

Work is part of the normal experience of the vast majority of people, either as the recipients of the benefit of work or as the agents doing the work or both.

But is work also a normative experience for human beings, does it belong to our essence or is it essentially something alien and alienating?

Perhaps it is even more pertinent to ask the question, "Does work have any place in mission?" If we want to be more precise we can divide this question, "Does God's work contribute to, or even stronger, is it foundational for, his mission?" and "Does work carried out by humans have any place – and if so what and under what conditions – in the mission God has entrusted to us?"

Colossians presents creation and redemption as two aspects of Christ's work. This is profoundly illuminating for a missiological perspective on work and, I suggest, can serve us well as a guide for our reflections. "God created the whole universe through him [Christ] and for him ... Through the Son, then, God decided to bring the whole universe back to himself. God made peace through his Son's blood on the cross" (Col 1.16,20 GNB). These verses suggest that God operated through Christ both in creating and restoring the world. They also indicate that even God's creation was not an end in itself. It was created "for Christ". This provides a limit on the inherent value of creation and by implication, as we shall see, to our work which is correlate of our being made in God's image.

ATTITUDES TO WORK

I come across three kinds of people. There are those who go to work in order to be able to maximise their free time and their holidays. For these people work is a means to an end; it is escaping to the pleasure, enjoyment and fulfilment of their leisure time which is the focus for their living. The second group are those who take time off so that they can be more effective at work and so ensure that they continue to progress through the career path, or perhaps today, at least do not lose their jobs. Work is their centre of gravity. The third group work so that they can have the resources to live and work in the Church and other aspects of Christian mission. For them the focus is neither their personal leisure nor work itself, but another "world" where they can truly serve God's cause.

These three kinds of people represent three fundamental approaches or perspectives to work. The first that it is a necessary evil, not an end in itself for the worker, but the means to an end to ensure personal resources to find fulfilment and develop our own freely selected activities. The second see work as the main reason for living. It is work

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(and the commercial, economic and marketing worlds it generates and serves) which makes the world go round, leads to progress, prosperity and so on. The third group see the religious or spiritual side of life as the valuable part. It is our involvement in the Church which alone has value and which gives meaning to life. Is our involvement in God's mission limited to this, or are there ways in which work itself is mission?

Naturally, most of us are a mixture of these perspectives but they are prevalent attitudes to work. Are they all alright theologically? Where do they come from? How do they relate to one another and what are the boundaries of their applicability?

HARD WORK: FINDING A DEFINITION

All of this presupposes we know what we mean by "work". No doubt we can all recognise it when we are doing it, but what is included and what is excluded? Work includes "voluntary work", "caring work" and "house work" as well as paid employment. The fact we enjoy the task doesn't necessarily remove the status of "work". Work, I suggest, is the expending of energy, physical, intellectual and emotional, to achieve an intended aim where the immediate benefactor is not the agent but others.

THE WORK OF GOD'S HAND: THE CONCEPT OF WORK

We have seen that creation is viewed in Colossians as part of Christ's mission. Biblically, work is presented as something God does. Genesis 1 describes God's work of creation as having an intended aim, namely the bringing about of light and darkness, sea and land, plants and animals and, finally, humankind. In some ways we might question whether energy is expended as it appears so effortless, but the fact God is described as "resting" and the connection made with the Sabbath commandment (Ex 20.11; cf. Deut 5.12–15) underlines the fact that it is presented as a kind of work. Genesis 2 with its account of God forming humankind from the dust also implies work. The verb used here is that for the craft of the potter.

Human beings are therefore the consequence of God's work. Moreover, we are made in his image and likeness. Although there has been much

theological debate about the precise meanings and implications of these phrases, they do not exclude the possibility that human work is meant to be an aspect of that imaging. Again, as the story unfolds God instructs Adam and Eve to look after his garden for him,¹ and so provides both the possibility and the divine imperative for humans to be involved in work, and to do it cooperatively. This directive provides both encouragement and limits to human work.

However, this is not the whole story. God also invites Adam to name the animals. This suggests that work is not merely an obligation, the process of an automaton. Rather, it involves some level of relationship and exploration of that with which Adam works.² Genesis 2 presents us with the picture of work as a proper part of full human life, as intended by God.

Human work, therefore, continues the work of God in creation. It is one way we work in partnership with God, in this sense it can be understood as furthering the mission of God.

THE HARSH REALITIES: THE CONTEXT OF HUMAN WORK

The second way in which this picture is not the whole story is that humanity's disobedience involves serious repercussions for our understanding of work (Gen 3.17–20). So work becomes hard labour,³ with all manner of frustrations disrupting the benefits that should flow from appropriate work. The context in which we now pursue our work is one that is distorted and causes alienation.

Most of the rest of Scripture reflects this reality.⁴ However, just as the image of God in humankind is marred but not entirely lost, so is God's intention for work. Even within the present fallen context work has several values, such as the provision of resources, for ourselves and others; service to others; cooperation with other people and God; and, a proper way of responding to God.

THE DIMINISHING OF WORK

Given this strong biblical mandate for work and the contextual recognition that through work we are in partnership with God in his mission, it is worth asking, from where do the very negative views of work come? For instance, those who regard work as only valid in enabling us to have leisure⁵ or the Christianised form of this, namely that the only "work" that really counts is what we do in or for the Church.

No doubt, actual experience has contributed significantly to this. For many, slaves, serfs and factory workers, their work and the context of work did not do much to enhance their sense of wellbeing, increase their sense of positive identity or give them a view that work was a

holy experience. On the other hand, within the church community slaves could be valued and their real abilities might be used. The churches in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contributed a great deal through their education and socialising opportunities to affirm and develop ordinary people, often in stark contrast to their work experience. So it is understandable that "church" was viewed as a context where what you did was of a higher value, not least because it was seen as affirmed by God.

Perhaps there is rather more to it than this. More even than the fact that those who can speak publicly for the Church (the clergy) on work tend to deal infrequently with work-place issues,⁶ leaving the impression that ordinary work does not appear to matter to God as much as church work.

I suspect that certain biblical models and passages, read in a certain way, have made a strong contribution to the negative assessment of work in relationship to God's whole mission and our part in that. For instance, Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James and John from their business as fishermen (think also of the negative way in which Peter's return to fishing after the resurrection of Jesus is often treated, Jn 21.1–14) and Matthew ceases to be a tax collector (cf. Zacchaeus, who presumably continues, but now with integrity, as a tax collector, but we don't hear of him again). This willingness to leave ordinary work and follow Christ is presented as exemplary. Indeed, the whole pattern of the Gospels may strengthen the negative assessment of ordinary work. After all, while it is acknowledged that Jesus was a carpenter (Mk 6.3) and presumably spent about 18 years following this trade, the Gospels do not tell us much about his mission in this world of work. Perhaps perspectives like this go some considerable way to explaining why a person's decision to become a priest tends to be celebrated more than their decision to become an accountant or a fashion designer.

None of this should be taken as biblical support for the sacred-secular divide or the reduction of the contribution of the mission value of work to what we do "in church", but it may provide us with insight as to the kinds of biblical material that leads to these views, when interpreted from particular angles.

The Sabbath commandment has also probably helped to support this kind of negative evaluation of work: "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work" (Ex 20.8–10 NRSV).

While it is possible to read it as a command to work for six days, thus making work a divine ordinance, this is not how we normally receive these words. For most people the emphasis is on the holiness

of the absence of work; it is the “non work” which is dedicated to God. It does, after all, state that God “blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it” (Ex 20.11, NRSV).

By association, this kind of understanding supports the view that “full-time Christian work” is of greater value than “secular roles” or even that the work “lay people” do for God within the life of the Church is of greater significance than their paid employment.

Can we profitably and properly read these words in a different way which illuminates the mission dimension of all work?

This command has strong links with God’s mission, both in creating and redeeming. The command recognises the basis of the Sabbath as being that God worked for six days as well as resting on the seventh (Ex 20.11), but also that God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt (Deut 5.15). Here we have the two elements we find in Colossians.

As well as for the enjoyment of the fruits of work, the Sabbath is to be seen as protection from the potential for the corrupting of work, the overburdening of the workers. The story of the building of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 introduces a further level of dysfunction to the world of work. Now the task is approached not to provide resources or even protection but rather “so that we can make a name for ourselves”. The aspiration to build a tower that reaches the sky should probably be understood as another way of saying to reach the gods or become like the gods (Gen 11.4). Work becomes a means to challenge the supremacy of the deity and an attempt to ensure that humans take control of their destiny. Thus work becomes the expression of human hubris with all the disruptive consequences which flow from this.

Taken in isolation it is possible to understand the Sabbath commandment as exalting rest above work. Nevertheless, it is better to understand the hallowing of the Sabbath, with its cessation of work, as God’s way of protecting humans from both overexertion (hence the motivational clause in Deuteronomy connecting this to their experience of slavery in Egypt) and overambition.⁷ It reminds us that work is not the be all and end all of life, but it should not be taken to imply that work cannot be dedicated to God, too.

It is important to note that in Leviticus, particularly chapter 19, all kinds of work behaviours are linked to God’s holiness, such as not reaping to the edges of the fields, withholding wages from workers, oppressing foreigners and cheating by using dishonest ways of measuring or weighing.⁸ Work, as well as rest, is properly within the boundaries of the holy life.

This view is, I believe, confirmed by the fact that first fruits and tithes can and should be offered to God and they are the results of our work. Again, as with the Sabbath commandment, such processes ensure that

we recognise that work is not the ultimate purpose of human life, but neither is a life without work.⁹

CONCLUSION

What can we say then to our three kinds of people? It is neither the case that we should work for our holidays or have our holidays to maximise our effectiveness at work. Both expending energy in the service of others (and so providing for ourselves) and enjoying God’s creation through relaxation are part of what it means to be a full human being made in the image of God. Considering our daily work only as a means to enable us to participate in Christian work or mission is also a misunderstanding. For the role of Christ encompasses both creational and redemptive aspects of work as part of the mission of God. So too with our work. All work, to some extent, mirrors the creative mission of God. The extent is affected by the ways in which work is warped by the fallenness of human life, including the oppressiveness of it, the distorting impact on those working,¹⁰ the corrupting products of that work and the absolute claims made either for the work or its outcomes. Nevertheless, work expresses and contributes to the mission of God whose intention is through Christ to restore all things to himself. Those “all things” will include the experience of work. The Sabbath commandment can be seen as indicative of this. The Sabbath does not denigrate work as unholy, but serves to ensure that we understand that the oppressive experience of work and its idolatrous tendencies are not of its essence. Just as creation and redemption are two aspects of Christ’s work, so our ordinary work is itself potentially part of God’s whole work, his mission of creation and redemption, just as much as evangelism or leading worship.

ENDNOTES

¹ This depiction contrasts with the text of Enuma Elish, the Babylonian creation text, where Arduk creates humans to serve the gods and release the gods from work.

² Job 28 is an amazing description of the exploratory tendencies of humans, but again clearly recognises limits as to what we can achieve.

³ It must also be true, that God’s work also becomes “hard labour”. He now has to bring about redemption as well as sustain creation

⁴ A quick survey of the wisdom material shows this ambivalence to work as we experience it is recognised there. See, for instance, passages such as Prov 3.9–10; 6.6–11; 10.4,5; 11.16; 12.24; 13.4; 28.19; Ecc 2.4–12,18–25; 5.7,12; 6.7. Here is evidence of both the encouragement to work hard, and the recognition that it never quite delivers what we sense it should. Here, too, is the understanding that work does not explain fully our human lives.

⁵ Cf. M. Greene, “The Great Divide: Overcoming the SSD Syndrome”, paper available at www.licc.org.uk/imagine/files/The%20Great%20Divide.pdf: “so the Roman word for business was negotium, ‘not leisure’. Leisure was the high ideal” (p. 7). He forgets to mention that the Romans also had a word for work opus which does not function on this negative model.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 3–4; also Idea (March/April 2003), p. 20.

⁷ It is worth comparing the Sabbath year law with this, too (Ex 23.10–11). There is no implication that working to harvest crops is dubious because Israelites are told to rest the land every seven years.

Rather, the concern for poor and even animals to benefit from the land in the seventh year, puts a

limit on possessiveness and total absorption in maximising profit. It curbs greed and reminds them that they do not own the land.

⁸ While this passage does not directly forbid these things by saying “Be holy because I am holy” it amounts to this, “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev 19.2, NRSV) and the frequent refrain, “I am the LORD your God.”

⁹ Consideration of the concept of “rest” in Hebrews as well as passages such as Revelation 14.13 and 21.22–26 can support this within an eschatological context.

¹⁰ This relates to what Pope John Paul II calls the “intransitive aspect of human action”. See A Dulles, *The Splendour of Faith: The Theological Vision of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1999), pp. 132–33.

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