



## Thinking Biblically About Work

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### The problem of definition

I stood at the kitchen sink finishing off the family breakfast dishes. Glancing at the clock I realized I needed to move faster. So I pulled the plug and swung around in time to shout out to my wife - "can you finish off here, dear. I need to get to work."

Work? What did I mean? I was already sweating from doing 101 tasks around the house. If that wasn't work, what was? And what was the 'work' I needed to get to? It was in fact, a 'job', sitting at a desk making phone calls, writing letters, sitting in meetings, organizing events etc.

So what compelled me to call this job 'work' and, by implication, not regard my household duties as work? Likely the fact that I was being paid for my job, and not for doing the dishes!

### A cultural dilemma

When it comes to defining work in our culture, we have a real problem, and one that must be addressed before we can seriously embark on the journey of thinking biblically about work.

The word work has become almost totally defined by paid employment. We meet someone for the first time and they ask what we 'do' and we reply 'I'm a builder' or 'I work for Telecom'. Instinctively we know that what they are really asking us is 'what is your paid employment?' (This of course presents real problems for those who don't have any paid job).

The matter of 'employment' defines who we are in the eyes of our culture, more than anything else<sup>1</sup>.

### Defining 'work' biblically

This narrow view of work is problematic when we come to examine the scriptures. Our fragmented and highly compartmentalized world doesn't connect well with the much more integrated ancient world the biblical writers were immersed in. Their world was one where home and employment, relationships and activities were not separate spheres, but had very real everyday connections. So in order to read the scriptures we need to develop a much broader, dare I say, wholistic definition of work. Here are some examples of people attempting to do this.

Paul Marshall defines work as *"human activity designed to accomplish something that is needed as distinct from activity that is satisfying in itself."*<sup>2</sup>

John Stott suggests that work is *"the expenditure of energy (manual or mental or both) in the service of others, which brings fulfilment to the worker, benefit to the community and glory to God"*.<sup>3</sup>

1 It's interesting how things vary in other cultures. In the 1980s I spent some time in the Philippines and the first question on meeting someone new had nothing to do with occupation, but everything to do with family relationships. 'Tell us about your family' was the stock inquiry.

2 Paul Marshall's article on "Work" in New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology (IVP:

Downers Grove, 1995, p899

3 John Stott, Issues Facing Christians Today, p162

There is obviously a number of ways to nail down what we mean by work. My intention is not to get hung up on detailed semantics but to note that whichever way we go, seeing work as much broader than paid employment will help us to understand the biblical references to work more thoroughly.

Am I working when I read to my daughter in bed? In a sense I am. I may regard it as a chore or I might be totally energized by it - either way there's a degree of expended energy involved, and it's a very important task in the overall goal of raising and discipling my daughter.

What about when I meet on a school or community committee; or when the elderly neighbor needs help with her groceries; or a friend has just lost a brother through death and needs someone to sit with them and listen and just be there?

You bet! Some may be instinctive responses to people in need, others may be quite deliberately planned. Some may seem effortless and 'self-rewarding', others may be a real chore and require major application.

But all of these 'tasks' are work.

## SECTION A - A BIBLICAL OVERVIEW

### The nature of God - God is a worker

A starting point for understanding a biblical view of work is Genesis 1, because it is really a journal of work. As Eugene Peterson writes:

The Bible begins with the announcement, '*In the beginning God created..*' - not '*sat majestic in the heavens*'. He created. He did something. He made something. He fashioned heaven and earth. The week of creation was a week of work. <sup>4</sup>

An interesting exercise is to read through the first two chapters of Genesis, highlighting all the verbs that describe activities engaged in by God or others. We soon discover the breadth of God's work habits and the range of his creative genius.

Of course it doesn't stop at these two chapters. Robert Banks, in his book *God the Worker* explores a number of images used throughout the scriptures to describe aspects of God's work, such as shepherd, potter/craftworker, builder and architect, weaver, gardener, farmer, musician and artist.<sup>5</sup>

But it's here, right at the very beginning of the scriptures that we are faced with the inescapable conclusion that God himself is a worker. It is part of his character and nature.<sup>6</sup>

### Creation - Born to work in partnership with God

God's creative work tells us much about who he is and what he is like. It's not a complete picture, but it does give us a glimpse of his character. This is particularly so in his creation of humankind, for in Genesis God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness..." <sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (IVP: Downers Grove, 1980), p104.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Banks, *God The Worker* (Albatross: Sutherland, NSW, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Clearly, work is not the sum total of what God is 'into'. Genesis 2:2 tells us that "...God...rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done." This is not because he exhausted himself, but rather to enjoy what he had created. Rest complements work and indeed work only makes sense in the light of rest.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 1:26

The implications are not just that we have been made to resemble, even reflect who God is, but if that's the case and work is part of God's nature, then work is intended to be part of ours as well. We are workers because we are made in the image of a God who works. We need to be engaged in creative and purposeful activities. It is fundamental to the essence of who we are.

Deprived of this opportunity we are robbed of something essential for our well-being. Not only that, but this work is intended to be done in partnership with God, to help bring about his purposes. For having been 'made in His image', we are his representatives.

In fact, the mandate God gives Adam and Eve is to share in his work. From the beginning God is prepared to entrust the garden to humans.<sup>8</sup> It's clear then, that God's intention is for us to become his co-workers.

In the creation narrative this is expressed in God's command to *"fill the earth and subdue it"* and to *"have dominion"* over all living things. This stewardship role is a call for humans to work **with** God. The implication seems to be that the value and significance of our work is directly related to how connected it is with God's work.

We find further expressions of this partnership in the narratives in Genesis chapter 2 about the planting of the garden and the naming of the animals.

Here God is the landscaper who designs the garden and plants trees that are both economically functional (*"good for food"*) and aesthetically pleasing (*"pleasant to the sight"*). We can see from this that the value of work should not be measured by just economic criteria.

Then we are told that God places a person in the garden to *"till it and to keep it"*, to cultivate and to conserve. Thus God's creative work is linked with human creativity, designed to both preserve what God has given and to build on it through further creative ventures using the resources that God has provided.

In the story of the naming of the animals we find God creating animals and birds, then parading them past the man so he can name them. The man is invited to add his creativity to God's creative work. And we're told that *"whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name"*. Given the significance of naming in Hebrew culture, clearly the man is delegated both real responsibility and great freedom.

So again and again the creation narratives provide pictures of the partnership that connects God's work with our work.

## The Fall - A spanner in the works

*"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..."*<sup>9</sup>

The events of Genesis 3 have had a profound and lasting effect on work. With the fall, four relationships were damaged - with God, with ourselves, others and the rest of creation. So how has it affected each one of them, as it relates to work?

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<sup>8</sup> It's interesting to note that God creates Eve to be a helper to Adam. She is to help Adam fulfil the responsibilities God had entrusted him with.  
<sup>9</sup> Genesis 3: 17-19

### *Our relationship with God*

In the pre-Fall days, Adam and Eve were at one with God the Trinity. Not only did they enjoy absolute intimacy, but the tasks they were given were full of value and dignity. They worked as partners with God. Consequently, everything in life was sacred because everything had something of the touch of God on it. Nothing was disconnected.

Since the Fall, humans have struggled to discover the connection (and therefore significance) between the work they have been commissioned to do, and God. A huge divide has occurred between the spiritual and the secular, Sunday and Monday. The issue becomes, how can someone work alongside God when he or she insists on doing their own thing? By rebelling against God, the fulfillment and purpose of our work is seriously eroded.

### *Our relationship with ourselves*

Alienation also directly affects our relationship with ourselves. In the early days of creation Adam and Eve were at peace with themselves, confident in the roles entrusted to them. But following the Fall, our struggle now is to discover where we 'fit'. This is no longer automatic and it is hardly surprising that being out of step with God, we struggle to find our identity as workers. Tasks don't effortlessly fit our unique mix of motivations, giftings and temperament.

Not only that, but we frequently struggle with work becoming either compulsive or senseless. Life can sometimes be one of oscillating between these two heresies, desperately looking to find the balance. Rather than our identity being intimately connected with our relationships with God and others, it becomes bound up with our work (and our perceived value or lack of value it carries).

### *Our relationship with others*

Honesty, transparency, care and compassion were all marks of relationships before the Fall. However, since then blame-shifting, deceit, dishonesty, selfishness, power struggles and stress have dominated. Relationships in our work have been deeply affected - particularly by the lack of trust between people.

### *Our relationship with the rest of creation*

The creation story speaks of a world where harmony between created beings was the norm. In this environment, humankind was to care for and steward the natural resources. The Fall dramatically disturbed the equilibrium. The result is all around to see. Humankind has struggled to conserve and cultivate, without also abusing and exploiting.

The damage created by sin is not irreparable. Nevertheless, it has produced a built-in tension between "frustration and satisfaction in work."<sup>10</sup> There is the potential for work to be deeply satisfying, but also for it to be full of despair and futility (as the writer of Ecclesiastes points out).

Given this, we should be neither resigned to toilsome work, nor triumphalistic, understating the ongoing struggle that it is to discover meaning and significance in what we do.

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<sup>10</sup> David Westcott uses this phrase in his book *Work Well: Live Well* (Marshall and Pickering, 1996)

## God's sustaining work

Having worked to create the world, in what sense is God still involved? Or has he just wound our earth up like a clock and left it to run its course?

There are very clear indications throughout scripture that God continues to work, and that in fact, if he stopped working our world would come to a grinding halt. He sustains this world. We are totally dependent on God to hold everything together.

For example, in John 5:17 "Jesus said to them (the disciples), *'My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.'*" Hebrews 1:3 tells us that the Son sustains all things by his powerful word; Paul in Colossians 1:17 states that *"He (Christ) is before all things, and in him all things hold together"*. Even one of Job's unreliable 'comforters' gets it right on this count when he says, *"If it were his intention and he withdrew his spirit and breath, all mankind would perish together and man would return to the dust"* (Job 34:14-17) while the psalmist offers the following perspective about God's care - *"He will not let your foot slip - he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep."* (Psalm 121:3-4)

## Redemption/Transformation - Making all new

The Bible makes it clear that ultimately God intends to transform everything - all that he brought into being. This programme for restoration is already in place. But redemption is not restricted to people's 'souls'. God is in the business of putting right the whole cosmos (Col 1), bringing order out of chaos, resolving conflict and restoring relationships, working for justice and just solutions in all situations.

In fact, God's redeeming work involves the restoration of all four foundational relationships (with Him, with ourselves, with each other and with the rest of creation). Paul addresses this in his letters to the Romans (8:18-23), the Ephesians (1:9-12) and the Colossians (1:15-20).

Everything we do to counter or reverse the effects of the Fall is a participation in God's redeeming and transforming work and looks forward to the completion of this work. We work as agents and signs of God's redeeming work.

The significance of work for us as Christians lies in discerning ways in which we can express through our work stewardship, service, creativity, witness, truth-telling, preservation, healing, community-building, justice and peace-making etc. These are clear expressions of the character and on-going work of God. This does not mean that all the monotony will suddenly be taken out of mundane work, nor that we will no longer experience struggle in our work... But it does increase the likelihood of our work and worship becoming better connected, with the hope that each might become infused with the other.

Making connections can mean substantial changes for Christians who view their tasks as boring and insignificant. Those in the 'serving' professions (such as teaching and medicine) can often more easily see the connections between what they do and what God is doing. But what about truck drivers, business people and data entry workers? Most often we need help to see that our tasks provide opportunities to serve others, build relationships, steward resources etc.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For example, a truck driver may struggle to appreciate how the frozen goods they cart have much significance, until they reflect on the service they're providing in getting them from one place to another. How else are people going to have access to them unless someone transports them? They might also be able to see the value in driving courteously, driving well to conserve fuel, expressing God's care and love in the way they relate to people during the day etc. This is not an exercise in helping us feel better about the tasks we do. Rather, we need to do this kind of reflecting in order to understand how what we do fits into God's call on our lives and contributes to his work.

## The End/Completion

Eventually, the world as we know it will come to an end. God's redeeming work will be completed. So what will be the role of work then? And what does the Bible mean when it talks about eternal rest?

It's certainly true that for us, presently living in the age of the already/not yet tension, rest generally means refraining from work. But is this primarily because of the 'toil factor' which exists as a result of the fall?

Unfortunately, the picture of 'heaven' being permanent inactivity is often reinforced by images of eternity being a non-stop church service or even as one big feast. However, there are indications that the eternal rest promised will involve work. For example, Isaiah, in writing about the new heavens and new earth states:

*"They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit....They will not toil in vain...for they will be a people blessed by the Lord..."*<sup>12</sup>

Here we are given a brief glimpse of a much more active and fulfilling eternity, rather than the more passive aspects we are traditionally taught to associate with life beyond the grave, work of a quite different type.

While there is little in the scriptures confirming that work will exist in the next life we only really have to reflect again on the nature of God and of humankind to see that work will continue. For work is an integral and essential aspect of who God is and who we have been made to be. Given this, it seems totally reasonable to expect that we will work in the next life, but it will be in a way which is supremely invigorating and energizing.

## SECTION TWO - BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON OUR WORK

### Biblical characters at work

Most theologies of work fail to refer to workplace stories in scripture. A few refer fleetingly to references about Jesus the carpenter and Paul the tentmaker. Yet many other leading figures in the Bible story were not professional religious people, but God spoke to them in and through their everyday working lives. Clearly most believers were not required to leave their workplaces in order to follow God's leading. Consequently, many of the most useful sources to consider workplace perspectives, issues and ethical dilemmas come from the stories of characters such as Joseph, Daniel, Nehemiah and Esther, to name a few.

For example, Nehemiah is extolled as a prayerful person, a dynamic and effective leader, even a justice-maker. And he was. But it is rarely pointed out that these attributes belong to a man whose primary role was to manage a very difficult and demanding building project. They were developed within the pressures of his construction deadlines.

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<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 65:21,25

Likewise, with Joseph, Daniel and Esther. They were high level public servants in rather anti-Jewish environments. Consequently, they had to struggle through what it meant to serve as representatives of a religious minority, in the context of foreign gods being worshipped. Their world view was substantially different to that of the surrounding culture. Isn't this how many Christians feel today?

These examples (among many others) help us to see that the Bible gives little evidence of a secular/spiritual split. The Hebrew world view was a much more integrated one than that of the Greeks.

## Jesus and work

Jesus was an acute observer of everyday life. His parables draw on a variety of images relating to daily work - from weddings, funerals and parties, to building construction, buying and selling etc. These are all stories of daily work which are used to illustrate faith principles. This is not to suggest that they all provide simple and straightforward examples of how the life of faith and daily work are connected. The history of interpretation warns us that it is easy to try and read far too much into parables. Nevertheless, such a rich fund of illustrations drawn from everyday work must suggest some connections between faith and daily work.

His own 'work history' is also illustrative. Most of Jesus' adult life was taken up in working with his hands, as a carpenter. Unfortunately the gospels give us little sight of how Jesus viewed his work before becoming itinerant. Even so, it makes little sense to presume that Jesus simply saw his many years as a craftsman as a 'fill in' until it was time to go public! For God himself, in human form, to spend the majority of his adult years engaged in carpentry, speaks volumes about the value of such tasks.

It would also be unfortunate to consider acts such as his washing of the disciples' feet as merely object lessons. These tasks seem to have been of inherent value in themselves, and full of significance when done as an expression of love for God. Again, while there is little explicit evidence, it nevertheless seems fair to presume that Jesus shared willingly in the everyday tasks of community life with his disciples.

## Paul and work - "all work can be God's work."

Perhaps predictably, Paul has the most of all the New Testament writers to say regarding the role of work. In 1 Corinthians he teaches that we should work out our calling (to follow Jesus) in the context we find ourselves in.

*"Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him" ( 7: 20) About this passage Gordon Fee says "The call to Christ has created such a change in one's essential relationship (with God) that one does not need to change in other relationships (with people). These latter are transformed and given new meaning by the former. Thus one is no better off in one condition than in the other".<sup>13</sup> Paul is essentially saying that we can serve Christ wherever we are. Our context for serving may change, but rather than seeking change in our circumstances, we should be working to discover ways that our calling (to follow Jesus) can be lived out through our current situation.<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>13</sup> Gordon Fee, 1 Corinthians (NICNT) (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987), p307

<sup>14</sup> Perhaps this is instructive for our current age where we have created a Christian culture which encourages people to seek incessantly after a state labelled 'full time Christian service'. Somehow this is seen as the ultimate way of serving God - more spiritual and satisfying than 'secular work'. Under this false value system disciples will never find a strong sense of fulfilment and value in the tasks God has placed them in, because they will be forever dreaming of a 'better' way to serve.

Paul makes this same point in other epistles. For example, in Colossians he writes:

*"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."*<sup>15</sup>  
Tom Wright comments on these verses, *"The task may appear unimportant or trivial, but the person doing it is never that, and he or she has the opportunity to turn the job into an act of worship."*<sup>16</sup>

**To summarize, what seems clear from Paul's teachings is that:**

- **All work is of value and significance**, in spite of the status (or lack) given by the surrounding culture (as above).
- **There is no hierarchy of tasks in God's economy.** As Eugene Peterson writes: *"Any work done faithfully and well is difficult. It is no harder for me to do my job than for any other person, and no less. There are no easy tasks in the Christian way; there are only tasks which can be done faithfully or erratically, with joy or resentment."*<sup>17</sup>
- **Work is part of our calling, but not the sum total of it.** Our calling is primarily to follow God and live as His people. Our work is an outworking or expression of this - not the main ingredient. This is reflected in Paul's view of his own work. Paul Stevens comments *"...the New Testament treats work in the context of a larger framework: the call of God to live totally for him and his kingdom. Therefore Paul was not, strictly speaking, a bivocational missionary, but rather monovocational by integrating daily work with all aspects of his kingdom life."*
- **We are to find ways of connecting our work with our calling to follow Jesus**, serving him in all we do. For example, in Colossians 1:10 Paul writes, *"As you learn more and more how God works, you will learn how to do your work."* (The Message) Again Peterson writes, *"In every letter St Paul wrote he demonstrated that a Christian's work is a natural, inevitable and faithful development out of God's work. Each of his letters concludes with a series of directives which guide us into the type of work that participates in God's work."*<sup>18</sup>
- **Laziness and sloth are not consistent with the Christian calling** (Eph 4:28; 2, Thess 3: 10-13) for work gives us dignity and serves a purpose.

## CONCLUSION - MIXED MESSAGES

There is actually an inherent tension in the way the scriptures deal with the subject of work. Almost as if two messages exist side by side. As I have noted in this article, one is a strong affirmation of work - particularly where it is an expression of our calling to follow Christ. But the Bible also sounds a message of warning to disciples who run the risk of idolizing work, or who have delusions of grandeur about creating a human-made utopia.

Put simply: work mustn't become an end in itself, but neither should it be sidelined or marginalized from the life of discipleship. Christians in every generation face the challenge of discerning which of these two errors (idolizing of work or divorcing it from our faith) they are most likely to fall into. Into that context the prophetic voice of the other 'message' needs to be heard loud and clear.

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<sup>15</sup> Colossians 3:23-24

<sup>16</sup> N.T. Wright, Colossians and Philemon (Tyndale series) (IVP: Downers Grove, 1986), p149-50

<sup>17</sup> Peterson, p70

<sup>18</sup> Peterson, p104

It is only as we learn to work **with** God in his creative, sustaining and redemptive plans that our work too, will be redemptive and we will grow the biblical balance. For the Psalmist reminds us that “...Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain.”<sup>19</sup>

Or in the colloquialism of The Message, “So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life - your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life - and place it before God as an offering.” (Romans 12:1)

Eugene Peterson reminds us that “...As Christians do the jobs and tasks assigned to them in what the world calls work, we learn to pay attention to and practice what God is doing in love and justice, in helping and healing, in liberating and cheering...The Bible insists on a perspective in which our effort is at the edge and God’s work is at the centre.”<sup>20</sup>

Connected to God’s work, but ultimately recognizing that it’s what He does which counts most.

A prayer of Richard Foster’s seems an appropriate place to turn from theology to doxology:

The day has been breathless, Lord. I stop now for a few moments and I wonder: Is the signature of the holy over the rush of the day? Or have I bolted ahead, anxiously trying to solve problems that do not belong to me?

**Holy Spirit of God, please show me:**

How to work relaxed  
How to make each task an offering of faith  
How to view interruptions as doors to service  
How to see each person as my teacher in things eternal  
In the name of him who always worked unhurried. Amen.<sup>21</sup>

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. When someone asks you what you ‘do’ what do you usually say? What are practical ways you could change the way you think and talk about ‘work’, to incorporate a wider definition of it?
2. Read through the first two chapters of Genesis, highlighting all the verbs (doing words) that describe activities engaged in by God. Make a list of them and reflect on the range of God’s work.
3. List all the roles and tasks you fulfil during your week. Include not just paid employment and voluntary work, but roles such as parenting and tasks like household chores. Reflect on each of the tasks, asking yourself:
  - How do I feel about the value of this task?
  - What in this role do I find fulfilling and significant? Why? What do I find mundane, boring, pointless and insignificant? Why?
  - How much do I feel I am serving Christ when I do this work?
  - Reflect on the tasks and roles you feel negatively about. Do you think this is primarily because they don’t fit well your unique mix of giftings and temperament, or because you have not been able to connect what you do with what God is doing?
  - Take time to consider what opportunities each of these tasks present for expressing stewardship, service to others, creativity, witness, conservation/preservation, community and relationship-building, justice, peacemaking, healing etc.

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<sup>19</sup> Psalm 127

<sup>20</sup> Peterson, p106-7

<sup>21</sup> “A Prayer at Mid-day” in Richard Foster, Prayers from the Heart (HarperCollins: New York, 1994), p76