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Niggle's Leaf and Holland's Opus: Reflections on the Theological Significance of Work

Richard Langer

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MIROSLAV VOLF FIRST published his ground-breaking book, *Work in the Spirit*, in 1991. It garnered immediate and well-deserved attention both because of the intrinsic importance of work for Christian life and practice, but also because he attempted a sea change in our theological thinking about work. He presented a Christian theology of work grounded in eschatology and pneumatology rather than in notions of vocation and original creation. His work also became the leading edge of a budding genre of theological reflection on work.[1]

Recently, Darrell Cosden has developed a theology of work which continues and amplifies much of Volf's thought, particularly his emphasis on the importance of the new creation in our understanding of work.[2] John Jefferson Davis has also written on work in the new creation, though his concerns are not with the connection between our current work and the new creation but rather with the ongoing presence of work within the new creation itself.[3]

Though I will ultimately argue for retaining a more traditional view of work grounded in vocation and in the 'old' creation, I will also argue that Volf, Cosden and others are right in seeing an eschatological significance in our work. Unfortunately, I believe that eschatological significance is found in a different place and pointed in the opposite direction. To illustrate this difference, I will appeal to two stories: a short story by J.R.R. Tolkein entitled 'Leaf by Niggle' and a story told in a movie entitled 'Mr. Holland's Opus.' The first story is set in an explicitly eschatological context and is used to examine alternative possibilities for understanding the eschatological significance of work. The second story is used to probe more deeply into the significance of work as it is traditionally understood. Together they build a case for an eschatologically broadened, but ultimately traditional, understanding of human work.

I Volf's 'Work in the Spirit'

I will use Volf's *Work in the Spirit* as the framework for discussing the new theologies of work, making additional comments to Cosden's work as appropriate. Much of the theological core is shared in common in these works, both of which draw substantially on Moltmann's eschatological vision. Without disputing the many virtues of an eschatologically-grounded theology of work, I do have some fundamental concerns. First, it seems that both Volf and Cosden assume an overstated discontinuity between old and new creations when discussing traditional views of work.

This overstatement may serve to blind them to the possibility that traditional views of work might also find a connection between our work in the present age and the new creation. In other words, I do not believe that affirming eschatological significance in our work requires a theology of work grounded in the new creation. Similarly, I believe there is a tendency to overstate the eschatological significance of work at the expense of its protological significance. I do not believe that the mere fact that there is eschatological meaning to our work entails that the eschatological meaning is primary.

1. Eschatology and continuity

Volf begins his discussion of work and the new creation by identifying a fundamental bifurcation in Christian eschatology:

> Christian theologians have held two basic positions on the eschatological future of the world. Some stressed radical discontinuity between present and future orders, believing in the complete destruction of the present world at the end of the ages and creation of a fully new world. Others postulated the continuity between the two, believ-

1 Some recent representative works include: David H. Jensen, *Responsive Labor: A Theology of Work* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 2006), Armand Larive, *After Sunday: A Theology of Work* (New York: Continuum, 2004), Douglas Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns1999). In addition to these works (and those by Cosden mentioned below) which attempt extended theological reflection on work, there are countless books addressing practical issues related to work and the Christian faith, theological reflections on capitalism and free markets, business ethics from a Christian perspective, Christian wisdom for business leadership, and books discussing 'business as mission'. These works often contain chapters laying theological foundations for work with varying degrees of success.

2 See Darrell Cosden, *A Theology of Work: Work and the New Creation* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2004) and Darrell Cosden, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work* (Carlise: Paternoster Press, 2006)

3 John Jefferson Davis, 'Will There Be *New* Work in the New Creation?,' *Evangelical Review of Theology* 31, no. 3 (2007)

***Dr. Richard Langer**, PhD (University of California, Riverside), is an Associate Professor in the Biblical Studies and Theology Department at Talbot School of Theology (Biola University) and an ordained minister in the Evangelical Free Church of America. He served for over twenty years as a pastor at Trinity Evangelical Free Church in Redlands, California. His current teaching and writing is focused on the integration of theology across academic disciplines and within everyday life. He is the author of 'Humans, Commodities, and Humans in a Sense,' in* Philosophia Christi, *May-June 2008; and 'Emerging Church: Abiding or Departing?' and 'The Faith Once For All Delivered to the Saints' (*Proclamation!*)*

ing that the present world will be transformed into the new heaven and the new earth. Two radically different theologies follow from these two basic eschatological models.[4]

Christians, it seems, come in two sorts: one sort stresses what Volf calls 'radical discontinuity' between present and future orders, the other sort postulates continuity between present and future. Regarding work, the result of embracing discontinuity is to make human work 'devoid of direct ultimate significance,' because the annihilation of the old creation entails the annihilation of human work in the old creation. The new creation arrives *ex nihilo*—totally disjunctively from the old creation.

In contrast, those who affirm continuity believe that the old creation will be 'transformed' into the new creation and our works will be transformed with it. New creation is not creation ex nihilo, but rather a transformation of the old into something new—*transformatio mundi* rather than *annihilatio mundi*. Because the old is continuous with the new, but transformed, our work has enduring value. It survives, in some meaningful sense, the eschatological transformation. Not only are human persons redeemed, but also the work of their hands.

In the absence of such continuity, Volf finds 'human work and its results are eschatologically insignificant.'[5] He notes that those who affirm annihilation may find eschatological significance in human work by its effect on human souls, but there is no direct significance because the work itself is not enduring.

At first blush, Volf's understanding of discontinuity and annihilation might appear mistaken because many people who believe in the annihilation of the old creation would also believe in the significance of work and cultural involvement. Volf, however, argues that there is an important confusion hidden in such a combination of beliefs. He admits that it is 'logically compatible' to affirm annihilation and social and cultural involvement, but he argues that embracing both is *theologically* inconsistent.[6]

This is because 'under the presupposition that the world is not intrinsically good, the only theologically plausible justification for cultural involvement would be that such involvement diminishes the suffering of the body and contributes to the good of the soul.'[7] So, for example, Bach might compose music on annihilationist presuppositions, but his desire for people to take pleasure in the music itself could not be theologically motivated:

> He would have no theological reason for this important way of loving others. This problem would not arise, however, if Bach believed in the intrinsic goodness of creation. And he could do this only if he believed in the eschatological transformation rather than destruction.[8]

4 Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 89.
5 Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 90
6 Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 90
7 Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 91
8 Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 91

The outcome of his line of reasoning is that the only work which has true significance is work that endures through to the eschaton. Though we may do our work 'protologically' (in the old or present creation) our work's real validation only comes eschatologically (in the new creation). And continuity, for Volf, seems to include an ontological element—the very products of human work endure and become the building blocks of the new creation. We may not make the new creation directly, but our work is integrated into the new creation by God's act of transformation.[9]

To capture the significance of this Volf suggest we ask ourselves 'whether all those unappreciated small and great Van Goghs in various fields of human activity would not draw inspiration and strength from the belief that their noble efforts are not lost, that everything good, true, and beautiful they create is valued by God and will be appreciated by human beings in the new creation.'[10]

Though I am sympathetic to much of what he says, a false dichotomy reverberates throughout Volf's discussion. He suggests that Christians affirm an eschatology of either 'radical discontinuity' or else of 'continuity.' The presence of the modifier 'radical' in one case and its absence in the other is noteworthy. Why not compare radical discontinuity to radical continuity? Or better yet, why not simply compare continuity and discontinuity and leave the radicals to their Parisian cafes? It is clear that 'radical' is not merely rhetorical flourish. The discontinuity he describes is indeed radical. Not only is the new creation made *ex nihilo*, it is apparently devoid of any shaping influence from the present creation.

Cosden has a similar view of 'annihilationists'. They are said to affirm 'God's punishment of creation will lead to its total destruction and replacement with a new earth that God will make "out of nothing," as he did the original creation.'[11] Such radical discontinuity means our ideas, objects and accomplishments are entirely left behind as we move forward into the new creation. This is a result, presumably, of an understanding of annihilation which Volf describes as follows:

> belief in eschatological annihilation…is not consonant with the belief in the goodness of creation: what God will annihilate must either be so bad that it is not possible to be redeemed or so insignificant that it is not worth being redeemed. It is hard to believe in the intrinsic value and goodness of something that God will completely annihilate. And without a theologically grounded belief in the intrinsic value and goodness of creation, positive cultural involvement hangs theologically in the air.[12]

But is it necessary for continuity and discontinuity to be formulated in such absolute terms? Similarly, is it proper to understand annihilation and transformation as disjunctive opposites? If so, I wonder who it is who actually affirms annihilation. Presum-

9 Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 92
10 Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 92
11 Cosden, *Heavenly Good*, 112.
12 Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 90-91

ably Volf is referring to the Lutheran theologians cited by Berkouwer who 'favor the concept of annihilation of the present cosmos and of a complete discontinuity between old earth and new.'[13] But surely such theologians still affirm a continuity between the resurrection body and the present body.[14] The differences between the resurrection body and the earthly body are substantial, but no one denies the continuity even if its exact nature hard to specify. Perhaps Volf's understanding of annihilation and radical discontinuity is somewhat too radical.

From a biblical perspective, the relationship between old and new can be described either by metaphors of transformation or annihilation. Or to put it more precisely, in biblical language old and new creations are described by a set of metaphors rather than a single metaphor. This is *not* because some objects are continuous and others are discontinuous between the old and new creations. Rather, it would seem that the very nature of the eschatological transformation is both continuous and discontinuous, such that the exact same object undergoing the eschatological transformation will sometimes be described in terms of discontinuity and at other times in terms of continuity.

Consider Paul's observation that 'the earthly tent we live in will be destroyed' and that we will receive 'a heavenly home not made by human hands and which is eternal in the heavens.'[15] Paul expresses the fundamental discontinuity between the resurrection body and the temporal body by a reference to an annihilation metaphor. And it should be noted that *destruction* in this passage is referred to using terms almost identical to those which describe the final conflagration in 2 Peter 3. But Paul also feels compelled to use the language of transformation when describing the resurrection body, using metaphors of waking and sleeping, putting on (in the sense of clothing) and the promise that 'we shall all be changed.'[16] This change is promised without explicit reference to a preceding destruction.

Hoekema aptly summarizes the combination of continuity and discontinuity that marks the resurrection transformation:

> Previously we pointed out that there will be both continutiy and discontinuity between the present body and the resurrection body. The differences between our present bodies and our resurrection bodies, wonderful though they are, do not take away the continuity: it is we who shall be raised, and it is we who shall always be with the Lord. Those raised with Christ will not be a totally new set of human beings but the people of God who have lived on this earth.[17]

Furthermore, some aspects of the transformation between old and new are best not reduced to either a point of continuity or a point of discontinuity. Paul's use of metaphors such as the death of a seed before it comes to life can best be understood as neither continuity nor discontinuity but rather as marvel or a mystery. This entire section is marked by a sort of grasping at metaphors which are discarded almost as soon as they come to hand. He speaks of sowing seed, then of different kinds of flesh, then of different sorts of heavenly bodies, and finally of bearing the image of dust and bearing the image of heaven. It seems that any single metaphor is inadequate to sustain the scope of Paul's thought. At the end of metaphors is a mystery which still remains.

In summary, then, the eschatological transformation is discontinuous and continuous at the same time. Annihilation is an apt description for the discontinuous aspects of the eschatological transformation without thereby asserting that continuity has no place. Furthermore, single metaphors are simply inadequate for describing the eschatological transformation between old and new creations.

2. Eschatological significance of work

But Volf and Cosden are not concerned about eschatological continuity and discontinuity in general, but rather the eschatological continuity or discontinuity of our work. They are seeking the significance intrinsic to our work, and argue that it is found in the continuity of our work between old and new creations. Volf points down two tracks in order to understand this relationship.

First, he leans on Hoekema to suggest hints of this sort of thinking which can be found in Scripture. He notices that Paul believes a man can 'build upon Christ, the foundation, with gold or silver, so that his work will remain in the consummation and he will receive a reward (1 Cor. 3:14).' Secondly, the Book of Revelation mentions works which will follow the believers in the consummation (Rev. 14:13). And finally, in the description of the new Jerusalem, it is said that kings will bring their glory into the new Jerusalem (Rev 21:24, 26). This last is also a theme that Cosden takes up in his discussion of Revelation 21 and 22.[18]

But each of these examples is problematic if appealed to as support for the continuity of the products of our work between the old and new creations. Beginning with the glory of the kings, it is not at all clear that this refers 'some continuity between the

13 Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), citing Berkhouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics—the Return of Christ*, 220, n. 18. See also Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 737.

14 Volf cites Stott's summary of the Lausanne Consultation. Some affirmed 'discontinuity based on the destructive nature of God's judgment and the newness of the new creation. Others believe that just as after the new birth we are not a different person but the same person remade, so the universe is going to experiences a new birth.' But Stott goes on to say 'We all believe that about our bodies, for the principle of continuity is evident in the resurrected body of Jesus.' See John Stott, 'Evangelism and Social Responsibility,' in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: Lausanne Occasional Papers* (Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, Grand Rapids: 1982), 41.

15 2 Cor. 5:1

16 1 Cor. 15:20, 53, 52.

17 Hoekema, *Bible & Future*, 280. Hoekema is explicit in affirming both continuity and discontinuity (see *The Bible and the Future*, 38-39). Volf seems to read the both/and position as a denial of annihilation rather than simply as an affirmation of transformation.

18 Cosden, *Heavenly Good*, 72-77.

culture of the present world and that of the world to come.'[19] Revelation 21 pictures the kings of the Gentile nations entering the new Jerusalem and thereby submitting themselves and their kingdoms to the sovereignty of Christ. It is not unlike the twenty-four elders in Revelation 4 casting their crowns before the throne of God. What the highest representatives of the people of God begin in Revelation 4 is completed in Revelation 21 by Gentile kings making a similar acknowledgement. There is no particular reason to believe the *works* of these Gentile kings enter the new Jerusalem intact.

Similarly, the statement in Revelation 14 reassuring the saints that they can rest from their works because 'their deeds follow them,' provides scant warrant for a belief in the continuity of the products of our works. The context of this statement is as follows: 'I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Blessed indeed,' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labors for their deeds will follow them!''.

This clearly attaches to preceding paragraph describing the endurance of the saints and their willingness to keep the commandments in the face of persecution. They are to have confidence that 'their deeds will follow them' in the sense of having confidence that the judgments spoken against those who received the mark of the beast will not apply to them. Their deeds of faithful obedience will follow them in the form of protection from judgment which befalls those who did not do faithful deeds but rather worshiped the beast and received his mark. Volf himself comments that he understands this passage not to refer to the products of work (which seems to be what Hoekema has in mind) but rather to the effect our works have on the shape of our personality.[20]

Finally, regarding Hoekema's contention that 2 Corinthians chapter 3 refers to the continuity of work after the consummation, it should be noted that this context is very narrowly focused on the work of spiritual ministry. What endures are the products of his work in the form of transformed lives built into God's building—a metaphor for the church. The work itself is not enduring; Paul's preaching will not be repeated in heaven. Paul also looks forward to receiving an eschatological reward, but again, this is different than his work.

Volf himself offers some additional considerations regarding how our work continues into the new creation.[21] Specifically, he suggests:

a) We contribute our small portion to the whole of human knowledge, and upon this the next generation stands to see farther and do more. Even if our work itself does not survive, it may make another work possible which does survive.

b) Human work leaves an imprint on natural and social environments and creates a home for human beings without which they could not exist…Even if every single human product throughout history will not be integrated into the world to come, this home as a whole will be integrated.

c) Work and its perceived results define in part the structure of human beings' personality, their identity. Since resurrection will be not a negation but an affirmation of human earthly identity, earthly work will have an influence on resurrected personality. Rondet rightly asks whether Guttenberg in a glorified state would be Gutenberg apart from any eschatological relation to the discovery that made him famous.

Cosden is sensible to similar considerations. As he discusses the New Jerusalem, he comments that the apocalyptic vision 'suggests that God is pleased to gather up, transform, and include not just his "pure" creation, but also the genuine additions to the created reality that we have brought about through creation-transforming actions.'[22] He also encourages us to think of the

> cumulative nature and impact of our work on this earth and on the whole of humanity. Think about how different our world would be had someone not invented the wheel. God's judgment about the 'goodness' or otherwise of the wheel we invented does not apply only to the 'original' wheel. It involves a judgment of all that has resulted from there being wheels—all that we have built upon, and from, and with, this invention.[23]

I cannot speak for others, but this level of continuity of the 'products' or 'results' of our work seems like pretty thin gruel. My work is aggregated into the entire accomplishments of human history. Together, humanity has made earth into a habitable human home. Human beings have invented and used the wheel. But my work is vanishingly small painted on such a vast canvas. This may be a good account of the cosmic and eschatological significance of human work, but it is a very poor account of the existential significance of human work. I remember spending an entire summer unable to find a job and struggling with intolerably long days and gnawing feelings of depression. It would hardly have made me feel better to remind myself that I was nonetheless human, and human beings had invented the wheel.

There may very well be eschatological significance to the invention of the wheel, but it is of little existential significance to the individual human person. I would argue that a well-formed theology of work must be able to give a good account of work's profound existential significance. Perhaps there are hints of an eschatological meaning for the individual person in Volf's reminder that work helps shape my resurrection personality, but why is that more significant than more traditional values of human work such as loving my neighbor or earning divine rewards? Does it matter so much that my personality comes through intact to the new creation? Our work may continue into the eschaton, but as described by Volf and Cosden, it seems to be of little real significance for the individual worker.

3. Other Concerns

I have three other concerns about

19 Hoekema, *Bible and the Future*, 74.

20 Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 97-98.

21 Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 96.

22 Cosden, *Heavenly Good*, 75.

23 Cosden, *Heavenly Good*, 115

grounding a theology of work in the new creation. The first of these is characteristic of both Volf and Cosden, the second two concerns attach specifically to Volf.

a) Both Volf and Cosden focus their discussions of the traditional view of work on Lutheran notions of work and calling.[24] Of particular importance is the strand of Lutheran thought that affirms the fixity of calling. This is an artifact of Luther's exegesis of 1 Corinthians 7:20 as well as his sense of parallelism between our spiritual and external call (since the spiritual call is singular and irrevocable, our external call must be as well). Volf notes that the combination of these factors contributes to a stagnating conservatism and blinds one to important modern concerns about the social structures of work which often contribute to degrading and alienating forms of work.

But this Lutheran reading of calling is unfortunate, at least in an American context, because Calvin's understanding of calling as mediated by the Puritans has been far more influential. Calvin was suspicious of human social structures. His understanding of human depravity implied that the social structures that created one's *Lebenstand* could be corrupted by sin and might stand in need of redemption. Our divine calling might be to change our social setting, not accept it.[25] Once again, it should be noted, that such reform would be a distinctively protological task.[26]

b) Volf rejects as naïve the notion that an adequate theology of work can be built on induction from biblical passages,[27] but there must be a middle ground between such a simplistic theology by concordance and an authentic biblical theology. I believe Scripture provides more theological ore than Volf mines. Clearly such a theology is complicated by the dramatic changes in the social structure surrounding work which have taken place since biblical times. However, the nature of creation itself and the necessities of human life are largely unchanged.

The work of gathering and eating is intrinsic to our creaturely existence and appointed by God himself. Human beings are still made in the image of a God who is a worker. The biblical God finds pleasure in work, unlike the gods of ancient Greek and Babylonian literature. Biblically, work elevates humans by making us more god-like rather than less god-like. We imitate God by working for the pleasure of 'doing well something that is well worth doing'.[28]

Work is also a context where we show our fidelity to God both by obedience to his commands and by stewardship of his gifts to us.[29] By our work we share in God's work, becoming channels of both special and common grace: of special grace as we proclaim the Gospel and build up the church, and of common grace as we turn the seed which God provides the sower into bread which can sustain the eater. This is barely scratching the surface of biblical material related to work.

Since Volf does not set out to do a biblical theology of work, this criticism may seem irrelevant. But what does pertain to Volf's concerns is that these threads of biblical teaching are all strongly rooted in the *old* rather than the *new* creation. There is very little which points us forward out of this age into the next. At the very least, such biblical considerations go a long way towards explaining historical pre-occupations with a protological rather than eschatological perspectives on work.

c) Volf makes a specific effort to connect his theology of work in the new creation with the work of the Spirit. He accomplishes this primarily by associating human work with 'charisms' or spiritual gifts. To him, the gifts are the Spirit's empowerment for our various vocations:

> If we must understand specific function and task of a Christian in the church and in the world charismatically, then everyday work cannot be an exception. The Spirit of God calls, endows, and empowers Christians to work in their various vocations. The charismatic nature of all Christian activity is the theological basis for a pneumatological understanding of work.[30]

I do not find his reading of spiritual gifts to be biblically grounded enough to carry the theological weight required of it. There is a comparatively narrow biblical usage of this phrase that should be honored in our theology. This point is raised by Hardy in his review of Volf's book and I think Hardy's response is still quite to the point.[31]

I also reject his understanding of the work of non-Christians as being 'in the Spirit.' Without going into the details of his argument, let me simply observe that I am far more inclined to understand secular gifts and talents to be divine endowments extended as part of common grace rather than to try to force them into the category of spiritual gifts. In general, it seems misleading to describe the work of non-Christians as 'done in the Spirit'.

Volf seeks support for this notion from Basil of Caesarea who states that creation possesses 'no power, no motivation, or ingenuity needed for work that it did not receive from the Spirit of God.' From this, Volf infers that there is an important sense in which all human work is done 'in the power of the Spirit.'[32] Certainly there is a sense in which this is true, but do we really want to call this an *important* sense? All human work ultimately depends on

24 See Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 105-110 and Cosden, *Heavenly Good*, 38-45.

25 Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1990). See especially his discussion of reforming fallen structures, 63-67.

26 Williams makes this point in a response to some of Volf's early work. See Stephen N. Williams, 'The Partition of Love and Hope: Eschatology and Social Responsibility,' *Transformation* 7, no. 3 (1990), 24-27.

27 Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 77, and Lee Hardy, review of Work in the Spirit: Toward a New Theology of Work, *Calvin Theological Journal* 28, no. 1 (1993), 192.

28 This expression is borrowed from Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?*, reissue ed. (Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute, 1995), 63.

29 In this context I am thinking both of spiritual gifts and of human talents in general.

30 Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 113.

31 See Hardy, 195-196. Volf's response to Hardy's criticisms on the issue of spiritual gifts is found in, Miroslav Volf, 'Eschaton, Creation, and Social Ethics,' *Calvin Theological Journal* 30, no. 1 (1995), 138-143

32 Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 118.

divine power, but nonetheless many human works are sinful and vicious. If the sense one makes of 'in the power of the Spirit' is so broad as to encompass all human work including Nazi death camps, surely this sense is not important but rather hopelessly broad.

II Eschatology and the significance of work

So must we reject the eschatological significance of work? I think not. I believe there is an eschatological significance to our work, but it is not directly grounded in the new creation. Furthermore, though our work has an important eschatological element, it is not necessarily more important than the traditional (protological) significance of work.

I would like to advance my case by means of two thought experiments regarding the significance of human work. The first of these two fictional examples will help us understand the eschatological connection between human work and the new creation. We will discover that there is a connection, but it points in the opposite direction of what Volf and Cosden suggest. The second example will move us back to the protological significance of work and argue that work can be meaningful even in the absence of direct eschatological connections.

1. Niggle's Leaf

J.R.R. Tolkein wrote a provocative short story entitled *Leaf by Niggle*.[33] It tells of a man named Niggle whose passion and purpose was to paint. Specifically, he wanted to paint a picture of a tree—or more properly of a leaf, that drew him onward to a tree, and then to an entire landscape. The vision was so compelling, he forgot about all his other pictures or else incorporated them into the ever-growing tree and landscape he was painting on his ever-growing canvas.

He also had a nearby neighbor, a man named Parish, who was lame and had a sickly wife. Niggle was often called upon to help Parish when his leg was particularly bad or his wife was particularly ill. This was always somewhat irritating to Niggle since it took him away from his picture, but there was nothing to be done. He had to do his duty. And of course there were countless other distractions which kept delaying his progress. And looming ominously in the background of this story is the long journey that Niggle knew he would have to take, but for which he was always reluctant to prepare.

He often castigated himself for not being 'strong-minded' enough to resist the other calls of life and focus fully on his painting. He was worried he would not be able to complete it before he had to depart for his long journey. Just as he was getting a sense of urgency about his painting, Parish's wife took ill and Niggle was called upon to ride his bike through the rain to call a doctor. Niggle knew this might mean he couldn't finish his painting, but Parish couldn't ride a bike and there was nothing to be done. He had to go. And, of course, the delay proved tragic. By the time he had recovered from the cold he contracted while riding his bike through the rain, the Driver arrived to take him on his journey. The painting would have to be left undone.

As the reader quickly becomes aware, this Driver is taking him on his final journey—by Tolkein's eschatology one that includes a trip through Purgatory and then gradually on to his vision of the eternal state. For our present concerns, however, this aspect of his eschatology is relatively unimportant. After his initial season of hard labor (what I would deem to be his metaphorical purgatory), Niggle is released to another land. In fact, his release comes early in part because in life he had exhibited a willingness to do his duty to neighbor without expecting a reward.

The new land is a sort of foothills of heaven and as he wanders through it, he suddenly rounds a corner and before him stands the Tree, his Tree. And it is finished. Tolkein describes the moment as follows:

> He gazed at the Tree, and slowly he lifted his arms and opened them wide. 'It's a gift!' he said. He was referring to his art, and also to the result; but he was using the word quite literally.

He proceeds to admire the Tree in all its beauty, noticing leaves he had labored over in life as well as leaves that were only buds in his mind and other leaves that 'might have budded if only he had had the time.' And there were birds flying to and fro, and an entire forest around the Tree and mountains beyond.

As the story unfolds, Niggle is ultimately reunited with Parish in this forest and they work the land together making it into the most beautiful of places. Finally, Niggle is called on to the higher mountains but Parish stays behind to await his wife.

The final narration informs us what became of Niggle's actual painting in the original world. Because of its size, it proved useful as a large piece of canvas to cover a hole in Parish's roof after Niggle departed on his journey. A corner of the painting tore off: a spray of leaves and a mountain-peak. A sympathetic passer-by took a fancy to it, framed it and put it in a local museum. But the museum burned down and the painting with it and Niggle was 'entirely forgotten in his own country.'

This story is provocative because of how it portrays the connection between eschatology and the meaning of our work. Niggle was clearly driven by what could be called an eschatological vision. He saw something, but that which he saw was of the next world not this world. His labor in this world was to paint his eschatological Tree, but not to plant it. In other words, the product of his labor was a painting not a tree and not a forest.

In the new creation, his painting was not cleansed of its imperfections and purified through a transforming and preserving act of God. It was not completed and hung in a new creation art gallery. The final end of his painting was, simply put, annihilation. It was turned into a tarp and the only part that was kept as a painting was ultimately burned in a fire. The destiny of his protological work was to be annihilated, not to be transformed.

It may be that I am constraining Volf's notion of continuity too narrowly. Perhaps the connection between painting and forest is a continuous one—allowing for an episode

33 J. R. R. Tolkein, 'Leaf by Niggle,' in *Tree and Leaf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989)

of divine transformation in-between. But then it would seem that Bach's music could undergo a similar transformation and come out on the other side not as music but as a waterfall or a moonlit glade. When the transformations are so discontinuous, the language of annihilation and the language of transformation become one. I can't imagine Bach's work being intrinsically meaningful on one set of assumptions but not on the other. What is ruled out is a radical discontinuity which makes the new creation entirely disjunctive from the old—not haunted as it were by the ghosts of paintings and symphonies from a distant land. But there is no reason annihilation must destroy all connection.

As was pointed out earlier, this sort of radical disjunction seems to be ruled out by more clear cases of continuity such as the resurrection body, the preservation of personal identity, the memory of martyrdom, the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve Apostles whose names are inscribed on the foundations of the new Jerusalem, and countless other reminders that there was a creation that proceeded the new creation.

But obviously there is a connection between his painting and the new creation. As Tolkein tells the story, the reader is teased with the thought of Niggle having painted that part of the new creation into being. On the other hand, the new creation explicitly contained much that Niggle never conceived of but only 'could have conceived if he had had the time.' It would seem the eschatological fulfillment of his vision was a joint venture between Niggle and God.

The meaning and significance of work is found by making something in this world which *anticipates* the next, even though it may not *participate* in the next. Volf seems to argue that for work to be meaningful it must actually participate in the new creation—it must be eschatologically durable.[34] He wants to bring objects of the old creation *forward* into the new creation. I would argue that it is more proper to understand our work as an attempt to bring visions of the new creation *backward* into the present state.

Our protological work does not have a *participatory* relationship with the new creation but rather an *anticipatory* relationship. We know that the day is coming when these visions will receive their true fulfillment, but that is a distant day. We have need of tangible reminders lest we forget our calling as we labor in our temporal context.

In this sense, anticipatory work is sacramental—creating visible reminders of invisible realities. The Lord's Supper is a visible reminder of the death of Christ which we celebrate 'until he comes.' It is a *retrospective reminder* of what Christ has done. Our work is analogous though different; it is (or can be understood as) a *prospective anticipation* of what Christ will do.

In order for our work to succeed on these terms, it need not be eschatologically durable. It can pass away having fulfilled its purpose if it creates an authentic anticipation of Christ's kingdom in the present world, thereby making this world—at least for a moment—glimmer with the light of the next. Tolkein captures the significance of such anticipatory work beautifully when he recounts the interaction between Parish and the 'shepherd' who comes to take Niggle on to the heavenly mountains. Parish asks him the name of the country that Niggle and he have been living in; the shepherd tells him it is called 'Niggle's Picture'. Parish is amazed that Niggle had conceived of this beautiful place and marvels that Niggle was so clever, and asks why Niggle never told him of all this. The shepherd reminds Parish of the picture that Niggle was always working on back in the country from which they came:

> 'But it did not look like this then, not real,' said Parish.
>
> 'No, it was only a glimpse then,' said the man; 'but you might have caught the glimpse, if you had ever thought it worthwhile to try.'

Our anticipatory work is a proclamation of the kingdom for those who have ears to hear and eyes to glimpse. Though many do not think it is worth the while to try to glimpse the coming Kingdom, those of us who eagerly await it are called to grant seekers of that Kingdom the best glimpse we can offer. And our glimpses also fulfill a purpose by keeping us actively longing for the next world and the transformation of our anticipatory paintings into glorified reality. And it should be added that it is not only our successful work but also our failures that helps us cultivate a longing anticipation for what is to come.

The bitterness of our vision fallen short fosters a longing for the sweetness of our vision fulfilled. The joyful anticipation of the future and the heartfelt mourning of the present are both authentic Christian emotions in this fallen world. Creation's groaning is not to be silenced until the new creation comes—the groans keep us awake, watchful and working.

The fact that our work is anticipatory relative to the new creation rather than participatory also protects us from the dangers of misguided utopic visions—one of the most disconcerting aspects of 20th century history. As Francis Bridger comments:

> Paradoxically, the fact that it is God who will bring about a new order of creation at the End and that we are merely erecting signposts to that future need not act as a disincentive. Rather it frees us from the burden of ethical and technological autonomy and makes it clear that human claims to sovereignty are relative. The knowledge that it is God's world, that our efforts are not directed toward the construction of an ideal utopia but that we are under God, building bridgeheads of the kingdom serves to humble us and to bring us to the place of ethical obedience.[35]

So in these many ways and more there is a profound connection between eschatology and our work. But I would argue that none of these connections trumps the priority of the protological aspects of our work. Tolkein seems to share this doubt because as much as

34 This is not to say that Volf is blind to an anticipatory relationship between our work and the new creation (see *Work in the Spirit*, 80). Rather, it seems that whatever meaning derives from this anticipatory relationship is negligible compared to the meaning that comes from participation in the new creation.

35 Cited in Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2006), 411.

the story praises the anticipatory work in Niggle's painting, it is clear that the Voices in his story that represent God's evaluation of Niggle's work are much less concerned with his eschatological vision than with his protological duty.

He is commended for being faithful to serve Parish in the most mundane of ways—and having done so without the expectation of reward. He is commended for having left his painting and gone to get the doctor in the rain on behalf of Parish's wife, even though he knew his time was short. Niggle even guessed she wasn't all that sick, and indeed events proved she was not, but he went nonetheless. He is commended, in effect, for his refusal to let his eschatological vision trump his protological duty.

2. Holland's Opus

My second example develops the importance of protological duties even more directly. The movie *Mr. Holland's Opus* tells the story of a musician who dreams of writing a brilliant orchestral composition. However, the realities of life press in upon him and he decides to take a position as a high school music teacher. He continues to work on his 'opus', but the challenges of balancing school, family life, and dealing with a son who happens to be born deaf renders progress on his opus ponderously slow. His love and concern for his students also weighs heavily on his heart. He loves to see students flourish and succeed and he often finds himself believing in students who no longer believe in themselves. Budget cuts make teaching even more difficult, frustrations mount with his son's disablility, and finally an attractive and gifted student tempts him to leave his mundane life and chase his dream. And of course, in the midst of these trials, the opus in neglected.

However, a variety of circumstances conspire to make help Mr. Holland realize the life he has is best embraced and his dream is best left simmering on the back burner. He does his duty, and his symphonic masterpiece remains incomplete and unperformed. Unperformed, that is, until the day he retires and unbeknownst to him an orchestra of his former students is assembled and together they play—as best they can, his opus—which has only been completed as best he can.

The movie plays with predictable pathos—but there is a point to this story, a point most germane to our present discussion. In contrast to *Leaf by Niggle*, the opus by Holland is not driven by an eschatological vision but rather a protological one. Mr. Holland, as portrayed in the movie, does not have a vision of the new creation that he is trying to express through his art. He is simply trying to write music for this world which he finds lovely and hopes others will as well. And at the end, the opus is completed not by being purified by divine transformation and brought forward into the new creation. Rather, its final expression comes in the here and now—at the hands of less than skilled high-school caliber musicians. Holland's Opus differs from Niggle's Leaf exactly at the point eschatological fulfillment. Niggle's Leaf had a future in the eschaton, Holland's Opus did not. But does that mean Holland's Opus was insignificant?

I think not.

Though Holland's theological sentiments are not laid bare in this movie, let us assume he is an earnest Christian—at least as earnest as Niggle. On this assumption, is Holland's Opus significant? I would argue that Holland's Opus is indeed significant, but his primary opus was not his musical score but rather his students. His work was not deemed worthwhile because of its musical merit, but rather because of the way he served his students, loved his wife and son, and ultimately the sort of character he formed within himself. And furthermore, by the standards of the New Testament, he has a clearer warrant for claiming to have done good works than if he had written a work that surpassed Mozart in musical quality, but in so doing had neglected his other duties. Mr. Holland, when pressed, chose the better portion.

This does not mean music is bad, or insignificant. Indeed, I would argue that there are times and situations in which it might very well be appropriate to place a higher emphasis on music. However, those situations were not Holland's situation. He was married, and therefore had an abiding duty to love and be faithful to his wife. He had a son, therefore he had a duty to love and provide for him—doubly so in light of his disability. He was a teacher, and therefore he had a duty to teach, train and shape his students to the best of his ability.

This was his situation and such were his circumstances. They were not necessarily chosen by him. In fact, if we assume he was a Christian we might also assume he would view these circumstances as providentially thrust upon him by God. God was, in effect, posing him a question by his life circumstances which he was to answer with his life choices. His family, his work, his community were all part of his calling in a sense that is very familiar to us from Luther. These things constituted his *Lebenstand*. It was a kind of life that was imposed on him by the providence of God—and vocation, as William Perkins puts it, simply is 'a kind of life *imposed* on man.'

The most central feature of a vocation is *not* that it is freely chosen, but rather that it is divinely given. It may come in an explicit, verbal fashion to a person walking along the Damascus Road, or it may come through the strong current of providential circumstances, channeled by God-given gifts and abilities, directed by the opening and closing of sluices of both divine and human origin, and bounded by the banks of God's revealed Word.

But the method matters little. The point is to understand the divine origin of the call and to answer it as if it truly is divine. In so doing, human freedom finds its expression not in libertarian acts of choosing but rather in worshipful submission to the divine will. And often, the connection between such works and the eschaton is not mediated by the objects of the work but rather by the persons of the work—the God who assigned it, the person who did it, and the people for whom it was done. Work's significance, both protologically and eschatologically, is deeply rooted in its relational element. Work given to man is a divine trust—work done for God is our act of worship.

Conclusion

Looming in the background of the discussions of both Niggle and Holland is

our understanding of the term 'duty'. Some concluding remarks on this topic would be in order. 'Duty' is a term that once was clearly used as a term of praise, often highest praise, for human conduct. In more recent years, its connotation has become dominated by a sense of irksomeness. Duty has always been *other* than one's free choice but it has not always been *contrary* to it. Choosing to do one's duty has often been counted a great and noble thing.

It seems, however, because of the enlightenment desire to do away with the shadows of God in our moral reasoning, and perhaps because of Kant's aptitude for accomplishing this desire, duty was stripped of a personal element and reduced to the product of arid and impersonal rational argument. Duty was abstracted from persons and disconnected from relationship. It became connected to raw authority—either the authority of rational thought or the authority of a person who, almost by definition, one did *not* have a relationship with—the king, the teacher, the civil authority.

The roots of biblical duty, however, are profoundly personal. They are almost always rooted in a covenant relationship, nourished by love, sustained by commitment, and expressed by meaningful work to accomplish a jointly shared purpose. In the biblical context, when God calls us to do something, it is our duty to do it because of the relationship in which we stand. We are bound to him in covenant and he is bound to us. Doing our duty is not merely an abstract response to authority but rather a way of sustaining and fulfilling a covenant relationship. Our work finds meaning, in this sense, neither protologically nor eschatologically but *relationally*. It expresses and nourishes a cherished relationship.

Niggle joins Holland in finding meaning in doing his duty. He is bound to Parish because he is his neighbor, and one has a duty toward one's neighbor. What is interesting in Tolkein's rendering of neighborly duty is that the relationship which was begun in the old creation by faithful works of duty is culminated in the new creation by an authentic bond of friendship. This friendship expresses itself in shared work for a common goal which ultimately created a place of healing in the new creation. In fact, it was such a good place of healing that the heavenly Voices which portray God in this story found it extremely useful for helping others.[36]

In the new creation their shared labor served the common good. The story closes with a delightful anecdote in which the heavenly voices discuss the naming of this place, a naming which has become necessary because of its constant use by fellow heavenly travelers in need of a place to help complete their healing.

> 'I think we should give the region a name. What do you propose?'
>
> 'The Porter settled that some time ago,' said the second Voice. 'Train for Niggle's Parish by the bay: he has shouted that message for a long time now. Niggle's Parish. I sent a message to both of them to tell them.'
>
> 'What did they say?'
>
> 'They both laughed. Laughed—the Mountains rang with it!'

Doing one's duty, properly understood, can be the celebration of a relationship. It need not be an arid task which serves only an instrumental purpose or no purpose at all. In fact, doing one's duty may one day bask in eschatological glory, having served the common good, having mediated the grace of God to others, and having bound one to God and to one's fellow workers in friendship and love. Faithfulness to protological duties is significant and meaningful merely by benefits accrued in the present world, though the seeds of our duties may also flower in the next.

36 Tolkein's eschatological transformation is gradual and phased, not sudden and comprehensive. Heaven involves a progressive healing.