

The dignity of work

JOHN L. MACKAY





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This publication is based on a lecture delivered by the author for The Christian Institute's Autumn Lecture series in November 1999 at St Stephen's Church, Elswick, Newcastle upon Tyne.

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First printed in January 2011

Reprinted in November 2014 and September 2018

ISBN 978-1-901086-45-4

Published by The Christian Institute, Wilberforce House, 4 Park Road, Gosforth Business Park, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE12 8DG

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Introduction

Although there is a large and ever-growing body of Christian literature which explores the theme of work and employment, with its corollaries of leisure and unemployment, it is probably no exaggeration to say that the ideas that most Christians have about work are shaped by the world rather than by the teaching of Scripture. Work is a subject about which little is said, particularly in formal situations, possibly because it is viewed as an insufficiently spiritual topic. Consequently, people take in ideas from various sources, and as often as not end up with views not much different from those of the surrounding community. Even so, society does not possess one unified view about work. Sometimes people view work with whimsical detachment. The attitude expressed in Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* is well known: "I like work; it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours. I love to keep it by me; the idea of getting rid of it nearly breaks my heart." More common still is the simple concept that I work to earn a living. It is something that has to be endured so that with the proceeds from work I can really get on with life. That approach was summed up by a sticker on the back of a car which read: "I owe; I owe; So off to work I go." This is probably what most people see as the point of work: earning so that they can consume.

The origins of work

In developing a biblical theology of work it is important to watch where we begin because it can significantly colour the outcome of our analysis. There seems to be three possible starting points: Genesis 3, or Genesis 2, or Genesis 1. Beginning in Genesis 3 emphasises the difficulties that beset mankind because work now involves toil and frustration. Beginning in Genesis 2 brings out the fact that work is central to fulfilling our potential as human beings. We were created not merely to exist, but to be active. The divine mandate that we work predates the Fall, and is part of God's overarching programme for humanity. But it is only as we appreciate the significance of Genesis 1 that we arrive at a fully-orbed picture of what the Bible teaches about work. Here we find God portrayed as the divine worker.

GENESIS 1: THE GOD WHO WORKS

The fundamental biblical fact about work is that God works. We may take that perception for granted, but in fact it contrasts starkly with the view of the gods prevalent in many religions. For the ancient Greeks, for instance, ordinary work was beneath a true citizen — it was an indignity to impose the burden of manual labour or household tasks on a free man — and the gods too were viewed as living a life unencumbered by labour. Indeed, it is remarkable that the Greek word corresponding to 'work' was *aschole*, 'not leisure'. In our culture the negative words are used of the non-work situation: unemployment, jobless, even retirement. For the Greeks it was the other way round: the negative words were used of the work situation, the positive ones being applied to leisure.

However, the scriptural picture is of a God who works. That is the presentation of God found in Genesis 1. There God is active in a creative and orderly fashion, producing what is useful and beautiful, giving existence to all that had been conceived in the divine plan. The chapter is a record of the methodical and purposeful activity of God, which culminated in the verdict: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1:31).

Thematically the first few verses of Genesis 2 constitute part of Genesis 1, and in them it is recorded:

By [on] the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. (Genesis 2:2-3)

The term rendered ‘work’ in this passage focuses on activity which involves skill and which produces what is beautiful or beneficial. A little later in Genesis 2, divine action is again presented in terms of work when God is described as an adroit craftsman: “The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground” (Genesis 2:7). The word ‘formed’ is a metaphor from the skilled production of an artefact, especially related to a potter’s proficiency in shaping clay. Scripture does not hesitate to speak in this way of God functioning in such a fashion.

It is not only in creation that God works. Jesus told the Jews, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working” (John 5:17). This points to God’s continuing supervision and control of creation in his works of providence as well as to his redemptive activities which are known as his ‘works’ or ‘deeds’. To take one instance, in Psalm 107 the psalmist surveys the saving provision God makes for his people, and repeatedly comes to the conclusion, “Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men” (verses 8, 15, 21, 31). God is at work in providence and in salvation.

What is more, we must remember that Jesus himself worked. He was a carpenter until the age of thirty. “Isn’t this the carpenter?” (Mark 6:3). An ordinary occupation indeed, but not on that account rejected by the Saviour who was aware of the dignity and nobility accorded to all honest toil by his Father.

It is against that background that the Christian view of work has to be formulated. It is not demeaning. It is not to be despised. It is inherently good in that it is modelled on what God himself does.

Leisure

It is often useful in discussing a concept to consider its opposite. For most people nowadays the opposite of work is leisure, the time when I do what I want. Scripture, however, uses the term ‘rest’ rather than ‘leisure’, and has a significantly different orientation towards it. This too is related to the account of Genesis 1 where the point is clearly made that God himself did not work continuously.

■ *And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. (Genesis 2:2, AV)*

It is put in even more vivid language in Exodus 31:17, “on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested”, or, as the AV rendered it, “was refreshed.” This sequence of work and rest is therefore an essential feature of God’s activity as Creator, and so it should also characterise human work patterns. Being a workaholic does not conform to the scriptural norm.

GENESIS 2: WORK IS BASIC TO BEING HUMAN

The second major aspect of the biblical perspective on work comes out of the creation covenant. Not only is it true that God works, but he has made mankind in his image and in his likeness, and so work realises an inherent aspect of the potential implanted in the human

constitution. The link between our work and God's work, and the fact that the same pattern is to be shared by both, is stated most clearly in the Fourth Commandment:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Exodus 20:8-11)

Here the obligation to work is referred to as an ordinance deriving from creation. Discussion of that often focuses on Genesis 2:15: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." This shows work as part of God's original purpose for human life. Adam's sphere of labour was divinely designated, and the general nature of the tasks assigned him were fixed. Idleness was not to prevail even in Paradise. Consequently, for an individual to fail to engage in work is abnormal and unnatural. It is a breach of the divine purpose in creating humanity.

At this point we need to incorporate into our thinking the changes which have occurred in the work environment since biblical times. Then economic activity was largely centred on small-scale, family-controlled enterprises, most often agricultural, but with craft activities too. The work pattern was such that every member of the family contributed directly to their common tasks, and there was a fairly clear link between work and survival. To work was to make one's personal contribution to this family undertaking whose products were clearly identifiable and whose success determined the economic well-being of the group as a whole.

In modern industrial society paid employment is the mode

in which our need to work most frequently finds expression. We should, however, keep in mind that this is a significant narrowing of the biblical concept, which tends to disparage certain activities in the family and in the voluntary sector which are within the scriptural concept of work. Even so, for most people to work is synonymous with being in paid employment. Since the need to work is an inbuilt feature of our human constitution, the impact of redundancy in modern society may well be devastating for the individual. To be told that you no longer have any contribution to make here may not create as great a problem as regards physical survival as it would once have done, but there is still a mental and spiritual crisis in terms of the rejection involved in being no longer wanted. There is also an assault on the self-identity and self-fulfilment of the individual who can no longer realise an integral aspect of true humanness.

Equally distressing is the personal deprivation and social alienation engendered among those for whom opportunities for paid employment may never arise. Part of the answer to coping with such situations lies in the realisation that Scripture never defines a person's potential or standing before God in terms of their employment. The biblical concern for the alien, the widow and the orphan shows the stress placed on the worth of the individual whatever their economic circumstances. In an industrial society those who, through the imperfections of the market mechanism or the failures of macroeconomic policy to maintain an adequate level of overall demand, are unable to find paid employment are to be treated with understanding and compassion. But voluntary idleness and avoidance of effort are still unnatural. "If a man will not work, he shall not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

The biblical scope of human work is realised when we build Genesis 1:26 into the picture: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground'".

There mankind is given dominion over all the earth. It is not just a matter of gardening, or agriculture. In modern terms it goes beyond industry and such economic activity as contributes to a nation's gross domestic product. It is utilisation and control of our whole physical environment, making use of all the potential of the created realm, including our own. What we might generally refer to as culture and civilisation are part of the sphere of human work, just as much as procuring what we need to have to survive. Work is the way in which we carry out the duties imposed on us by the creation covenant. We are stewards of God's resources in the physical world around us, and we are also stewards of our own time and effort in relation to carrying out what has to be done to fulfil the mandate given to us.

In such work there is a measure of divine-human cooperation. God is still at work in providence, in history, in the world around us. Since God is sovereign, no human work can exist outwith his control. We must see our work as part of his work. "Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labour in vain" (Psalm 127:1). This is not to disparage human activity. There are some, might I call them ultra-reformed thinkers, who argue that there is no intrinsic value in the work the believer does. God may in his love assign such work value, in the same way that a fond parent values the drawings of a young child, but would never suggest they be hung in the National Gallery or that they could be sold for anything. What they produce has no value in and of itself (see Walter A. Henrichsen, "Work and Leisure" in *Applying the Scriptures*. ed. K. S. Kantzer, Zondervan, 1987). However, the analogy between human work and the drawings of children stuck to the door of the family fridge is misleading. There is meaning and significance in human work because it is divinely appointed. God has decreed that the way forward for his cosmos is through the achievement of his designated agents. It is from this that the dignity and lasting worth of human work are derived.

Luther's concept of vocation made much of this human-divine cooperation in work. He argued that when we carry out our vocation in faith to God and obedience to his commands, God will work through us. Such a view of work provides us with the incentive to work because there is meaning in what we are doing: God's meaning. It also saves us from arrogant assertions about human achievement.

GENESIS 3: WORK AND THE FALL

Before the Fall work was a blessing; afterwards it was affected by the curse. But note that work itself was not cursed; it was the ground which bore the curse. That is, the environment in which humanity is to work is now hostile, and the resources for realisation of the creation mandate will no longer be readily or easily available. So work will entail difficulties and frustration in this suboptimal situation.

To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,'
"Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.
It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.
By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." (Genesis 3:17-19)

Despite the changes which have been divinely imposed, there still remains the command given by God to work, even though now it may no longer be a pleasure and a delight, but a burden. Someone has expressed it by saying that Adam having been a gardener now becomes a farmer. His activity is no longer to be an essentially enjoyable pursuit, but one in which he has to strive against forces that impede and seek to thwart him.

This negative environment is explored most powerfully in the book of Ecclesiastes. In chapter 2 an examination takes place of what happens when one tries to find satisfaction in acquiring more and more goods. It gets you nowhere.

Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 2:11)

What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labours under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless. (Ecclesiastes 2:22-23)

But for all that the Fall means that work is not now always inherently rewarding, Ecclesiastes does not argue that people should stop working. “There is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot” (Ecclesiastes 3:22).

A Christian attitude to work

New Testament teaching regarding work continues and reiterates what had been said earlier. It is possible to identify three perspectives which illumine a Christian view of work.

1. LIFE IS NOT TO BE COMPARTMENTALISED

The medieval Roman Catholic view of life separated the spheres of grace and nature. Acts of spiritual contemplation and devotion were the means by which an individual was to seek God. At best, ordinary labour was just a necessary evil to enable one to live a spiritual life. There was a two-worlds mentality which kept Christian standards from permeating every aspect of life. The truly religious withdrew from ordinary life and its demands into the monastery or nunnery.

Arising out of the Reformation's close attention to Scripture, it was again emphasised that all of life is God's and that the ordinary activities of life ought to be acts of loyal obedience to him. In this way all living becomes sacred since it is set apart to God's service. "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). What can be more ordinary than eating and drinking? And "whatever you do" shows that every activity in life should be motivated by a desire to please him.

That is how Scripture portrays the attitude of the Christian towards work. "Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good" (NIV), "ready for every good work" (NKJV) (Titus 3:1). And of

course we know that Paul saw all of his life as lived to Christ, and so acted in line with his own advice, remaining a tentmaker to earn his livelihood and not be a burden to others (1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-13).

We should not adopt the outlook prevalent in our culture of pigeonholing people according to the status accorded to their employment. All legitimate occupations are worthy. They provide opportunities for extending help to others. “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need” (Ephesians 4:28). There is also the testimony provided by industrious lives. “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody” (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).

All are to explore, to use and to enjoy the gifts God has given us in the world around us, and in the individual talents with which he has endowed us. Provided work has in view the fulfilment of the creation mandate it is not to be robbed of significance and worth because it is unpaid. Luther somewhere says, “What you do in your house is worth as much as if you did it up in heaven for our Lord God.” I think that part of the answer to unemployment is to be found in such a wider conception of work.

2. WORK AS A DIVINE CALLING

A second major aspect to the Christian understanding of work is the concept of calling or vocation. There is the call of God to lead a life of faith and godliness, receiving and responding to the salvation God bestows in Jesus Christ. But there is also a divine calling to specific tasks. In the Old Testament that is most often associated with the prophets. “But the Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’” (Amos 7:15). In the

New Testament we think of the way Jesus called the disciples, and the way Paul described himself as “Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God” (1 Corinthians 1:1). You might conclude from this that it is only spiritual, religious, church-related tasks which are the subject of divine calling. That idea persisted for centuries, but it was turned on its head by the Reformation, when it was emphasised that God has arranged society so that every individual may exercise the gifts given him or her in a way that glorifies God and furthers his purposes.

That is what Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 7:17-20, when he says: “Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him” (verse 17). A little later, he writes: “Each one should remain in the situation (“calling”, AV) which he was in when God called him.” Paul deliberately uses two words from the same Greek root (translated as “calling” and “called”) to connect two aspects of the Christian life. Each is “called” by divine summons out of spiritual darkness into the light of the kingdom of God, but Paul also mentions a “calling” which does not refer to that new spiritual standing before God, but to our ongoing earthly existence. Becoming a Christian does not mean abandoning our family or life situation and responsibilities. Instead our perception of them is transformed in that they are now prized as opportunities given to us in divine providence. By approaching them with Christian moral and spiritual values, we can show their true value and worth. Remember the advice John the Baptist gave to the tax collectors: “Don’t collect any more than you are required to”. And to the soldiers: “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.” (Luke 3:12-14). There has, of course, to be a caveat. I’m reminded of the story of an American gangster who claimed to have been converted shortly before being released from prison. Someone challenged him about the reality of his conversion because on his release he went back to his old lifestyle, and he is reputed to have replied, “Well, there are some who are Christian

lawyers and some who are Christian doctors; I'm a Christian gangster."

Now if our work is something to which God has called us, then that fact should make all the difference in the world to our attitude towards work. In the context of faith and obedience, it becomes the great motivator and sustainer in life. Even when the task is monotonous, if it needs to be done, and if it is done for him, that task is transformed.

There's another consequence of seeing employment as vocation. If you are where you are because God wants you there, then that is a great equaliser: from the top of a vast organisation to the lowliest post within it, all can make the same claim. It causes a radical reassessment of the values the world so likes to promote regarding success in work. We are being asked not merely to promote Christian values in our work, but to see our work itself as part of the onward movement of God's purposes in history.

Now the big question becomes: 'How do I know what vocation God is calling me to?' Our aim should be to serve God effectively. Given I am who I am, and given the opportunities that are before me, how may I best serve God? In doing so I will also be in a position to know true personal satisfaction, and I will be making as good a contribution as I can to the welfare of society. Notice these will not necessarily mean that I am maximising my income, or that I am able to command the greatest amount of economic resources. We have to be able to appraise ourselves — and it is far from easy to acquire genuine self-knowledge. That is why Paul urged each believer in the church at Rome: "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you" (Romans 12:3). This is not a mystical process in which rational thought goes out the window, but an exercise in realistic self-awareness. The same thing applies to staying in a job. A 'successful' career or business should not lead us to have an inflated view of our self-importance. What matters is how we can

use the opportunities it affords us to serve the Lord.

3. WORK IS PART OF CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP

The general concept of stewardship derives also from the creation covenant. We have no absolute rights on earth; all that we are and have are divinely given. While God has authorised mankind to rule on earth, the resources put at our disposal are to be used in a responsible fashion. Ultimately the Great King will demand a reckoning from those he has entrusted with the stewardship of his created realm. Something of what is involved in this may be seen in Jesus' Parable of the Talents, which is recorded in Matthew 25:14-30.

The parable tells of a landowner who, before going on a long journey, entrusted his property to three of his stewards. One man was given five talents, another two, and another one. Two of the stewards acted wisely in investing the resources entrusted to them and during their master's absence doubled what they had been given. The third hid his money in the ground. When their master returned, those who had made good use of their stewardship were rewarded, while the slothful servant was cast into outer darkness.

Now the parable is one of a pair recorded in Matthew 25, both of which are prophetic of what was going to come on the Jewish nation and which also serve as a warning to the Christian church. Two types of behaviour are characteristic of those who are almost Christians. There are those who are constantly active but whose religion is one of works without faith (the virgins without oil in their lamps), and there are those who are dreamers, whose religion is that of faith without works (the servant who buried his talent). It is the balance between the two which is the key to the situation.

God sovereignly provides the opportunities of life. The talents need not be confined to the physical means which God makes available. They include every aspect of the situation in which we are called to serve him. And that includes ourselves. Christian

stewardship is not merely a matter of responsible use of material resources; primarily it requires responsible use of the aptitudes and abilities God has bestowed on each of us when he made us what we are as individuals.

There is no scope for opting out of this. Indolence is not permitted. Not working because we cannot be bothered is not an option. Paul commands and urges the abandonment of idle lifestyles (2 Thessalonians 3:6), and there is a continuing obligation to “warn those who are idle” (1 Thessalonians 5:14) and to “spur one another on towards love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24).

Where there is an option, however, is in the particular way we use the resources entrusted to us. Stewardship allows scope for individual, responsible initiatives in utilising what is placed at our disposal.

Furthermore, when it is asserted that Christian service involves total commitment, we must take care not to confuse that with doing nothing other than work. There are those who fall into the sin of being workaholics, so addicted to their work that everything else takes second place. That is a form of idolatry, and is biblically unwarranted. It is a distortion of the biblical doctrine of work, by identifying work with paid employment. It is a distortion of the biblical ethic of leisure. There is a duty to rest, even as the work of God was complemented by rest. Workaholics disrupt the life of the family which is central to God’s structuring of human society. Equally the resultant physical and mental pressures on those who work without relief may well breach the Sixth Commandment: “You shall not murder” — which applies to self as much as to others. The duty to rest is a social as well as an individual obligation: it applied to everyone in the community, slaves, foreign visitors, even the animals.

However, the crucial outcome of stewardship is the approval of the master. The endeavours of the servants may have entailed financial rewards and the esteem of the community they lived in. But these are not mentioned because what truly mattered to them

was the verdict of their master on their activities. They had been motivated by the desire to please him.

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. (Colossians 3:23-24)

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men. (Ephesians 6:5-7)

The key to Christian living and working is conscious dedication to the Lord as the one whom we serve and the one whose approval we crave. It is in this way that we can respond to Paul's injunctions to "set your hearts on things above" and to "set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (Colossians 3:1, 2). The job may be on earth, but if it is done to the Lord, earthly endeavour becomes directly linked to heavenly realities. There is the promise of a heavenly reward, but the ultimate accolade is simply "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21,23).

The story is told of the man who was walking down a country lane and came upon three men working in a quarry. He asked them what they were doing. The first replied with irritation, "Can't you see what I am doing? I am hewing stone." The second answered without looking up, "I'm earning five pounds a week." (This must have happened some time ago!) The third man stopped his work, drew himself upright, and answered with pride, "I'm building a cathedral." What are you doing in your work? Can you view it in the overall plan of God? Are you looking for the accolade of your Lord's approval?

The dignity of work

Men and women, made in the image of God, were created to work. We should therefore view our work, whatever type of work it is, as a means by which we can serve and glorify God.



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