

**A Two-Talent Servant in a Five-Talent World:
Secular versus Christian Views of Human Potential**

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Dedication

To Sheryl, Jessica, & Jared Yost

(my wonderful supportive family)

To Rob, Joey, Dana, Margaret & Brie

(my friends and co-laborers in the I/O Psychology Department)

To my SPU Colleagues

(a community of scholarship, service, and grace)

Abstract

Emerging research in psychology and neuroscience suggests that a relatively small and rather stable set of personality characteristics are valid predictors of everything from job performance to life satisfaction to longevity. For example, three traits—cognitive ability, conscientiousness and emotional stability—appear to be relatively stable over a person’s life and strong predictors of job performance across *all* jobs. Similarly, two stable personality traits—positive and negative affectivity— are responsible for up to half of people’s life satisfaction scores and are also relatively stable over time with scores varying around genetically determined “set-points.” In this Weter Lecture, I will explore how a Christian worldview offers a way to acknowledge these results, but in a way that reframes and transcends them. A Christian worldview starts with a community-level perspective where everybody has a *place* – a unique role to play that is critical to the whole, where people recognize themselves as people in *process* and are called to adopt daily practices of gratitude and forgiveness that transcend predispositions, where people’s *purpose*—their value—is not defined by what they do or how they feel but by who they are, and where people recognize they are *purchased* and serve a loving God who is just as likely to use their weaknesses as He is to use their strengths. The implications for Christian higher education and faculty are explored.

Introduction

In 2009, a research study was published that analyzed the smile intensity of students in their college yearbook pictures (an indicator of two personality traits - positive and negative affectivity) and then assessed their marital satisfaction and divorce rates 30 years later (Hertenstein, Hansel, Butts, & Hile, 2009). They found that yearbook smile intensity significantly predicted both outcomes.

In another study, researchers rated the smile intensity of Major League Baseball players in their baseball card photos. They found that intense smilers were half as likely to die in any given year following the photos when compared against nonsmilers (Able & Kruger, 2010).

Over the last two decades, research in psychology and neuroscience has begun to identify a surprisingly small and rather stable set of personal characteristics that predict everything from job performance to marital satisfaction to longevity and mortality.

Job Performance

Three personality traits—cognitive ability (intelligence), conscientiousness (responsibility, achievement motivation), and emotional stability (adjustment, lack of trait anxiety) have been established as valid predictors of performance across *all* jobs (Dudley, Orvis, Lebiecki, & Cortina, 2006; Salgado, Anderson, Moscoso, Bertua, de Fruyt, & Rolland, 2003; Salgado, 1997; Schmidt & Hunter, 2004). Meta-analytic studies, a statistical technique that researchers use to combine results across multiple studies, has found that cognitive ability correlates between .25 and .60 with job performance, with the higher correlations related to more complex jobs. This means that between 5% and 36% of a person's job performance is

related to their cognitive ability.¹ The personality characteristics, conscientiousness and emotional stability, account for another 10%.² This means up to 46% of a person's job performance may be determined by their personal characteristics. This finding is not particularly unsettling unless these three personal characteristics are genetically determined and stable over time (to be discussed in more detail later).

Job Satisfaction

The story is not any more comforting when the precursors to job satisfaction are considered. For example, research suggests that a person's job satisfaction in one job is a good predictor of their job satisfaction in other jobs (Staw & Ross, 1985). Other research suggests that about 45% of a person's job satisfaction is related to genetic traits – specifically positive and negative affectivity (Ilies & Judge, 2003).³

Life Satisfaction

Maybe life satisfaction is a better story... Unfortunately, this does not appear to be true. Based on twin studies, researchers estimate that about 50% of a person's ongoing life satisfaction is genetically determined (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Steel, Schmidt & Shultz, 2008). Likewise, life satisfaction appears to be fairly stable over time, although recent longitudinal research suggests that some traumatic events can permanently decrease resting states (Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006). Researchers suggest that people can adapt to changes;

¹ Squaring the correlation provides an estimate of percent of variance accounted for. Population estimates corrected for unreliability in the predictor and criterion measures.

² Conscientiousness = 6%; ($r = .25$) and Emotional Stability = 4% ($r = .19$)

³ This research is based on twin studies comparing identical versus non-identical twins where identical twins share 100% genetic overlap and non-identical twins share 50% genetic overlap. Other twin studies look at identical twins raised together and apart to estimate genetic and environmental affects. This allows researchers to calculate the percent of variance that is shared genetically, environmentally, and what's left over which is called "non-shared environmental influences" (more about this later)?

however, stable personality characteristics are often cited as the reasons for better or worse adaptation (e.g., Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007).

Religiosity

Well, at least a person's faith is spared. A person might be doomed to be a low performer and and doomed to be unhappy, but at least they still get to choose their faith, right?

Unfortunately, there is some more bad news. Whether religiosity is measured as engaging in religious activities, personal spirituality, religious attitudes, or having a transformative religious experience, it appears, based on twin studies, that 30-60% of religiosity is genetically influenced.

Personal Characteristic Over Time

At least people can change, right? The answer appears to be "kind of." Emerging research suggests that personality traits (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000) and cognitive ability (Schuerger, & Witt, 1989) are surprisingly stable over the course of a person's life. It appears that mean levels change. For example, all people tend to become more conscientious as they age, but their relative ranking doesn't change (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006). People who tended to be the most conscientious among their peers remain high. Unconscientiously people remain low. Estimates of the genetic component of cognitive ability and personality typically range from 40-60% depending on the characteristic (Bouchard & Loehlin, 2001 ; Plomin & Spinath, 2004).

What are the Implications?

In essence, in psychology—and I would argue, in our larger society—we have moved from B. F. Skinner's behaviorism's environmental determinism to today's genetic determinism.

From a purely functional perspective, the implications are clear. With respect to job performance the findings suggest that organizations should find, hire, develop, and promote people who are bright, conscientious and emotionally stable because they will be more likely to be productive, happy and successful over the long-term. In fact, organizations are already using this kind of information to identify “high potential” employees who are then provided enhanced development and promotion opportunities from the time they enter the organization (Silzer & Church, 2009). In the words of George Orwell (1946), organizations have concluded that, “Everyone is equal, but some are more equal than others.”

I don’t mean to be alarmist, but the implications go farther than that. To date, researchers have not been able to identify genetic tags for these personal characteristics, but it is likely that this will occur someday. Most of the genetic research articles cited consistently concluded with a call for future researchers to identify the genetic mechanisms through which these affects occur (e.g., Bouchard & Loehlin, 2001 ; Plomin & Spinath, 2004). If genetic tags are ever discovered, the next steps are obvious. Future employment tests could be simple blood tests. After all, people can fake written tests, but they cannot fake blood tests.

At a societal level, the genetic testing and selection of children with high IQ, high conscientiousness, and high positive affectivity is not far behind. Who would ever want less for their children? ⁴

From a theological standpoint, the findings are equally unsettling because they suggest that God has created people unequally—some people are predisposed to achieve more in their lives and be happier. Perhaps even more unsettling, God has predestined some people to be more religious?

⁴ The movie *Gattaca* portrays this logical next step.

What Then Shall We Do?

This is all rather bleak. What should be the Christian community's response to these findings? One option is for Christians to disregard and ignore them. Another strategy might be to attack the research as it comes out or conduct research that contradicts the results. Given the breadth and depth of evidence that has begun to accumulate across multiple domains, neither of these approaches is likely to be a particularly successful strategy.

Another option might be to attack the results arguing that that personal characteristics and the environment interact—people are the product of nature and nurture. Unfortunately, this argument does not buy the critic much because it is built on the interaction of two deterministic forces – genes and environment. A person is simply a product of the two forces. Others have proposed that people's personal characteristics should be given precedence because people tend to self-select themselves into environments that that are consistent with their personal dispositions (Schneider, 1987). For example, there is evidence that people with higher cognitive abilities gravitate toward more complex jobs (Wilk & Sackett, 1996). Unfortunately, this argument also buys the critic very little because it simply pushes determinism back to a person's genetic predispositions.

However, what if a third way were available? Is there a way for Christians to accept that many personal characteristics are partially and maybe even largely genetically predetermined and then transcend these findings? In the remainder of this paper, I propose that a Christian worldview provides exactly that opportunity.

A Christian Perspective of Human Potential

I propose that adopting a Christian worldview allows one to acknowledge and transcend the findings reported earlier. Specifically, I propose that a Christian-based definition of potential includes four lenses that are critical to a comprehensive understanding of human potential. These are:

- **Place.** A Christian worldview starts with a community-level perspective where everybody has a *place* – a unique role to play that is critical to the whole. Differences allow the whole to be greater than the sum of the parts.
- **Process.** A Christian worldview calls people to explicitly recognize themselves as created beings in *process*. People are called to adopt practices such as gratitude, forgiveness, and learning that have the power to transcend personal predispositions as long as they are practiced and more permanently transcend when they become habits. Christianity holds the practices that science is “discovering” are precursors to personal and community wellbeing.
- **Purpose.** A Christian worldview starts by defining each person as inherently valuable as a child of God who is made in the image of God. A person’s value is not defined functionally by what they can do or how they feel. It is not even defined by who they are. These are all secondary outcomes.
- **Purchased.** In a Christian worldview, people not the first actors, but the recipients of God’s grace. They are called to partner with a loving God who is with them and for them



and just as likely to use their weaknesses as He is to use their strengths. They can risk doing the right thing because they are confident God is in tomorrow's unknown.

Taking these four levels as the foundation, in the remainder of this paper, I will explore the implications of each of the four factors at three levels:

- How should we understand human potential in each of these areas as a *Christian community*?
- How should we understand human potential in *business organizations*?
- What are the implications for *Christian Higher Education*?

The key points to be discussed are summarized in Table 1. Throughout the following pages, contrasts will be drawn between Secular and Christian worldviews. Of course, this oversimplifies the variety of worldviews that are represented within the two broad categories. Sometimes they even overlap. However, the contrasts are drawn because they represent the dominant narratives related to human potential that often stated and assumed within the two camps. The contrasts are drawn to emphasize the way that a Christian worldview (or Christian worldviews for that matter) can and should challenge the basic assumptions that often remain unchallenged in psychology, business, and American society.

Table 1. A Christian View of Potential

	Christian Community	Business	Higher Education
1.Potential as Place	We are the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:14-26)	Potential for what? Leverage strengths, managing weaknesses Playing Jazz	Embrace the diversity Look for the Holy Spirit Remember that calling goes beyond the classroom
2.Potential as Process	We are responsible for the resources we are given – large or small (the Parable of the Talents, Matthew 25:14-30)	Expertise is developed (10 years, 10,000 hours) Build self-regulation – behaviors & cognitions Promote double-loop learning	Focus on meta-skill development (critical thinking, learning orientation, growth mindsets, emotional regulation & self-regulatory behaviors)
3.Potential as Purpose	Love God, Love Your Neighbor (Luke 10:25-28)	Produce goods/services that promote flourishing Enable creative work Reconciliation & Sabbath Living a holy and righteous life	Education for the whole person Our view of God matters Character matters
4.Potential as Purchased	If God is for us, who can be against us? (Rom. 8:31-39) Made strong in our weakness (1 Cor. 1:26-30) Two loaves and five fishes (John 6:1-15)	We are a people of hope Can one good apple save the bunch? Yes	Students are made in the image of God But for the grace of God...

1. Potential as Place

When considering traits, the dominant secular narrative tends to reference images of competition, survival of the fittest, and the adaptive potential of traits (e.g., Bouchard & Loehlin, 2001). In contrast, the Christian narrative uses the body of Christ where every part is different and valuable (1 Cor. 12:14-26; Rom. 12:4-8). Thus, potential is most fully realized when people are able to find their place within a church, the community, an organization, and/or larger society where their unique constellation of strengths will allow them to use their gifts, abilities, and experiences in concert with other people. Secular narratives might recognize the importance of apparently negative traits as adaptive for the larger group (Ein-Dor, Mikulincer, Doron, & Shaver, 2010); however, they are still considered only to the extent that helping the whole increases a person's individual survival. This functional perspective is fundamentally different than Christian's belief that everyone has a unique and important role in this world. People who conceivably add no value (e.g., the severely handicapped, the elderly) are intrinsically valuable and have a special place in God's kingdom.

Christian Community

The Gospel challenges Christians to reject a worldview that is utilitarian and comparison-based (comparing and valuing people based on what they can do). Christians are instead exhorted to assume that everyone is given different gifts that can be used to play indispensable, complementary, and equally valuable roles in the body of Christ. Individual talents and abilities and resources will vary but the whole of the church is greater than the sum of the parts with Christ as the head. Christians are called to value and celebrate the differences and use them to complement, build up, and support one another. If taken as true, personality variables that predict lower religiosity should have some value in the church body. Research suggests that people who are high on agreeableness and consciousness are more likely to be religious (Saroglou, 2009).

One might assume a creation where everyone is high on these attributes. The next logical question becomes, what is the church missing? [Other than a few cynical academics, but I digress.]. People high on these attributes might be more likely to accept whatever religion comes along (high agreeableness) and be more rules-bound (high conscientiousness). In moderation both are acceptable, but a healthy spiritual community will also be missing a critical component - disagreeable cynics (low agreeableness) who challenge people to examine their beliefs and community members who are less focused on rules and behaviors (low conscientiousness) and more open to unpredictability and clutter in their lives.

Business

Applying a complementary rather than a competitive lens to organizations would cause leaders to ask a different question. Rather than who has the highest potential, they would be more likely to ask, “Potential for what?” (Yost & Chang, 2009). Group, organizational, and societal potential is dependent on *all* of the parts that are interdependent, complementary and emergent. Maximizing on any one attribute in such an environment can hurt the whole because optimizing on any individual attributes will not optimize group performance. In this model, the visionary entrepreneur is ineffective unless he/she is paired with an operations manager who makes sure the work gets done. To borrow an analogy from chemistry, a molecule that is made up of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom will not display properties that are the average of the three atoms. Instead, a new set of properties emerge that is independent of the elements. A Christian worldview would free organizations, and society as a whole for that matter, to adopt the same perspective, moving away from a simple sorting of employees into different levels of “potential” to instead conceptualize organizations as an ecosystem (or body) where people are encouraged to find the niches where their strengths can best be used. Thus, an

organization's potential is expanded when people are encouraged to find the places where they best "fit" (Cable & Edwards, 2004; Schneider, 1987). For example, a closer look at the relationships between personal characteristics and job performance suggests that different jobs require different trait profiles (Hogan & Holland, 2003). The people who emerge as leaders and perform effectively are higher on cognitive ability, extroversion and openness to experience (Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002; Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004). In positions like sales, service, and police officers, where interpersonal interactions are central to the role, extroversion appears to be more important (Barrick & Mount, 1989; Saldago, 1997). For individuals, this suggests finding a place in an organization and in society where you can leverage your strengths (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001), and manage around your weaknesses (Morrow, Leirer, Altieri, & Fitzsimmons, 1994). Recent work suggests that as organizations become more complex, dynamic, and adaptive systems, this may be the best model to optimize both individual and organizational outcomes (Haekel, 1999; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009).

Higher Education

The implications for higher education are a natural extension. As teachers, this would suggest that one of our jobs is to help people find their place in the classroom and in the world. We are called to leverage the diversity of student talents, skills and experiences to make the classroom as a whole more than the sum of its parts. Cynics, introverts, talkers, and free thinkers all have an important role to play. I personally am at my best when I picture the Holy Spirit in the middle of the room drawing everyone into the discussion. As the professor, I am one part of whole—my contribution is sometimes as facilitator, expert, participant, or listener. I acknowledge that some powerful learning might even occur without me.

Defining potential as place also should remind teacher that, for some students, their greatest contribution could be in other roles outside the classroom. A student's place might be in another major, in another role in their life, or even in another time. Maybe my classroom is an area of the student's life where he/she needs to do "good enough." Focusing on place also reminds the teacher in Christian higher education that their biggest role is to help students find their place in the body of Christ and their role in the world.

2. Potential as Process

As noted in the beginning of this paper, Secular worldviews today are increasingly emphasizing the causal influence of inherited, stable traits. In contrast, a Christian worldview focuses the most attention on process and change. The Christian life is a journey. At any point in time someone can turn (repent) and be in the center of God's will. Sin and past transgressions are forgiven and life can be started anew. Finding and living an abundant life is a daily decision.

There is growing evidence that people can adopt habits and behavior that help them transcend personal characteristics. For example, recent research suggests that predetermined happiness "setpoints" might be relatively stable because life satisfaction perceptions are influenced by stable trait. However, people can adopt behaviors that elevate happiness levels temporarily (Lyubomirsky, et al., 2005; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). For example, as noted earlier, twin studies suggest that life satisfaction is 50% genetic, 10% shared environment, and 40% unshared environment. To begin, let's look at that last label—unshared environment. The underlying assumption in the label is that any variance in life satisfaction that cannot be accounted for by genes or shared environment is caused by random events in the environment (e.g., unshared environment). Two other factors that are conspicuously missing --

free will and error. The label implicitly excludes the possibility that people might choose to adopt behaviors that affect life satisfaction (and account for up to 40% of the variance).

This, of course, begs the question: Can people adopt behaviors that change life outcomes like job performance, life satisfaction, and mortality? Research suggests that the answer is yes. For example, research by Martin Seligman and colleagues (Seligman, et al., 2005) found that people who reflected daily on three things for which they were grateful showed increased life satisfaction levels six months later over that were significantly higher than previous levels and significantly higher than control group scores. Several other behaviors appear to show the same pattern. Interestingly, many of these behaviors are behaviors encouraged by Christ and the church. People are much happier when they adopt regular practices of gratefulness, meditation and prayer, finding and using one's strengths, and active participation in a faith community (Bade & Cook, 2008; Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008; Hill & Pargament, 2008; Myers, 2000; Pargament, 2008; Seligman, et al., 2005; Worthington, 2008).

Thus, personal characteristics might influence life outcomes but they don't determine the final outcomes. People can adopt practices to counteract them. After a quarter studying theory and research on free will, doctoral students in our program concluded, "People have free will. They just don't use it very often."

Christian Community

Scripturally, the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) serves as an example of how we might think about the resources that are given to us. The servant who received five talents and the servant who received two talents were given exactly the same praise by the master in Jesus' parable.

'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

Christians are repeatedly reminded that their role is to surrender what they have and trust that God can multiply it. People are to be faithful with whatever they are given. Emerging evidence suggests that spiritual practices are important to increase acts of service (prosocial behavior), even among Christians. Researchers found that the reading of Scripture and priming people with God-related words leads to significantly greater generosity than among students who didn't receive these priming interventions (Carpenter & Marshall, 2009; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). And these behaviors affect all outward behaviors. There is growing evidence that religiosity increases people's ability to regulate their own behavior (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). Specifically, this research suggests that religion increases self-control, influences which goals are pursued, facilitates self-monitoring, and can behaviors that promote health and well-being.

Business

Four streams of research highlight the importance of process in helping people reach tier full potential: building expertise, adopting a learning orientation, and learning as you go.

Expert performance in medicine music, sports, and chess suggests that stable traits seldom distinguished who performed at expert levels from people who did not. A few physical abilities in sports appeared to be the one exception. Instead, expertise required extended deliberate practice: 10,000+ hours over a 10 year period (Ericsson, Charness, Feltovich, & Hoffman, 2006; Ericsson & Ward, 2007).

Goal orientation research (Dweck, 1986; Molden & Dweck, 2006) suggests that people who hold a fixed theory of human attributes (e.g., traits like intelligence are stable) are at a

significant disadvantage when compared to people who adopt a growth theory of their skills (e.g., traits like intelligence can be developed). People with a fixed mindset tend to avoid challenges that threaten their self-images and are less resilient after failures because they attribute failures to personal characteristics that can't be changed. In contrast, people with a growth mindset are more likely to look for challenges and perceive failures as learning experiences. This research suggests that even highly talented individuals with an entity mindset will engage in counterproductive behaviors to protect their self-image.

My own work focuses on how leaders can learn as they go (Yost & Plunkett, 2009; 2010). Research suggests that some traits will increase a leader's likelihood to move into and succeed in a management role (Judge et al., 2002, 2004). However, these should, at best, be considered "tickets to play" with the majority of a leader's development occurring on-the-job in trial-by-fire episodes that push the leader to the edge of his/her comfort zone (McCall, 2010). But not all leaders grow in these experiences and emerge better leaders on the other side. The ones who are most likely to benefit are the ones who have set performance and development goals for themselves, put themselves in positions that will stretch them to grow in the areas they have targeted for their development, seek ongoing feedback, and reflect on their learning along the way (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Yost & Plunkett, 2009, 2010).

Higher Education

This is a place where higher education can play a major role. The purpose of higher education is help students move beyond just the content to become lifelong learners, developing skills in critical thinking, self-management, curiosity, and a love of learning. The benefits of a focus on process go beyond just learning, but can have larger implications. For example, Vohs & Schooler (2008) found that students who read a text that encouraged a belief in determinism

were significantly more likely to cheat on a subsequent task than students who read a neutral text or one that endorsing free will.

I am at my best as a professor when I treat the class content as simply fodder to help student refine their ability to analyze problems. My goal is to develop students who can go beyond my own thinking someday.

3. Potential as Purpose

In a secular world, potential is often defined functionally: potential to contribute. This is especially true in American culture and especially business, where usefulness, efficiency, and maximizing shareholder value are given primacy. In contrast a Christian worldview emphasizes that people's primary purpose is to love God and love one's neighbor. The Christian worldview furthermore assumes people are intrinsically valuable because they are the children who are of God made in the image of God.

Christian Community

When Jesus was asked to name the greatest commandment, he replied, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:37-40, NIV) This represents a way of viewing the world and people that differs from the one typically adopted in business.

Business

Christ challenged the premise that an organization's first duty is to maximize efficiency (e.g., to build more barns – Luke 12:13-21). Recent work by SPU's School of Business and Economics suggests other models that should be considered based on the creation story and the role of work assigned in that narrative (Van Duzer, 2010; Van Duzer, Franz, Karns, Wong, &

Daniels, 2007). Other work, again by our own faculty here at SPU, suggests that because we now live in a fallen world, we are also called to bring justice, redemption, and reconciliation into the world (Diddams & Daniels, 2008). We live in the tension of a world with sin.

Furthermore, for the Christian, personal character of people matters. The oft-quoted words of the prophet Micah sums up what God requires, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8, NIV). In the words of the billionaire Warren Buffet, “Somebody once said that in looking for people to hire, you should look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence, and energy. If they don’t have the first, the other two will kill you. You think about it; it’s true. If you hire somebody without the first, you really want them to be dumb and lazy.”

The values that people hold do appear to be malleable. Interestingly, research suggests that conversion experiences do not seem to change base personality, but do change mid-level functions such as goals, coping strategies, values, attitudes, behaviors, and how people think about themselves – identity, their value, and the meaning they assign to events (Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999). Thus, extroverted people remain extroverted and introverted people remain introverted. Temperament stays the same, but conversion experiences and religiosity affect what people value and how they interact with the world and each other.

Higher Education

In the classroom, the call to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves compels the teacher to approach his/her job as a sacred responsibility. The teacher’s role needs to be approached with humility, openness, rigor, and love (Palmer, 1983). The character of the teacher becomes as important as the material. Likewise, the building of character in students matters as

well. If love for God and for each other is the ultimate purpose, what is studied and how scholarship is used also matters. As an illustration just how important the attitudes of an advisee and mentor can be, Jennifer Kidd and colleagues at the University of London, asked 104 employees to describe a significant career development conversation in their lives. Interestingly, most of the conversations happened outside formal processes (only 21% were with a boss and only 7% took place within an organization's formal performance development process). When the researchers went on to ask people what made the conversations so effective, the people seldom talked about what the other person did or said; instead, they talked about the person's character. They said the conversations were memorable and had such a big impact because the other person had their best interests at heart. They talked about honest, frank, difficult, some of the conversations were but valuable because the other person cared about them. Character defined how the actions were interpreted. In teaching, Christian institutions have the same opportunity to teach and build scholars in the context of authentic, loving, trusting relationships.

4. Potential as Purchased⁵

Ultimately, a Christian worldview proposes that our potential is not defined by what people do, or who they are, but by *whose* we are (Guinness, 1998). People are loved unconditionally by the Creator of the universe. This is a God who not only *loves* them, He *likes* them. People are called to accept that love and live their lives as a grateful response. God is the first actor, people follow. There is no corollary in secular society. In business, theorists have written about the importance of stewardship and servant leadership, but they often struggle with how this advice will work in a world where people are and organizations are likely to act in a

⁵ The reader might note that the first three words (Place, Process, and Purpose) are all nouns. This last word (purchased) is a verb and, more important, people are not the actors but are being acted upon by God. In a Christian worldview, God is the first actor. His grace, through Christ's death and resurrection, is the act that forgives sin and releases a person's potential. The person's role is simply to accept the gift.

way where they maximize personal gain (Ghoshal, 2005; Davis, Schoorman, & Donaldson, 1997). Christianity transcends this issue by emphasizing that injustice may succeed in the short-term, selfless people will sometimes lose out, evil will sometimes triumph; but that is never the end of the story or the ultimate reality. And God is with people in the midst of the struggle. When people look into unknown future, they might not know what will happen but they know that God is there.

Christian Community

Christians believe their role is to be faithful to what they know is right and surrender the outcome to God. They don't have to try to be the best or brightest because they can trust God with the unknown. Despite their weaknesses and past actions that they regret and can maybe never repair, God is for them and promises to redeem them, and use them for good going forward (Romans 8:31-39).

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,

neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Furthermore, Christians operate with the irrational belief that if they bring five loaves and two fishes, Jesus will be able to feed over 5000 people (John 6:1-15). Christians believe that they are given the promise that they can bring their strengths and their brokenness, and God will use them both; in fact, God has a habit of preferring to work through weaknesses. In 1 Cor. 1:26-30 (NIV), the Apostle Paul writes to the Christians at Corinth,

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

A Christian view of potential starts with God. But not every view of God is created equal. Over the centuries Christians have represented a God of punishment or grace. Recent research suggests that people's view of God affects their well-being and long-term health (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000; Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2004). For example, people who try to: deal with things on their own, or wait for God to do something, or try to plead and bargain with God; tend to cope less well than people who: see themselves in partnership with God, or see themselves actively giving up control to God. In the same way, people who see their illness as a punishment from God or a temptation from the devil fair less well than people who perceive the situation as part of God's plan, actively look for a lesson in the event, or attempt to

see how God might be strengthening them in the situation. How we see God of punishment or a God of grace matters and appears to have direct consequences to our wellbeing.

Business

People's worldview impacts their attitudes, behaviors, and what they ultimately value (Koltko-Rivera, 2004). As noted in the previous section, people's worldviews can directly impact how they make decisions and what is prioritized. A Christian worldview recognizes work as good, created before the fall (Van Duzer, et al, 2007). Christianity also asserts that humanity is fallen and evil has entered the world (Diddams & Daniels, 2008) and this creates an inherent tension—people live and work in a fallen world and yet are called to work, as co-agents with God, to redeem the world.

Secular worldview promote a very different model. The underlying business model in most American organizations today is agency theory (everyone is out to maximize their own interests). When this is combined with a theme of genetic determinism, the natural conclusion is organizations should hire, develop, and promote the “best” people. Equally valid business models based on different assumptions are ignored (Ghoshal, 2005). Shared strategy and whole system outcomes are ignored (Porter & Kraimer, 2011). However, critics are quick to note the tensions: Are people and the businesses that adopt a stewardship model doomed to be taken advantage of by people and organizations that operate from an agency perspective (Davis, et al., 1997)? Christianity provides a third option. We live in a world where the evil sometimes win. We can have the courage to do the right thing independent of the consequences because God is in the unknown and with us in the journey. Because Christians are partnering with God, one person can make a difference within an organization or within society; that is, one good apple can sometimes save the whole bunch (De Dreu & Beersma, 2001). We are called to be people of

hope in a fallen world (Moltman, 1967, 2004). There is more than maximizing profits and maximizing one's happiness in this life. Profit is a means not an end (Van Duzer, 2010).

Higher Education

As educators, Christians see themselves as partners with God in their teaching, scholarship and service. Their value comes first from God and the activities follow. In the same way, they are called to view students as more than their grades or performance, but as people made in the image of God. Interestingly, recent research suggests that how people define their value affects their overall sense of wellbeing. For example, the pursuit of self-esteem as an end in itself can result in short-term boosts to happiness, but long-term costs to learning, relationships, autonomy, self-regulation, and mental and physical health (Crocker & Knight, 2006).

Reflecting a Christian worldview, Brennan Manning challenges people to "Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. God's love for you and his choice of you constitute your worth. Accept that and let it become the most important thing in your life" (Manning, 2002, p. 51). Fredrick Buechner writes, "Repent and believe in the gospel, Jesus says. Turn around and believe the good news that we are loved is gooder than we ever dared hope, and that to believe in that good news, to live out of it and toward it, to be in love with that good news, is of all things in this world the gladdest thing of all" (Buechner, 2006, p.161).

Conclusion

Society is at a critical important inflection point where Christian scholars can help define what how people think about genetic predispositions. Christian scholars can help define what is meant by human potential and what is ultimately valued in society. Furthermore, as a Christian

Liberal Arts Institution, we have the opportunity to experiment with these ideas inside and outside of the classroom – to create a community where everyone is valued and encouraged to use the unique gifts that God has given them to impact the world.

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