

REFLECTIONS ON WORK

This is an account of the progression of my thinking on the subject of work.

There are three stages I can identify in my journey of musings on this theme. The first two stages I intend to summarise. The third stage is where I am at present and I would like to provide as clear a picture as I can of my current thinking and the questions I am asking.

Stage One: Pietistic

The first thirteen years of my Christian life were spent with what I would describe as a *pietistic* view of work. In this understanding work had a four-fold purpose: to be an example of good Christian character; to fulfill my responsibilities as a provider; to enable giving to our local church; and as an opportunity for evangelism.

Although this view of work touched on some truths, its weaknesses came into view soon enough. Acutely it failed to give adequate reasons as to why we work. Inevitably it led me to place a higher value on church work and to a dualistic view in which regular employment was seen as something less worthy. The result for me was conflict, confusion and a sense that I was less spiritual if I didn't cut ties with all and pursue training for paid ministry.

My discussion with many people over the years suggests that this is where the thinking lies for a great many Christians. This includes those with strong evangelical roots.

Stage Two: Vocational

The second stage in my thinking can be described as a *vocational* view of work. It began when I was in my early thirties during a watershed experience at L'Abri (England), a time when many questions about how to think in a Christian way about everyday life were answered. Lee Hardy's *The Fabric of This World*¹ was particularly helpful. It opened this whole area up for me, notably through its introduction to the thinking of leading Reformers on the subject.

There were a number of key concepts which fitted together for me in a very useful way at L'Abri. A key idea was that men are made in the image of God. This answered in more satisfying terms why we worked at all. Put simply, just as God is creative and a worker, then so too is man. Also resolved was the dualism between general work and church work. The two were no longer unequal in status because to serve the image of God was to honour God Himself. Loving God and loving our neighbor were somehow intertwined. As Matt 22:39 puts it, the second commandment is *like* the first. Ordinary work became a valid thing. The plurality of gifts and abilities among men was God's design and men in mutual service of one another was His plan for a healthy society.

Evaluation

The vocational view of work has helped me a great deal and I have worked with it quite comfortably for a number of years. It has been only recently that I have begun to ask a number of questions which my simple apprehension of Reformation thinking failed to grapple.

I still think that the Reformers got it right. However I have realized that the basic concepts I had adopted are not enough on their own. It's not that the ideas I had taken on board were wrong. It's just that they are less powerful, and can even lead one into error, when they are applied in isolation from their broader theological context. The Reformation understanding of work as calling is part of a bigger picture.

¹ Lee Hardy. *The Fabric of this World*. Eerdmans. Grand Rapids. 1990.

This is part of a broader shadow over Christendom today in which we fail to thoughtfully articulate our Christian worldview. As expressed by Andrew Cameron, we may in fact have:

lazily presumed upon many centuries of theology, philosophy and tradition without bothering to learn or teach it. We are a little like Alistair McIntyre's picture of peasants in a Mad Max landscape, picking up bits and pieces of [the] ruined wreckage of ... ideas and arguing about them with little idea of what they are or where they've come from, and how they once fit into a whole.²

With this in view, we should take care how we develop our thinking about work. We should be watchful that we don't take helpful ideas such as vocation and syncretise them with the worldview of our surrounding culture, which neither knows nor honours God. It is true that unless we actively and intelligently pursue a Christian understanding of the world that we will unconsciously become conformed to the thinking of the mainstream.

Stage Three: Where to from here

The way ahead is not altogether clear, but there are some thoughts I would like to put forward as a sense of direction.

The suitable foundation on which to build our thinking about work is the *theology of God*. The idea of the sovereignty of God brings us to the maxim that all things are to be brought into subjection to Christ and means that any significant thinking about work cannot ignore our on-going, personal obligations to our Creator.

Work in its various forms, indeed all of life and activity, is to be under Christ. Work exists within this bigger picture. Our thinking about work needs to flow from the broader perspective of created, fallen, redeemed man, who is in union with Christ and is being restored while he lives in a world which is also being restored and is under God's sovereign rule. Our work needs to be viewed in terms of our servanthood and partnership with Christ as part of the great work of bringing all things on heaven and earth to their fulfilment.

The idea of all things being brought into subjection to Christ suggests that all human endeavour is within His intent for restoration. I have already referred to the Reformation idea of the divine plan for society in which men mutually serve one according to the callings God has given them. This is helpful because it provides an idea of the scope for this restoration. It also encourages us not to think about work too narrowly, as though it refers to particular types of engagement, or to regard one type of work as more important than another. It affirms that non-church work is not somehow separate or weakly linked with the Christian life.

Moreover, we should probe how God is at work in us to make the mysterious union we have with Christ expressed in practice. Our ideas about work should be focused on what it means to be purchased as God's co-workers and that we no longer live for ourselves.

The Christian is yoked with Christ and should move beyond the idea that he labours alone. The idea of work as calling too easily impressed on me that the call was made and that it was then up to me to work it out as creatively as I could. Rather the idea of being yoked demands an essential and persistent co-effort with Christ in our endeavours, where He is the weightier in terms of initiative and energy. "Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain" (Ps 127:1). "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

It flows from this that, although God is interested in our productivity, He regards various qualities of His partnership with us as more important. Whilst productivity is good, God aims to make us His

² Andrew Cameron. *Separating Australia: Church, State and recent Aussie thought*. New College Lecture Series 2005. DVD. Disc 1. New College 2005

workers in practice. He aims for a mode of cooperation which, from our nature, we will resist. Those who abide in Christ (the vine) will be pruned. The Spirit works resolutely to make the action of the cross paramount in the life of the Christian and, to this end, He may inhibit the fruitfulness of our work while He does in us what he considers to be more valuable. The will of the believer is to be brought into subjection to Christ. This should help us to put some frustrations the Christian faces into perspective –if we are having trouble in our endeavours then it may be the Father at work.

We are being transformed into the image of Christ and in this life we are becoming more like He was when He was a man. This leads us to think about Jesus as a worker. One observation is that although He achieved relatively little in this world's terms, in terms of real work He was perfectly accomplished. This leads us to consider how our measures and markers in terms of performance, goal setting and the like may be wrong.

The fourth commandment makes work inseparable from rest. They are a non-negotiable combo. This has been a difficult one for me to pin down, but there seems to be different levels of understanding here. On the face of the matter we see the sabbatical rest. However, the book of Hebrews, in particular, unveils the types and shadows of the old covenant and indicates the fulfillment of the Sabbath in Christ³. What does it mean to enter His rest? Does this refer to a place of relief we will have in the future, or is it to be read with passages like Ephesians 2:6 where (noting the tense) we *are* seated with Christ in heavenly places? This understanding seems to connect work with faith in this present age where, as participants in the new covenant, we are being made familiar with the mode of work which we will enjoy in full in an age to come. Perhaps this nexus of work with rest is where the work of the Spirit (discussed above) is leading us.

The Reformers explained man as a worker because he is made in the image of God. As I reflect on this it highlights the need to properly understand created man in order to understand his nature as a worker. A crucial aspect of our humanity is gender and the creation account affirms this by describing the creation of man as male and female in the image of God⁴. Gender issues were less vibrant during the Reformation than today and this probably accounts for why it has been less visible in my reading on these older authors. The ferociousness of the debate today indicates a need to properly integrate an understanding of gender into our study of work. It seems that it is rarely engaged. If at all, the relevance of gender to work is dealt with more incidentally by texts on gender⁵ or church governance, rather than by those on work. The task is therefore to obtain a proper respect for how the gender distinctiveness of men and women will provide a complementary wholeness to human activity.

It seems that the perennial issue is to arm ourselves against having our faith diluted by the latest ideas dressed up in Christian jargon. The broad direction in which this is heading is to bring our vision of the everyday affairs of men under the scrutiny of a sound theology. I have thus made some attempt to introduce ideas from the theology of God, justification, sanctification, glorification, creation and the fall into a discussion on work. At this stage it is not a treatise, but more of a compilation of ideas put forward for further thought.

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Jan 7, 2007

³ See, for example, Hebrews 4:9

⁴ Gen 1:27

⁵ It was Piper & Grudem who recently stimulated my interest here. Consider for example this interesting principle "To the degree that a woman's influence over man is personal and directive it will generally offend a man's good, God-given sense of responsibility and leadership, and thus controvert God's created order." Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood. Crossway. eg on leadership, P 51