
BOOK REVIEW

A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life

William Law (Edited and abridged by John Meister)

Westminster Press, 158 pages

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For a long time I searched for a good Christian supplemental text for my Organizational Behavior course, a book to add the spiritual dimension to motivation, leadership, group dynamics, and firm change. I tried three or four books and found flaws in all of them.

Then one summer I started to read William Law's devotional classic, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. Written in 1728, this book had a major influence on such luminaries as John Wesley, William Wilberforce, George Whitefield, and Andrew Murray. Law's writing is very different from the sentimental "lite" style used by many contemporary spiritual writers. Law understood the human condition and presented God's claims in such a logical, readable, and seeringly honest way that,

reading him, I could only say, "Yes, he is right."

The version I happened to read was the Meister abridgement. In the early 1950's, a group of Indiana businessmen began to read *A Serious Call* for their weekly Bible study. They selected the book, Meister says in the forward, "for the not too admirable reason that none of us had previously read it" (p. 13). They soon found that 18th century Law spoke directly to their 20th century business situations. Eventually the group decided to abridge the book so that they could circulate it among their friends. They contemporized the language and took out many of the text redundancies. The result is a fresh, readable work of 150 pages, with short chapters and clear illustrations.

As I read the book, I realized that it might work in my Organizational Behavior class. It was an ideal size for a supplement — and the content fit. Law, the nonconformist, discussed the Christian business person's values and motivations. He discussed leadership, conflict, and change. The only OB topic he did not discuss in the book was group dynamics.

Take, for example, Goal Theory which is driven by intentionality. Law's comments on intention hit hard. "Why are the lives of even avowed Christians strangely contrary to the principles of Christianity?" he asks. It is because:

Men do not have the intention to please God in all their actions ... and if you will stop here and ask yourself why you are not so devoted as the primitive Christians, your own heart will tell you that it is neither through ignorance nor inability but purely because you never thoroughly intended it. (p. 23)

Law gives double value. After reading this chapter, students understand the practical applications of Goal Theory and

why intentionality is so important — and they consider their personal spiritual intentions as well.

Since I began using the book, I ask my OB students every semester if I should assign *A Serious Call* the next semester. Every semester the answer is an enthusiastic "yes!" Students feel that Law says things that resonate with them and they like his "interesting" approach.

There are, however, two types of students who do not like Law. One type dislikes Law because he is not contemporary and edgy. These students want a book written in the 21st century and feel Law is not "relevant." However, the more we incorporate Law into class discussion and papers, the smaller this group gets. Some of the people who dislike Law the most at the beginning of the semester are his most enthusiastic proponents at the end of the semester.

The other group dislikes Law because he is "too legalistic." Law's book is written for Christians who already understand the mercy of God and, therefore, desire to live a life of devotion to Him. Furthermore, Law is

systematic in his approach to holiness. He suggests that a person should set regular prayer times and subjects during the day. For example, at 9:00 a.m. thank God for His mercies, at 12:00 p.m. pray for the situations of the business, at 6:00 p.m. pray for unsaved loved ones and colleagues, and at 9:00 p.m. confess the sins of the day. This is standard learning theory but some students see this systematic approach as “too much law and not enough grace.” Not every student is at the same place in their spiritual walk, and some need to break away from legalism. To help these people, I discuss Law and grace early in the semester (pun intended), and also give students opportunity throughout the semester to point out where they think Law is wrong. Students have to read Law, but they don’t have to agree with everything he says. This has the double benefit of helping those particular students become comfortable with Law, even if they still dislike him, and of helping them gain a firmer understanding of the grace of God.

Law’s *A Serious Call* is a Christian classic and it deserves

to be. Like a box of Belgian chocolate, Law is filled with wonderful things with delicious centers. I heartily recommend this edition to you for personal devotional reading, for practical business application, or as a supplemental text in a business class.