Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 25 • Number 2 • April 2001

Articles and book reviews original and selected from publications worldwide for an international readership for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
FELLOWSHIP
Theological Commission

ERT (2001) **25:2**, 154–169 0144-8153

A Survey of the Theology Of Work

Charles A. Metteer

Keywords: Providence, creation, obligation, prayer, fulfilment, dignity, achievement, service, motivation, charity, community

For most of us, work takes up the major part of our waking lives. We normally break our sleep so that we can meet our responsibilities in a timely manner. Frequently, we move from one task to another until we retire at the end of the day. Many of us have so much work to do that the quality of our work suffers. Yet whether we are involved primarily in intellectual work, housework, physical labour, or a mixture of duties, our work-related activities require most of our energy. Not surprisingly, our situations can prompt us to ask several questions with respect to our Christian faith. What do theology and Scripture have to say about human work? Is there a spiritual dimension to work or does it have only economic and social value? Can we make any applications to our current circumstances?

Despite the central role that work has in our day-to-day lives, in general there is surprisingly little theological reflection on this topic. For example, major theological works such as John Calvin's *Institutes* and Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* directly address the topic of work in relatively small sections.[1] In addition, our churches generally fail to help us connect our religious confession

Dr. Metteer is senior minister of City Vineyard Christian Church in Chicago, Illinois, and an Adjunct Instructor of Spirituality and Faculty of Record member in the Distance Learning Program at Fuller Seminary, Pasadena, California. He earned his Ph.D. in Theology at Fuller Seminary, with an emphasis in Practical Theology. Recently published articles include 'Desert Spirituality for the Coming Millennium' (*Theology, News and Notes*; March 1999), 'Between Gluttony and Rigorous Fasting: The Role of Moderation in Early Egyptian Monasticism' (*Sobornost / Eastern Churches Review*; Winter 2000, 21:2 & Summer 2000, 22:1), and 'Spirituality, Everyday Life, and Work' (*Spirit and Life*; July-Aug. 2000).

1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989, one-volume edition; reprint 1995), III, vii and III, x; and Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I, 1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. Harold Knight and G. T. Thompson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961; latest impression 1978), 3.1, 6.3, and vol. III, 4, *The Doctrine of Creation*, 53.1, 55.3, & 56.2.

with our working lives. Thus, we are left with a gap between our faith and practice. In this article, I will attempt to bring greater congruence between these two by surveying several aspects of the theology of work. Because this topic is so broad, I must limit my investigation. Instead of attempting a comprehensive theological analysis of work, I will simply give summary attention to a number of representative themes, viz., providence, obligation, worship, personal fulfilment, and service. I will also minimize the use of non-Christian, e.g., Marxist, sources.

For the purposes of definition, I propose that *work* covers the entire range of constructive and purposeful human endeavours apart from activities such as sleep, play, recreation, and eating. It includes paid employment, volunteer work, spontaneous charity, academic studies, and domestic duties. Whereas work encompasses manual and intellectual tasks, *labour* is confined to physical efforts and connotes, more properly, the difficulties and hardships in what we usually designate as toil. From here on, I will use the word *work*, except when context requires the use of *labour*.

Providence

The work of divine providence encompasses everything that God does to order and maintain the universe (e.g., see Ps. 104:10-23, 27-28). In addition to redemptive and creative work, this includes 'conserving, sustaining, and replenishing'[2] the world and human life in a way that all may benefit. One way in which God accomplishes these objectives is through human work, i.e., by providing goods and services for others and in caring for the visible world, people participate in God's providential work. In two major respects, this is a more fruitful concept than that of 'co-creation'—the idea that people are co-creators with God because their work 'cooperates with God in *creatio continua*'.[3] First, creative work is often not readily discernable in everyday life. Consequently, the only way to make sense of many mundane activities, e.g., household chores, is to view them as part of God's providence.[4] Second, Karl Barth contends that people cannot participate in God's creative work because the first humans never witnessed it, but were themselves its 'final object'. Indeed, Scripture never suggests that human work is creative in the same sense as God's.[5]

A vivid portrayal of this providential partnership occurs in Genesis 2:5, where the absence of plant life pointed to the relationship between

2 Robert J. Banks, 'The Place of Work in the Divine Economy: God as Vocational Director and Model,' in *Faith Goes to Work: Reflections from the Marketplace*, ed. Robert J. Banks (Washington, DC: Alban Institute, 1993), p. 24.

3 Miroslav Volf, 'Human Work, Divine Spirit, and New Creation: Toward a Pneumatological Understanding of Work,' *Pneuma* 9 (Fall, 1987):174.

4 Robert J. Banks, *Redeeming the Routines: Bringing Theology to Life* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993), p. 140. See also Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York & Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 101-102.

5 The quote is from Barth, vol. III, 4, 53.1 (p. 52). See also Alan Richardson, *The Biblical Doctrine of Work* (London: SCM Press, 1952), pp. 17-20. Jürgen Moltmann offers the insightful qualification that although people cannot fashion something out of nothing, they can act in ways that are 'unexchangeable and unrepeatable' ('The Right to Meaningful Work,' chap. in *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics*, trans. M. Douglas Meeks [London: SCM Press, 1984], p. 50).

divine and human work: 'Now no shrub of the field was yet on the earth, and no plant of the field had yet sprouted, for the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth; and there was no man to cultivate the ground.' Plant growth required cooperation between God who sent rain and people who worked the soil.

This divine-human partnership is based on a covenantal relationship in which God takes the lead. On the one hand, people must look to God for help in all their undertakings. For instance, the psalmist graphically depicted the extent to which workers were dependent upon God: 'Unless the Lord builds the house, they labour in vain who build it' (Ps. 127:1). On the other hand, God chooses in part to use human assistance. Luther stated that human work is actually 'the work of our Lord God under mask, as it were, beneath which he himself alone effects and accomplishes what we desire.'[6] For instance, God fashions new life through parents, feeds people through farmers and distribution systems, and orders human life through political and social systems. Thus, human work is not a contingent activity arising from human need or misery. Rather, the purpose of human work is 'God's purpose in creation and governance'.[7]

Because work is a divine trust committed to people for the fulfilling of the divine plan, it may be viewed as possessing an inherent dignity. Correspondingly, through work, people can affirm their unique position as God's ambassadors on earth. As the cultivators and preservers of God's vast resources, they are to seek the welfare of all life forms and not merely satisfy their own needs and wants.[8] On another level, God has given people different abilities and interests in order to meet the broad range of human needs, e.g., food, clothing, shelter, health care, education, and protection. Consequently, even though work is often laborious, unchallenging, and unrelated to personal interests and strengths, people may see it as a service to God if it is done to sustain and order God's creation.[9]

Obligation

Work as an act of survival

People are generally forced by necessity to work. Whereas work is divinely given to them as a '*means* of survival', it is with few exceptions also a '*condition* for survival'.[10] Thus, although they need to remember that they cannot 'live on bread alone' (Lk. 4:4; cf. Mt. 4:4, [Dt. 8:3]), they need no reminding that they cannot live without bread either. Along this line, Paul's charge, 'If anyone will not work, neither let him eat' (2 Thess. 3:10), was based on the underlying principle that if no one works, no one will eat. Fortunately, God has made people feel hunger

6 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 45, The Christian in Society, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, trans. Walter I. Brandt (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1962), p. 331.

7 Edwin G. Kaiser, *Theology of Work* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1966), p. 54.

8 Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of this World: Inquiries into Calling, Career Choice, and the Design of Human Work* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), p. 48.

9 Jacques Ellul, 'Working and Calling,' *Katallagette* 4 (Fall—Winter 1972), 9. John Paul II carefully makes this same point in *Laborem Exercens, in The Papal Encyclicals: 1958-1981*, ed. Claudia Carlen Ihm (Raleigh, NC: McGrath, 1981), p. 115.

10 Ellul, 'Working and Calling,' p. 13.

which, in turn, motivates them to provide for their bodily needs: 'A worker's appetite works for him, for his hunger urges him on' (Prov. 16:26).

Fundamentally, contra Marx, people work to exist, not to realize their essence.[11] Yet because nature yields its resources reluctantly, survival is not accomplished easily. Consequently, the greater part of people's waking lives is devoted to work-related activities that directly or indirectly secure basic necessities.[12] New life in Christ does not reduce or abolish the need to work. Thus, people need to see themselves as finite, limited creatures who are bound by the necessity of work.[13]

Work as toil

People are also called to see themselves as sinful creatures who suffer the consequences of their separation from God. As the original blessing of work extends to all people, so the divine curse on the ground affects all humanity, for all are workers. Although all manner of work is linked with toil, it is expressed in different ways. On a physical level, the fatigue and stress of labour provide people with a sobering reminder of their tarnished relationships with God. Moreover, because they live outside of the divine harmony, creation itself no longer provides what they need for survival. They now must strive for their sustenance. Toil is even experienced by those involved in non-manual work. For example, whereas many office workers face 'mountains' of paperwork each day, executives must frequently 'bear the burden of grave responsibility for decisions that will have a vast impact on society'.[14] Some people discover that their work does not measure up to their abilities, hopes, or interests. Thus, their efforts often do 'violence' not only to their bodies and minds, but also to their 'spirits'. In such cases, work becomes a 'necessary evil', a cruel rite that elicits little that is 'noble' in them.[15] Overall, the drudgery, monotony, and burden so often associated with human work possibly find their quintessential expression in the domestic worker. Housework is often fraught with the unrelenting responsibilities of raising children and keeping the family together and functioning through loving service. As pivotal as this work is for the well-being of families and societies, mothers and fathers may regard their self-sacrifice as insignificant, isolating, overwhelming, and depressing. Such frustrations are a

11 Hardy, *The Fabric of This World*, 31; and Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 149. Karl Marx said that in truly productive activity 'our productions would be so many mirrors of our nature.' Thus, our essence as human beings is realized as we contemplate ourselves in our work (*Karl Marx: The Essential Writings*, ed. Frederic L. Bender [Boulder, CO: Westview, 1972], p. 125).

12 According to a relatively recent survey, work takes up the greatest part of people's lives—even more than sleep; see Juliet B. Schor, The Overworked American: *The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), p. 21.

13 Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 506. Ellul states elsewhere, however, that it is an 'act of freedom' to face up to and obey the necessity of work (p. 44).

14 John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, p. 39.

15 The first two quotes are from Studs Terkel, *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* (New York: Avon, 1974), p. xiii; the last two quotes are from Elizabeth A. Dreyer, *Earth Crammed with Heaven: A Spirituality of Everyday Life*, (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1994), p. 86. Ellul argues that because work is of the 'order of necessity' and a sign of our creatureliness and sinfulness, we must accept it as 'normal' even thought it is 'alienating, crushing, and meaningless' (*The Ethics of Freedom*, p. 506).

vivid reminder that viable work is nevertheless toil.

The strain of work may force people to focus on 'higher things' or to submit to its character-building discipline. For instance, because even the most desirable occupations contain elements of toil, all workers have the opportunity to perceive that they are imperfect creatures dependent upon divine grace and guidance. On another level, believers can identify with Christ's suffering when faithfully performing their duties under harsh or unfair circumstances (1 Peter 2:18-21). In this context, Catholic thought generally sees human work as a call to follow Christ in his example of redemptive suffering. According to John Paul II, the toil of work offers Christians the possibility of sharing in the work that Christ came to do:

> By enduring the toil of work in union with Christ crucified for us, man [woman] in a way collaborates with the Son of God for the redemption of humanity. He shows himself a true disciple of Christ by carrying the cross in his turn every day in the activity that he is called upon to perform.[16]

Protestantism is more hesitant to link the toil of human work with Christ's salvific suffering on the cross. It holds that this connection inevitably denigrates the cross and elevates people: 'Christ's cross ceases to be something totally unique, and becomes instead the paradigm of the more general truth that suffering is the anvil upon which human good is forged.'[17]

Worship

Work and prayer

Work and prayer are generally seen as different activities. Jesus often withdrew to the wilderness or mountains specifically to pray (Lk. 5:16, 6:12, 9:18, 11:1; Mk. 1:35, 6:46; Mt. 14:23). His examples suggest that people need to seek out distinct times for undistracted prayer. But God wills that people also work (Gen. 1:26, 28; 2 Thess. 3:10b). The sweat, concentration, and perseverance required by work generally take up the bulk of their conscious hours. Ideally, people need to find a balance or rhythm between prayer and work so that their times of prayer are not cancelled by work and their work is not cut short by prayer. As much as they need to worship God through carrying out the divine will, they also need periodically to enjoy and praise their loving Maker in a more focused manner.[18]

This balance is necessary for other reasons. If human work is 'directed to worship,' then work is not the goal, but a 'means toward the end of union with God'.[19] Indeed, without separate times of prayer people can become enslaved to work. People also need to seek out the proper rhythm of prayer and work if they are to avoid making the latter an idol, particularly if their work is challenging and fulfilling. Basically, human work gains its full significance from prayer, e.g., people can dedicate their work to God and ask God to bless their work. Yet in spite of the

16 John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, p. 127.

17 Philip West, 'Cruciform Labour? The Cross in Two Recent Theologies of Work,' *Modern Churchman* 28, no. 4 (1986):14.

18 On this topic, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954), p. 69; and Eric Steven Dale, *Bringing Heaven Down to Earth: A Practical Spirituality of Work* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), p. 65.

pivotal role that prayer plays in human work, daily tasks are not subordinate to times of prayer. Both are fundamental activities of human beings. The New Testament offers 'no hierarchical ordering of charisms'[20] that corresponds to individual or corporate communion with God on the one hand (e.g., praying in tongues—1 Cor. 14:2, 13-19), and to action in the world on the other (e.g., administrations, helps, and service—1 Cor. 12:28, Rom. 12:7). Because work and prayer are inspired and guided by God's Spirit, both activities are sacred.

Work as prayer

Paradoxically, it is precisely in the distinction between work and prayer that 'their oneness becomes manifest'.[21] Work is God's instrument for purifying people from selfishness. Generally, work gets done when people get so caught up in the task or cause that they forget about themselves. When this breakthrough occurs, the unity of prayer and work is often discovered. Released from self-centredness, people are free to experience the meaning and joy of selfless surrender to God and to the task at hand. Work is now a prayer, not in the sense of a turning away from the task to communicate with God, but in a coalescing of prayerful thought and action. Over time, this harmonious state can deepen into an abiding disposition in which the customary line between action and adoration no longer exists.[22]

19 The two quotes are from Kaiser, *Theology of Work*, p. 461.

20 Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, p. 139.

21 Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 70.

22 Douglas V. Steere, *Work and Contemplation* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), p. 56; Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, pp. 70-71; and Richardson, *The Biblical Doctrine of Work*, p. 63.

Personal Fulfilment

Individual development

Until fairly recently, the question of what work does to the worker was hardly ever asked except, of course, in Marxist and Christian socialist circles. This is unfortunate. By avoiding this question, people narrow the purpose of work to maintenance, as if this is possible without giving any thought to the author of work, viz., the worker. Although Jacques Ellul is sensitive to the impact of work upon workers, he argues for a utilitarian understanding of work: 'It is one of the necessities of life…. We simply have to work—that is all.'[23] In contrast, Dorothee Soelle sees work as a natural exercise and function of human beings—the only creatures made in the likeness of the divine Worker.[24] Because men and women are God's image bearers, Dorothy Sayers states that they should not view work as essentially a 'thing one does to live, but rather the thing one lives to do'.[25] John XXIII adds that it is in keeping with the plan of divine Providence for people to grow and develop through their daily work.[26]

23 Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 496. See also endnote 13.

24 Dorothee Soelle, *To Work and to Love: A Theology of Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), pp. 80, 84.

25 Dorothy L. Sayers, 'Why Work?,' chap. in *Creed or Chaos? And Other Essays in Popular Theology* (London: Methuen, 1947; reprint, 1954), p. 55. Sayers' statement would be objected to by those who put the seventh day (sabbath) as the goal of work and those who put the first day (Sunday) as its basis. For example, see respectively Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrer, Straus & Giroux, 1951), passim; and Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time: Understanding and Practice for Contemporary Christians* (Minneapolis: Seabury, 1982), pp. 12-16, 52-57.

26 John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, in *The Papal Encyclicals*, p. 256.

John C. Haughey provides another twist to this theme: 'As we shape and do things, they make us who we are.' In contrast to the self-actualizing aspect of work, he adds that inactivity and nonproductivity—as in unemployment and indolence—leave a person 'unmade, half-made, or misshapen'. This condition is 'deeply disfiguring of the person who was made in God's own image and likeness'.[27] When considered together, these ideas pose a formidable challenge to Ellul's premise.

The influence that work has on the worker is further clarified by distinguishing between the 'objective' and 'subjective' dimensions of work.[28] The objective dimension refers to the impact that human work has on anything from the production of material goods to the transformation of society. The subjective dimension refers to people's personal involvement in their daily tasks. Here, work can be a means of self-expression, self-realization, and personal development. Ellul counters this more optimistic Catholic view by asserting that this is frequently not the case, e.g., the plight of women in the workplace, the increasingly restricted opportunities for vocational choice, the social and racial barriers which hold back individual advancement, and the meaninglessness of atomized work that is far removed from the finished product. Indeed, because of such obstacles and limitations, he rejects such meanings as 'self-realization' and 'self-enhancement'.[29] Though his charge is often true, the subjective dimension still takes precedence over the objective:

> However true it may be that man is destined for work and called to it, in the first place work is 'for man' and not man 'for work'. Through this conclusion one rightly comes to recognize the pre-eminence of the subjective meaning of work over the objective one.[30]

Whereas the products of work, including the organization of society, are vital contributions to humanity, the individual development and interaction of working people—no matter how often or seldom they occur—are phenomena of a more important nature.

Soelle builds on this basic premise. When people give priority to the subjective dimension of work over the objective, they expose capitalism and socialism as 'systems that deny the dignity of the worker in her work'. She adds that the subjectivity of work provides the main reason for establishing the priority of labour over capital. Moreover, the priority of workers over their work requires that working conditions facilitate rather than impede their needs for self-expression, responsibility, and personal dignity.[31]

There are different aspects of individual development that can arise from work. First, human nature is merely a rough sketch, a beginning

---

27 The last three quotes are from John C. Haughey, *Converting Nine to Five: A Spirituality of Daily Work*, (New York: Crossroads, 1989), p. 33.

28 For an extended treatment on this topic, see John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, pp. 16-27.

29 Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, p. 468; see also pp. 412, 458, and passim. For real-life examples of the oppression and opposition associated with human work, see Terkel, Working; and James E. Dittes, *Men at Work: Life Beyond the Office* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

30 John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, p. 27.

31 For the quote and thoughts, see Soelle, *To Work and to Love*, pp. 88 & 89.

of the whole person that needs to find its full expression through activity. In this sense, work enables people to use and perfect their areas of giftedness. Work can even bring out latent abilities that have gone unrealized.[32] Second, although people are born with different abilities, additional talents are usually developed during the course of their lives through practice and discipline, interaction with others, and environmental influences. These capabilities are also gifts from God's Spirit. People, however, must not passively receive the Spirit's provisions. Whether they acquire new skills or develop existing abilities through their work, they need to remain receptive to the Spirit of God.[33] Third, work is a school for life in which people can learn to act on the basis of their 'better moral impulses and values'[34] and grow in the virtues of patience, tenacity, commitment, sacrificial love, industriousness, and obedience.

Finally, all free, constructive work provides people with an opportunity to release the power of their imaginations. For instance, they can 'come up with an invention, a new solution to a problem, or a new way of working'.[35] These creative expressions testify not only to human ingenuity, but also to the work of the Spirit. Yet people engaged in creative work do more than use their ideas to fashion something. Their creative capacities help them to 'come out of themselves', and to 'realize their being' more fully.[36] W. R. Forrester states that people engage in creative work by incarnating their spirits into their work or the product of their work. He reasons that this is why artists and craftspeople have always found inspiration in the incarnation of Christ; both are, in a sense, incarnations of spirit into matter.[37] Fortunately, this heightened awareness may happen to all workers, and not just those involved in the 'more creative' professions.

Dignity

Though not all work appears to have dignity, there is an inherent dignity associated with all workers. Human dignity, however, is not derived from work. It is based rather on the scriptural understanding that God created human beings to reflect the divine image and that Christ suffered, died, and rose for them. Essentially, people are 'receivers' before they are grateful and industrious 'doers'.[38] Yet as God's image bearers, people are innately capable of expressing this dignity in constructive and creative ways, which may reflect itself in service as much as creativity, in conserving as much as innovating, in ordering life as much as enhancing it. Moreover, because free, constructive work expresses the dignity of the human person, it follows that the dignity of work does not consist in what is

32 E. F. Schumacher, *Good Work* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 3.

33 Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, p. 130.

34 Haughey, *Converting Nine to Five*, p. 14.

35 Soelle, To Work and to Love, p. 85.

36 Moltmann, 'The Right to Meaningful Work,' p. 50.

37 W. R. Forrester, *Christian Vocation: Studies in Faith and Work* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 135.

38 Miroslav Volf, 'On Human Work: An Evaluation of the Key Ideas of the Encyclical *'Laborem Exercens',' Scottish Journal of Theology* 37 (1984): 73. See also V. George Shillington, 'A New Testament Perspective on Work,' *The Conrad Grebel Review* 10 (Spring 1992):144.

done, but in *how* it is done,[39] viz., in loving, wholehearted service to God that is inspired and guided by the Spirit. This pneumatological understanding of work does not allow for a 'hierarchical valuation' of the various tasks of a Christian. All forms of work, from pastoring a church to managing a home, possess 'fundamentally the same dignity'[40] if they are directed by the Spirit.

The biblical witness supports this last idea, although the dignity of common labour was established not so much by specific proof texts as by the general picture of life that emerged. There was a veritable gallery of people engaged in ordinary labour, e.g., the craftsperson or artisan (Ex. 31:1-5; Rev. 18:22), potter (Jer. 18:3-4; Rom. 9:21), farmer (Gen. 9:20; Mt. 12:1-2), scholar or scribe (Eccl. 12:9-12; Mt. 13:52), sailor (Ps. 107:23; Acts 27:27-30), construction worker (2 Kings 12:12-13; Heb. 3:3), musician (Gen. 4:21; Rev. 18:22), shepherd (Gen. 47:3; Jn. 10:1-16), fisherman (Ezek. 47:10; Mt. 13:47-50), steward (Gen. 44:1; Lk. 16:1-8), servant (Dt. 5:14; Mt. 24:45), and worker at home (Prov. 31:10-28; 1 Tim. 5:14). Moreover, Saul was depicted as ploughing with his oxen (1 Sam. 11:5) and David was portrayed as a shepherd before he was anointed king (1 Sam. 16:11-13). No editorial effort was made to protect their royal dignity. It would seem from these passages that God sees no hierarchy of occupations. Tending sheep or a nation has the same dignity.

Achievement

Human workers should make and do things after the example of their Creator. As God's creative work was 'very good' (Gen. 1:31), so people should also strive to do high-quality work. At times, work done well can lead to opposition and a sense of oppression and frustration because of others' negative responses to it. For example, Paul's diligent missionary work was carried out amidst great opposition, as he vividly described in his list of trials (2 Cor. 11:23-29; cf. 1 Thess. 2:2). He mentioned to the Philippians that the jealous opposition of certain brethren and his imprisonment actually advanced the gospel (Phil. 1:14-18). Similarly, Jeremiah's faithful prophesying resulted in deep lamentation over his life (Jer. 20:14-18).

Nevertheless, work done well can be 'transforming', for there is a close correspondence between achievement and satisfaction.[41] For instance, some workers find pleasure in solving problems and difficulties. Others experience the joy of knowing that the product they make, or the service they provide, meet a real need in society. Still others, after working all day at a job in which they are poorly paid, put loving labour into a hobby that cannot bring them any financial remuneration. These examples suggest that people work not only out of necessity, but also for the satisfaction they derive from their efforts, such as the ability to develop personal skills, to pursue special interests, to contemplate past accomplishments, and

39 William J. Dumbrell, 'Creation, Covenant, and Work,' *Evangelical Review of Theology* 13 (April 1989):151.

40 The last two quotes are from Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, pp. 124 and 125 respectively.

41 Dale, *Bringing Heaven Down to Earth* 15. For more on work and personal satisfaction, see Sayers, 'Why Work?,' p. 55; and Piper, 'The Meaning of Work,' p. 183.

to anticipate new challenges.[42]

Although people have the god-like ability to examine their work, some personal reflections can go awry. Admiration of their accomplishments and creative faculties may lead to pride. Eventually, they may support a non-scriptural humanism that exalts 'the creature rather than the Creator' (Rom. 1:15). To counter this temptation, Scripture repeatedly warns people against worshipping the works of their hands. On one level, the intentional worship of crafted idols was vigorously condemned. For example, God quickly judged Israel for worshipping the golden calf (Ex. 32:4-14, 35; see also Ps. 115:4; Is. 40:18-20, 44:9-10). On another level, God did not tolerate indefinitely the pride people took in the magnitude of their tasks or in the magnificence of their craftsmanship. Perhaps the classic scriptural example of human work performed in the service of self is the construction of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9). Settlers on the plain of Shinar said: 'Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower… and let us make for ourselves a name' (v. 4). So massive were their achievements that God personally intervened to stop them from reaching their goals. Similarly, King Nebuchadnezzar was forced by God to live like an animal for several years on account of the pride he displayed at the completion of his tremendous building projects in Babylon (Dan. 4:28-33).

The examples from Babel and Babylon illustrate how easily people can make work the idol by which they determine their worth and establish their identities.[43] Yet because people are created for God and not for their work, there are limits to the satisfaction they can gain through work. Ultimately, they must find in their Creator what they cannot find in work. The restlessness that arises from human work, however, can function as an 'evangelist' that leads them to God.

Service

Motivation

God does not selfishly require from people special sacrifices offered to him/her alone. When people respond to divine love and grace, God redirects their attention to 'the world and its need.' Accordingly, there are no religious restrictions because serving God takes place in 'life itself'.[44] Christians are to see themselves as at God's disposal, carrying out the divine will in all that they do: Whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 4:11). Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). This attitude transforms constructive

42 Ellul counters, 'When human work produces joy or what seems to be outside the everyday, we have to realize that this is an exceptional event, a grace, a gift of God' (*The Ethics of Freedom*, p. 506). Yet by placing the greater part of our waking hours, i.e., work, at the mercy of God's 'exceptional' intervention, the inherently spiritual character of work is nullified.

43 The New Testament repeatedly condemns 'justification by works' and advocates 'justification by faith' (e.g., Mt. 20:1-16, Rom. 3:28, Eph. 2:8-9, Titus 3:5). The modern-day equivalent of the former is a 'justification by work' in which people validate their lives through their work or paid employment. On this topic, see Richardson, *The Biblical Doctrine of Work*, pp. 59-62.

44 The last two quotes are from Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947), p. 189.

work into something holy and good (Rom. 12:1-2, 2 Tim. 2:21, 1 Peter 1:15-16; cf. Eph. 2:10; Titus 2:7, 14; 3:8; 2 Peter 3:11).

The motivation for service is based on several factors. First, the appropriate response to creatures made in the image of God is 'a deep reverence and an attitude of service'.[45] Second, people can picture someone in need as Christ himself and thereby serve Christ by providing, among other things, food, clothing, and shelter as needed. Scripture indicates that no conflict exists between the love of God and the love of neighbour (1 Jn. 3:16-18; 4:12, 20-28). Because God identifies with fallen humanity, to serve the needy is to serve God. Jesus emphasized this point when informing his disciples as to what he would say on the last day to those who had faithfully served the sick, the stranger, and the hungry: 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine, even the least of them, you did it to me' (Mt. 25:40). This argument is widely represented in contemporary Catholic theology on work, e.g., 'Jesus is hidden in those most in need; to reject them is to reject God made manifest in history.'[46] Third, people can imitate Christ in his service to others. Jesus characterized his ministry when he said that he had not come 'to be served, but to serve' (Mt. 20:28). His earthly ministry included one example after another of loving service to those in need. Immediately prior to his death, he made his intentions explicit for the twelve disciples by washing their feet and directing them to follow in his steps: If I then, the Lord and Teacher, wash your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you (Jn. 13:14-15).

In like manner, all Christians should respond to Christ's exhortation by following him in the service of others. Christ's teaching also suggests that people are not to avoid even the humblest work since it possesses an inherent dignity when performed in imitation of him.[47] Fourth, the Christian principle of stewardship is built on the premise that everything people have—including their interests and abilities—belongs to God. As God's ambassadors, they are entrusted with these possessions in order to use them for their neighbour's good. Jesus dealt with this principle in the parable of the talents (Mt. 25:14-30; cf. Lk. 19:12-27). His followers were accountable to God for everything God had given them. They were to use their talents to serve others and to develop God's resources. In doing so, they served God and the divine purposes.[48] Calvin added that stewardship was properly expressed through love to the community:

---

45 Haughey, *Converting Nine to Five*, p. 24. For more here, see Calvin, *Institutes*, III, vii, 6.

46 National Council of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All* (United States Catholic Conference, 1986), sec. 44. For more on this view, see Hardy, *The Fabric of This World*, pp. 74-75.

47 Arthur T. Geoghegan, *The Attitude Towards Labor in Early Christianity and Ancient Culture* (Washington, DC: The Catholic Univ. Press, 1945), 99. See also William A. Beardslee, *Human Achievement and Divine Vocation in the Message of Paul*, Studies in Biblical Theology: no. 31 (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1961), p. 129.

48 William E. Diehl, *The Monday Connection: A Spirituality of Competence, Affirmation, and Support in the Workplace* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 10-13; Hardy, *The Fabric of This World*, p. 66; Carl H. Henry, 'The Christian View of Work,' in *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics,* ed. Carl H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964), p. 31; and Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, pp. 88-89, 114.

> No member has its ['divine deposits'] function for itself, or applies it for its own private use, but transfers it to its fellow-members; nor does it derive any other advantage from it than that which it receives in common with the whole body…. In regard to everything which God has bestowed upon us, and by which we can aid our neighbour, we are his stewards, and are bound to give account of our stewardship; moreover, that the only right mode of administration is that which is regulated by love.[49]

Finally, Scripture suggests that Christian workers are to do their tasks not so much for those in authority over them but for Christ himself (Eph. 6:5-7; Col. 3:22-24). The motive behind this Christian ethic of work comes from the obedience they owe to their heavenly Master. By picturing their earthly masters as types of Christ, workers can conscientiously and honestly perform their duties. Human work in this sense is raised to a sacred level for the goal is not reward or profit but the commending of the Christian faith and the honouring of God (Titus 2:10, 1 Tim. 6:1).[50]

Charity

It has been argued that, according to Scripture, the main purposes of work were the meeting of personal needs and the needs of strangers, the sick, and the underprivileged.[51] For example, Jesus exhorted his followers to give to the needy without exception (Mt. 5:42, Lk. 6:38). He wanted them to 'honour and love… the image of God, which exists in all',[52] and not to consider what people, in themselves, deserved. This principle was to include their enemies: 'But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return' (Lk. 6:35; cf. Lk. 6:27-34, Mt. 5:44-47). Elsewhere, he said that he would ultimately judge people's lives and work in terms of the charity they provided the less fortunate (Mt. 25:31-40).

The duty of almsgiving is not fulfilled by the mere providing of goods and services. Christ's disciples need to match their external acts with proper attitudes. In light of all God has done for them, they are not to give 'grudgingly or under compulsion' (2 Cor. 9:7b), but with cheerfulness and gratitude. Furthermore, as God has given 'generously and without reproach' to all people (James 1:5; cf. 1 Tim. 6:17b), so they are to give liberally to the poor (Dt. 15:8, 10; Prov. 22:9; 2 Cor. 9:9-11, 13; I Tim. 6:18). When Jesus told his disciples, 'freely you received, freely give' (Mt. 10:8), he was referring to continual action based on an ongoing sense of gratitude. Similarly, when the writer of 1 Timothy exhorted his readers 'to be generous and *ready to share*' (6:18b), he was implying that they maintain an attentiveness to other's needs. These passages indicate that a one-time act of charity is an inadequate response of love in light of God's ongoing charity to fallen humans. Finally, Christians are to put themselves in the place of those whom they see in need of their assistance (e.g., Heb. 13:3). By experi-

---

49 Calvin, *Institutes*, III, vii, 5.

50 Johannes B. Bauer, ed., *Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1970), s.v. 'Work,' by Johannes B. Bauer; and Richardson, *The Biblical Doctrine of Work*, pp. 43-44.

51 Volf, 'On Human Work,' p. 77. (See Gen. 1:29, 2:15; Acts 20:34-35; Eph. 4:28.) Although almsgiving was generally made possible by work, it could include selling 'property and possessions' and sharing the proceeds among the needy (e.g., Acts 2:45; cf. II Cor. 8:14).

52 Calvin, *Institutes*, III, vii, 6.

encing empathy for the 'downtrodden' (Lk. 4:18), they protect themselves from arrogance as well as the needy from subjection.[53]

Community

Closely related to, but not synonymous with, almsgiving is service to the community. Whereas almsgiving consists of gifts to the needy, service to the community centres more on working with others and working for the common good—the latter not necessarily provided free of charge. Basically, the necessity to work implies the necessity to cooperate with others.[54] John Paul II takes this correspondence one step further: It is characteristic of work that it first and foremost unites people. In this consists its social power: the power to build a community.[55]

Human work can bring people together because it liberates them from their inborn egocentricity which, in turn, frees them to cooperate with and serve others.[56] When taken together, these thoughts counterbalance Ellul's assertion that work is inherently 'alienating'.[57]

Relationships in the workplace can occur between peers, employers and employees, parents and children, and instructors and students. The character of these relationships generally influences the quality of work that is done. In business, 'spontaneous horizontal relationships' (e.g., teamwork), rather than 'hierarchical chains of command', can increase morale, efficiency, productivity, and the free flow of ideas.[58] The harmonious running of a home is determined to a great extent by the cooperative efforts of each family member rather than by the 'dictatorial' rulings of one adult. Likewise, the learning process is often enhanced by the exchange of ideas between the teacher and students versus the one-way lecture.[59]

The fact that most people need to work, and the reason why they need to work, promote the common good of society. In this sense, 'mere utility is elevated to the place of service to humanity',[60] which includes 'building the future' for following generations.[61] The dignity of work, consequently, does not depend on the kind of work performed, but on the reason *why* it is performed. The humblest of work is of equal value to highly specialized work if it is done in obedience to Jesus' commission to serve one another (Jn. 13:14-15). Indeed, the notion of work as service for the common good abolishes the distinction between 'spiritual' and 'secular' work. Spiritual work is no longer seen as religious endeavours, but as any activity that 'serves the Divine will and human community'.[62]

On another level, although people have the same basic needs, they do

53 Calvin, *Institutes*, III, vii, 7.

54 Otto A. Piper, 'The Meaning of Work,' *Theology Today* 14 (July 1957):184-185.

55 John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, p. 96.

56 Soelle, *To Work and to Love*, p. 93; and Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, p. 387.

57 Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, p. 496.

58 Moltmann, 'The Right to Meaningful Work,' p. 55.

59 For more on cooperation in the home and classroom, see Earnest Boyer Jr., *Finding God at Home: Family Life as Spiritual Discipline* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1984), pp. 128-176; and Parker J. Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993).

60 Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, p. 388.

61 The last two quotes are from John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 44 and 73 respectively.

62 Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, 388. For more on this topic, see John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle of Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), p. 457.

not have the same talents and abilities. The Spirit has equipped people differently in order that they might fully serve humanity together. This idea abolishes the basis for grouping people into classes according to their occupations.[63] In addition, Scripture indicates that people's charisms obligate them to serve others in specific ways (Rom. 12: 6-8; 1 Peter 4:10). It follows that the use of their charisms connects them with various communities, e.g., the home, neighborhood, workplace, parachurch organization, and church. More fundamentally, accepting the dignity of all workers and the work they perform is indispensable to the building of community.[64]

Workers contribute to the common good of society in different ways. They can provide people with goods and services that are useful or necessary. On a broader scale, they can work for social reform. Injustices in society are righted only when fair and equal redress or due are pursued on behalf of all people. Paul VI indicated that Christian workers should 'take the initiative freely and infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws and structures of the community in which they live'.[65] Finally, Dorothy Sayers argued that the best way for workers to further the common good is by serving their work rather than their community:

> The worker's first duty is to *serve the work* [italics are hers]…. There is, in fact, a paradox about working to serve the community, and it is this: that to aim directly at serving the community is to falsify the work; the only way to serve the community is to forget the community and serve the work.[66]

She defended her premise on several grounds. First, when people believe it is their duty to serve the community, then human beings are inevitably served before God. As a result, God's image bearers are worshipped and made the standard by which to measure all else. Second, in order to do good work, people must focus on the task at hand rather than the people they serve. Such competence is a cornerstone of ministry. John Paul II states that competency at work is not only a major factor in meeting the needs of society, but also the means whereby the 'spirit of Christ [can] more effectively achieve its purpose in justice, charity, and peace'.[67] Third, people who serve their communities may expect something in return. Those who serve their work, however, are primarily interested in the satisfaction of doing a task well. Fourth, workers who focus on serving their communities may aim at pleasing people's changing desires and expectations instead of simply doing high-quality work. This emphasis is self-defeating. Only work done well—'as its own integrity demands that it should be done'—will endure, for it alone is 'true to itself'.[68]

---

63 John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, p. 27.

64 Hardy, *The Fabric of This World*, p. 60; and *Dale Bringing Heaven Down to Earth*, p. 79.

65 Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, in *The Papal Encyclicals,* p. 81.

66 Sayers, 'Why Work?,' pp. 61-62.

67 John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, p. 117.

68 These two quotes, and Sayers' four points, are found in Sayers, 'Why Work?,' p. 61-63.

Conclusion

We have seen that the divine-human link in work is evident on several theological fronts.

a) Choosing to obey God in our common, ordinary activities is a practical spiritual discipline. People who work under the guidance and direction of God receive divine favour. For instance, the anxiety that naturally arises from striving to meet daily needs should not undermine the pursuit of God's kingdom. God blesses the work of those who exhibit trust despite the unrelenting demands of personal survival. Conversely, those who refuse to submit their efforts to God come under divine disfavour.

b) Instead of retreating from the needs of the world, we are to extend willingly God's providential care to others, as well as to cultivate and preserve the earth's natural resources. Along this line, each of us has special abilities and interests that can help meet the wide spectrum of human needs. At times, however, God provides us sustenance apart from work—e.g., gifts and charity—to remind us that our welfare is ultimately grounded in divine goodness rather than our industriousness.

c) There are several ways in which we may view our daily work as a service to God and others. We may learn to see our service to the underprivileged, or those over us, as service to Christ himself. Our toil and sacrificial service for others can help us identify with Jesus, the suffering Servant. We may exercise stewardship of our abilities by wholeheartedly serving God's creation. We are commanded to work hard to support ourselves and the less fortunate, e.g., we should always offer the fruit of our work generously, willingly, and empathetically to whomever is in need. Finally, we may effectively serve people in the relationships we develop in the workplace and in the work we do for the common good of society. Personal integrity, humility, respect, and competence facilitate these two areas of community service.

d) Although work and prayer are separate activities, they are intimately linked if we first dedicate our efforts to God and ask God to bless them, and then 'lose ourselves' (i.e., our self-centredness) in the task at hand. In this sense, worship is realized in an immersing in rather than a withdrawing from our ordinary work-related activities.

e) The divine-human link is seen in the personal fulfilment we gain from work. On one level, we are by nature workers because we were made in the likeness of the divine Worker. Moreover, as God drew satisfaction from reflecting upon the act of creation, so we too can reflect upon and derive satisfaction from our efforts. We can also mirror in a small way the creative aspect of God when using the power of our imaginations in our work. Our creative efforts point to more than our ingenuity; they also testify of the work of God's Spirit within us. On another level, just as God is greater than what she/he creates, so we are more valuable than what we do. Accordingly, our efforts to pursue and defend the preeminence of workers over their work is a small reminder that the divine Worker is preeminent over all creation. On yet another level, although we are born with God-given abilities, we must remain receptive to the ongoing work of the Spirit in and with us in developing our personal talents. The obedient and gracious exercising of these capabilities—

both innate and acquired—can promote enhanced service.

Based on these five points, it follows that there is an inherent dignity in all workers and all legitimate forms of work. Because we are God's image bearers, the value of work does not lie primarily in what we are doing, but in displaying the likeness of the divine Worker in creative and constructive ways. Correspondingly, Scripture offers no hierarchy of occupations. All work done as unto God, carried out in obedience to Christ's command to serve others, and accomplished under the Spirit's prompting is an honourable and sacred activity. These truths can shed a hopeful light into the debilitating darkness of meaningless, laborious, and oppressive work situations.