In his lectures at Princeton in 1898, Kuyper argued that Calvinism was more than theology. It provided a comprehensive worldview and indeed had already proven to be a decisive factor in the development of the institutions and values of modern society.<sup>30</sup> There is an intrinsic connection between this position and the laws he influenced or enacted. His theological and political views are linked, proposed legislation after 1901 to improve working conditions witnessing this fact.<sup>31</sup> Is this purely a realm for business? In contrast to the ideas of sovereignty through the individual (the French model) or derivation from the State (the German model), Kuyper advocated the notion of “sphere sovereignty,” in which schools and universities, the press, business and industry, and the arts are sovereign in their own spheres.<sup>32</sup> The sovereignty of business? A curious thought a century later in an age of robust compliance procedures!

<sup>29</sup> Arie L. Molendijk, “‘A Squeezed Out Lemon Peel’: Abraham Kuyper on Modernism,” *Church History and Religious Culture* 91.3–4 (January 2011): 396–411, doi:10.1163/18712411-1X609397.

<sup>30</sup> Arie L. Molendijk, “Neo-Calvinist Culture Protestantism: Abraham Kuyper’s Stone Lectures,” *Church History and Religious Culture* 88.2 (2008): 235–50, doi:10.1163/187124108X354330.

<sup>31</sup> James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

<sup>32</sup> Abraham Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty (1880),” in James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 461–90.

Reformed theology is relevant for institutions in the present for two reasons.

Firstly, more than it has been perhaps, it ought to be a cardinal principle of Reformed theology that the soul has infinite value and worth. The high view of God that this perspective espouses surely leads to the outcome that humankind made in the *imago Dei* ought not to be trifled with. Handle with care! The greater honor and dignity accorded to humanity (even though that honor and dignity has been grievously compromised in the fall), the greater the respect shown to the Creator, who made us in the mirror of divinity. If this principle is accepted, it surely needs to take legs. It is not a theoretical view only.

Secondly, redemption and *unio cum Christo* ought to be understood as a recovery program whereby our full humanity is restored. It does not lead to an artificial humanity, but tends towards a full restoration of what we lost that is now gloriously reframed in Jesus Christ; we do not become less than human when we encounter the divine grace of redemption, but return to humanity as it should be. The new man is renewed after the image of the one who created him (Col 3:19). We are told to put on the new man who after God is created (Eph 4:24).

The so-called Protestant work ethic arises because the subjects produced by Calvinism are disciplined foot-soldiers, not just for church work directly but in society. Work is not redeeming so much as it reflects a redeemed life made serious by being allied to a sense of purpose. Life is to be dedicated to God, not indulged or wasted.

Yet the reality is that this high ideal is compromised every day by a workplace that trashes the lives of its workers and by organization cultures that diminish people, disregard them, or fail to dignify them.

Redemption is not the imposition of a false humanity but a life approximating far better the life of fellowship with God. It can never take us back to before the fall, but it can direct our lives after the fall, shaping them in the image of Jesus, the trailblazer of the new humanity. Jesus was a working man for the vast majority of his life. Apprenticeship in his father's business was reality at a practical level, as well as that of divine sonship (Luke 2:21).

Kuyper was surely on the right ground when he grasped that his Reformed theology should translate into the organization of society and of the workplace where so much of life is lived. The emphasis here on the value and worth of human beings did not seem to loom large as a driving principle, but given what we know about the worth of God and value of a soul, it surely resonates.

As Calvin observes, “the primary seat of the divine image was in the mind and the heart, or in the soul and its powers.”<sup>33</sup> Reformed theology should go further than upholding the worth people have by being made in the *imago Dei*. Our identity is not, after all, solitary. We are relational. The turn to relationality in science and social philosophy has often been noticed in recent years. Calvin’s notion of a reciprocal relationship between our ideas of God and our self-understanding takes us in that direction,<sup>34</sup> though he does not underline the way that our relations to others mediate our knowledge of God and the self. That turn is of recent progeny.

Our identity is dispersed, formed, and re-formed in interaction with God and others. A high proportion of that interaction takes place in organizations and the workplace. Human worth and significance does not, though, live by itself. We need others to give us that meaning. Those around us in the sphere in which we live, move, and have our being are needed to affirm our value. The culture of where we work shapes us. When that goes wrong, and people do not function at their optimum, the impact is negative.

The three principles advanced here as genuine insights into how organizations can work to their optimum are derived from human fallenness. They are the mirror image of the negative factors that erode people, that diminish and degrade humanity. Sinfulness paints dark colors on the workplace.

## V. A Theological Project?

This article reflects a body of work<sup>35</sup> that traces the value and worth of people into various domains: psychology, social theory, organizations, and contemporary politics. It offers a coherent theological framework that derives human worth from the worth of God that is conferred upon us. This matters.

It is not just people in a negative workplace; God can also be devalued. Giving God the honor due to his name is vital to worship and Christian liturgy. It was emphasized much in the Reformation. “Let God be God”! Divine worth is about worship, “worthship.” To worship is to accord worth, to recognize something as being of highest and truest value, to recognize and give respect for the highest worth it has. “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Rev 4:11 NIV).

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<sup>33</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.3 (164).

<sup>34</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1.1.1–3 (37–39).

<sup>35</sup> For ease of reference, the reader is referred to the author’s website, [www.christopher-steel.co.uk](http://www.christopher-steel.co.uk).



The divine Lord is the supreme valuer, the one who bestows worth on his craftsmanship. We are his poem, his work (Eph 2:10). There is work to be done to show how the value of personhood connects the two and signposts the existence of God in a way that resonates profoundly with the psychological realities of our times. The theological project under discussion projects divine worth into the one-off incarnation of Jesus, who embraces the human situation as just slightly lower than the angels (Heb 2:7–8). Stepping into humanity, the Redeemer connects with human experience in a way that the church urgently needs to come to grips with.<sup>36</sup> The culmination of “the identification principle” is the astonishing atonement. A symbolic exchange is set up—characteristic, as I argue, of violence generally. Payment has to be exacted somehow. The devalued and degraded man stands forth as the representative of living humanity to offer himself up to death. Taking the place of the trashed and clothed with indignity, Jesus confers his value on the unworthy ones of the earth (2 Cor 5:21). Such is the exchange of status we call justification. Through this lens, atonement makes sense. It is not some alien doctrine but utterly true to life, to psychological reality, and to God!

LeRon Schults grounds a “reforming theological anthropology” in the implications of a relational turn in late modernity in such spheres as social sciences and developmental psychology. The way that connectivity is central to who we are illuminates Christian revelation. Vital to this project is the importance of personhood as it is played out at work.<sup>37</sup> Christianity is working!

## VI. *Summing Up ...*

It is some way from the atonement to business ethics and the life and times of contemporary organizations. Yet with its sharp understanding of fallen power and endemic sinfulness, Reformed theology should surely endorse the proposition that under common grace, wise and loving leaders are concerned to build organizations in which human beings can flourish.

Making organizations and the workplace more humane places—with the Internet already organizing economy and society in a different way, a premium will be placed on factors to do with the human “touch,” such as creativity, empathy, and entrepreneurial flair, that cannot be replicated by algorithms. There is a vital association between inner value and external, added value that is there to be drawn out under optimum conditions.

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<sup>36</sup> Christopher D. Steed, *The Identification Principle* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2019).

<sup>37</sup> F. LeRon Schults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

Leaders are often unsure about how to mobilize the participation and engagement of their people so they are productive and contribute effectively. That is true anytime, anywhere, but in the Fourth Industrial Revolution even more so if it deprives us of our heart and soul.

Vital on the contemporary scene is an understanding of value that is broader than the economic. Perhaps a sense of true value in a context where humans can flourish and do their best work provides a link between Reformed theology and business ethics. Human valuing is not just rooted in individuals but in interaction with others. The workplace is a vital sphere where the validation of our worth is performed. Deeply compromised by invisible power as it is, where we spend so much of our lives is of prime ethical concern.