

8A MORE ON WORK AND VOCATION

Overview

Jerry White, president emeritus of the Navigators, made these observations regarding human work: [1]

1. Both work and the family are ordained by God and part of God's plan since Genesis.
2. Work is a noble calling and a holy calling.
3. Work can advance the Kingdom of God, since it places believers right where people are. Work is the hidden mission field in our world.
4. Work is a fearful responsibility, since God's reputation is at stake. People judge Christianity by the performance of Christians at work.
5. Christians at work need particularly to exhibit excellence, competence, and faithfulness.

Importance of sound theology

Old Testament:

In the Ten Commandments, we are told "thou shalt labor six days". The Old Testament is filled with references to our responsibilities in this sphere and the consequences if we do not. Our consistent ignoring of this critical social sphere has resulted in ...oppression of workers, cheating on employers, vast poverty, and on and on, not to mention the terrible witness that modern Christians are in the workforce, both as the employer and the employee. [2]

New Testament:

The Bible shows that God is still working (John 5:17) in contrast to one popular perception that now that God has gotten everything running He is resting eternally...God is as active and creative today- creating, sustaining, redeeming, and consummating- as He was when He began to make this vast universe. [3]

The Reformation:

Both Martin Luther and John Calvin taught that calling includes your work, but about one hundred fifty years after the early Puritans, we see the words calling and vocation become merely synonyms for work and employment. Over time, that was distorted until it came to be seen that one's work simply was his calling. So, we have a situation where calling is being secularized and work is being sacralized. [4]

Modern society:

As modern life crowded out God the Caller, the idea of vocation as calling lost its footing. So now the pull toward a certain kind of work must come from the self. It's your "inclination" or your "strengths" or your "abilities." In the absence of the Caller, your challenge is to re-invent yourself. In the presence of the Caller, your challenge is to discover his call. [5]

"Lay people" and Work

It is important to stress that "lay people" are involved in ministry:

... God can use us as lay people in ministry while we keep our secular professions. This allows us to have some income that is not dependent on the generous giving of other Christians. It frees up money for the kingdom and it also allows us to not be beholden to those who give... I am doing (ministry).. I am just not doing it on a professional basis and I have an engineering job that pays my bills...Just to add another comment. By having a non-ministry job, we are able to come into contact with lost people and people who need to be confronted with the gospel on a daily basis. If you were a ministry professional you would be in a Christian bubble and would only have limited access to lostness. But as a member of the secular workforce we have ready-made relationships that are in place. All we need to do is use those in order to share the message of hope we have within us. [6]

Fletcher Tink confirms that God uses "lay people"—[7]

1. God wants to use everybody for His mission of redeeming the world.
2. The Bible is filled with stories of lay people who made a difference in their worlds.
3. Most parables and examples that Jesus used to teach about the Kingdom of God involved lay people.
4. God wants to redeem the world in all senses not just those who attend church.
5. We are all called to be agents of reconciliation: "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross" (Col. 1:19). We are all called to be agents of reconciliation.

One of the great recoveries of the Protestant Reformation was an affirmation of the dignity of all honest occupations and manual labor as vocations (literally, callings). Historically, the Jewish father was considered derelict if he didn't teach his son a trade. Most rabbis also plied a trade (for example, Rabbi Moshe, the shoemaker or Rabbi Shaul, the tentmaker).

Work is an essential part and expression of our humanness. It is not, as some mistakenly assume, a result of the Fall...

Only work that is drudgery is a consequence of the Fall. In Messiah we can experience a substantial redemption from drudgery to meaningful, enjoyable work and achievement. Whatever your job, it can be an expression of worship if you do it unto the Lord. [8]

Wolterstorff distinguishes between the mere “received role” of occupation and a world-altering role-

"One serves God and humanity in one's daily occupation . . . one does not serve God and humanity by going into business and then just playing the received role of businessmen, nor by going into medicine and then just playing the received role of physician . . . For those received roles are religiously fallen . . . To faithfully serve God and effectively serve humanity, one has to critique the received role and do what one can to alter the script." [9]

Work as a structure of love consists of three elements: provision, goodness, and security. Provision is the "supplies" or resources that will meet needs--food, clothing, housing, justice, medical care, art, or information---and these supplies come from the abundance that God has provided in and around us.

Goodness is having a heart to love others and wanting to provide for them what is good and best. It is not by chance that the word goods uses the same root as goodness and that both trace their core meaning back to God.

Security is protecting and promoting what is good and eliminating or suppressing what is evil. Securing the lives of the people in a community by ensuring that the sources of provision and goodness are maintained allows a just and merciful society to flourish and bless. [10]

Calling is for all believers:

As Christians, we can serve God in a variety of vocations. And we don't need to justify that work, whatever it is, in terms of its "spiritual" value or evangelistic usefulness. We simply exercise whatever our calling is with new God-glorifying motives, goals, and standards.

I once heard Os Guinness address a question about why the church in the late 20th century was not having a larger impact in our world when there were more people going to church than ever before. He said the main reason was not that Christians weren't where they should be. There are plenty of artists, lawyers, doctors, and business owners that are Christians. Rather, the main reason is that Christians aren't who they should be right where they are.

"Calling," he said, "is the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion, dynamism, and direction." When we reduce the notion of "calling" to work inside the church, we fail to equip our people to apply their Christian faith to everything they do, everywhere they are.[11]

Recall Ephesians 2:10 God has prepared good works for us to do.

(God) literally “loves other people” through (i.e., by means of) us. In other words, vocation is God’s calling out to us to love those whom He has placed in our lives. And because He is the One who has placed us in the stations in which we find ourselves in the first place, we can be confident that faithful service at those stations is faithfulness to Him. [12]

God’s call is practical and this-world-oriented:

For Paul, all different types of work can originate in faith and are service to God. When he outlines the service of the “new self...created in the likeness of God,” he urges “doing honest work with his hands.” Clearly the new self, the new nature in Christ, is not some disembodied soul. The new self has hands and needs to use them! The new person restored in Christ is to work in God’s world and to provide for the needs of others. Our new nature is, in this sense, intensely worldly. [13]

Darrow Miller notes that work is part of a larger plan:

The naturalistic or materialistic worldview sees work as a career, as the backbone of modern society. Work is viewed mainly in economic terms. It is what one does to have material things, “the good life.” Work in this sense is usually defined in terms of “success,” upward mobility, and affluence. The end result of work is consumption which is the natural purpose of a secular or hedonistic society...

This biblical concept understands that God is at work in the world building his kingdom, and that, among other things, he calls us to participate in the building of his kingdom through our work. I have called this concept one’s lifework. One’s lifework establishes one’s place in God’s unfolding story. Just as all of history is moving towards God’s ultimate purpose, so one’s individual life is intentionally moving towards its destiny, to fulfill its purpose in God’s plan. Both modern secular culture and animistic cultures have an inadequate view of time, a view in which there is no future. Among other things, a biblical worldview acknowledges that God is working in history to fulfill his telos—eschatological purpose for all of history, and his telos—anthropological purpose for each individual life ...

What does it mean to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness within the context of my vocation? When work is viewed as a calling, not only do we see God’s hand of providence directing us toward our work, but we have opportunity to manifest the moral and metaphysical values of the kingdom of God through our work into the institution and society that we are serving. To put it differently, we have the opportunity to connect the kingdom of God to our vocation, and through that to impact our world...[14]

The place of faith:

(Robert) George defines vocation as "the plan" that God has for every person. The Christian's task is to "cooperate with God in discerning that plan and living it out." ... But, he adds, "there is more." The "more" is faith.

1. Faith assists us in discerning what is "the highest and best use of one's God-given talents-- talents that impose responsibilities even more than they provide means of achievement, satisfaction, and recognition."

2. Faith also "enables one to bring his choices into a more coherent whole." In other words, it "plays an integrating role." (integrity in life)

3. Finally, George points out that faith enables us to see the "cosmic significance" of what we do (the advancement of God's kingdom) [15]

Our Work and our Choices

Even in the developed economies, many people have little choice about the kind of work they do for a living, The Christian community would do well to equip people both to make choices about their profession, and to follow God's leading in whatever work we find ourselves doing. Whatever your job, God's gifts enable you to work for the common good, to find more contentment in your work, and to overcome or endure the negative aspects of your situation. Most importantly, God promises eventual liberation from work's toil, sweaty labor, and thistles. Even if you do have the freedom to choose your job, these ...considerations are guides, not dictators. In Christ, believers have perfect freedom: [16]

Work and Significance

How does work fit with the human desire for significance? Tim Keller writes-

Everyone imagines accomplishing things, and everyone finds him- or herself largely incapable of producing them. Everyone wants to be successful rather than forgotten, and everyone wants to make a difference in life. But that is beyond the control of any of us. If this life is all there is, then everything will eventually burn up in the death of the sun and no one will even be around to remember anything that has ever happened. Everyone will be forgotten, nothing we do will make any difference, and all good endeavors, even the best, will come to naught. Unless there is God. If the God of the Bible exists, and there is a True Reality beneath and behind this one, and this life is not the only life, then every good endeavor, even the simplest ones, pursued in response to God's calling, can matter forever. That is what the Christian faith promises. "In the Lord, your labor is not in vain," writes Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 58. [17]

Impact of work

The impact of a Christian at work should involve more than honest practice and being patient, says Flood. [18] It is not just being a good worker with a good attitude but being a force for change and for good in the industry.

(In The Gravedigger Files, Os) Guinness writes, "Look for a place where the Christian's faith makes a difference at work beyond the realm of purely personal things (such as witnessing to colleagues and praying for them, or not swearing and not fiddling with income tax returns). Look for a place where the Christian is thinking 'Christianly' and critically about the substance of work (about say, the use of profits and not just personnel; about the ethics of a multinational corporation and not those of a small family business; about a just economic order and not just the doctrine of justification). You will look for a very long time."

Joe (Carson, Department of Energy, founder of the Affiliation of Christian Engineers) asks for example, should an engineer care that the work they are doing is helping to fuel a genocide in Darfur? It's the kind of big-picture question many of us in the professional world could ask of our own work's impact. What Joe stresses in the interview is that a single individual often can do very little. That's why it is so important he says for there to be a collective voice which can influence industry and power. [19]

Perspective

(If our work is also to count as a response to that call, our jobs must become smaller and larger at the same time. They have to get smaller because work is only one facet of our total vocation. A job that takes over a person's life, a job that loses all reference to the independent spheres of family, community, and faith, is a job that threatens to collapse upon itself, sucking everything into its vortex of activity without referring us to a larger moral purpose that ultimately makes that activity meaningful and significant. That job needs to get smaller; it needs to find its place in the larger scheme of things. But a sense of religious vocation at work will also make our jobs larger. Not that they will take up more of our time. Rather they will be internally enriched as we seek to align our professional activity with our best understanding of the creative and redemptive purposes of God in this world. Our job descriptions will be expanded. [20]

Pat Mays comments on the two-fold nature of work, based on Dan Boone's *The Way We Work-Work has a two-fold nature. In one sense, work is a curse (because) when sin entered the world through human decision in Genesis 3, then everything, particularly work, got complicated. Rather than a joyous partnership with God, work became more of a wrestling match to extract the benefits out of God's creation. Work can be oppressive and demeaning to people...*

However, work still holds the possibility of blessing. The blessing comes when we accept...the invitation and purpose of God that we live lives of sacred intent by receiving life and returning worship/work. When we see work as a partnership with God, a gift from the Creator to cultivate

redemptive communities, then we experience blessing. Work is full of potential for good or for evil. It holds the possibility either for fulfillment or for emptiness. [21]

Cosden adds:

Human work is a transformative activity essentially consisting of dynamically interrelated instrumental (vocational), relational, and ontological dimensions: whereby, along with work being an end in itself, the worker's and others' needs are met; the believers' sanctification is occasioned; and workers express, explore, and develop their humanness while building up their natural, social, and cultural environments thereby contributing protectively and productively to the order of this world and the one to come. [22]

Ben Witherington [23] suggests the following concepts for a theology of work:

- Work, from a Biblical view, involves calling, vocation, and, if done right, ministry.
- Work is what weaves together the very fabric of a called person's identity, and fulfills it.
- Not all tasks are vocations, and not all gainful employment is a calling. Does it involve love of God and love of neighbor?
- Christ is looking for industry, integrity, honesty, loyalty, a striving after excellence, a doing of our tasks to the best of our ability, (and) a taking responsibility for our own actions.
- Avoid both sloth and workaholism. Work, in the light of Easter, should be life-giving, not death-dealing.
- We are defined by our relationship with God, not merely by what we do.

Tom Nelson adds the following ideas:

- We were created to worship God and to display a glimpse of God's glory to a vast and expanding universe.
- We were designed to reflect who God is, in, through, and by our work.
- In all aspects of our lives, including our workplaces, we display to those around us the light of the glory of Christ who indwells us.
- If we look at our work through the lens of Holy scripture, our work, no matter what we have been called to do, is imbued with great meaning and significance.
- We are empowered by the Holy Spirit to positively influence a workplace culture that better promotes human flourishing, synergistic teamwork, and the common good.
- Our work influences in great measure the persons we are becoming. Daily we are being formed by the work we do, the people we rub shoulders with, and the skills we acquire. [24]

Amy Sherman, in her book *Kingdom Calling*, looks at work as a way of righteous living, as workers become “agents of restoration” involved in “vocational stewardship”. The result is a comprehensive approach to work: ethical behavior plus evangelism plus blessing others plus creation care plus alleviating poverty and oppression.

By vocational stewardship, I mean the intentional and strategic deployment of our vocational power—knowledge, platform, networks, position, influence, skills and reputation—to advance foretastes of God’s kingdom. For missional congregations that desire to rejoice their cities, vocational stewardship is an essential strategy. To accomplish their big vision, they need to capitalize intentionally on the vocational power of their members. [25]

Sometimes our vision for doing our work "as unto the Lord" is "adverbial." In integrating our faith and work, we focus on the kind of the employees we ought to be: ethical workers, kind workers, Gospel-sharing workers. This is certainly an important part of faith/work integration, but it's not the whole. For our work itself matters. What we do—not just how we do it—matters.

This is where vocational stewardship kicks in. It starts by asking: What are the hallmarks of God's Kingdom? We know that redemptive history is moving toward the consummated Kingdom. Revelation 21 tells us that in the New Heavens and New Earth, there will be no more suffering, pain, war, or death. Additionally, "preview" passages throughout the Old Testament offer glimpses into the characteristics of the Kingdom. Just as previews on Netflix give us a taste of forthcoming films, so passages like Isaiah 65:17-25, Ezekiel 34:11-31, Psalms 72, and Micah 4:3-4 inform us that God's Kingdom is marked by values like peace, community, justice, compassion, economic sufficiency, wholeness, and beauty. [26]

Finding our Vocation

Andrew Sears looks at vocation in three levels: [27]

1. Our calling as humans
Co-creators (of earthly things) with God
2. Our calling to the Kingdom
Loving God and our neighbor
3. Our calling to work/employment
A field-specific calling

Sears, based on the ideas of Buechner, suggests that vocation involves consideration of both status and meaning, our uniqueness and the world’s needs: [28]

S = STATUS

\bar{S} = NO STATUS

M = MATTERS

\bar{M} = DOESN'T MATTER

	S	\bar{S}
M	SM IDEAL VOCATION	$\bar{S}M$ FINANCIALLY UNWORKABLE (VOLUNTEER)
\bar{M}	$S\bar{M}$ EMPTY SUCCESS	$\bar{S}\bar{M}$ WORTHLESS PURSUIT

	INTERNAL MOTIVATION - THE WORKER	EXTERNAL MOTIVATION - THE WORLD
SKILLS	WHAT ARE YOU GOOD AT?	WHAT WILL THE WORLD PAY FOR?
SATISFACTION	WHAT DO YOU ENJOY?	WHAT DOES THE WORLD NEED?

“Marketplace Traders”

Justin Forman calls Christians to trade in a distorted view of work, turning away from ourselves and “the American dream” and seeking impact the world through our work. Such a person is a new “marketplace trader,” someone who: [29]

- Views work as sacred, ordained by God.
- Finds identity in Jesus, not in work or titles.
- Brings meaning to their work, because they are working primarily for Jesus.
- Works with excellence, as “unto the Lord.”
- Views work as a vehicle to meet needs, both physical and spiritual.
- De-compartmentalizes their life, following Christ every day of the week.

David Vader adds these thoughts:

Both the object of our work and how we achieve it matter. Not every activity that can be done for pay should be done; not every product that can be sold should be sold. If we believe that the primary purpose of work is to pay one’s bills, then it is also convenient to believe that whether or not something should be done or purchased is other people’s business. It is your business! We Christians are each responsible to ask, does the fruit of my labor honor and cooperate with God’s work in the world? Is it an instrument of justice and mercy? Does my work build up joy, peace, and kindness, or does it serve our high paced culture of fractured relationships and endless consumption? The market is able to value only what can be assigned a dollar value and is therefore unable to value the joy and lasting reward of doing something worthy of the Lord. There are many great works that we know need to be done. Some of us are called to create great music, literature, or film; others will be called to lead in industry; and God will ask some of us to care first for the special needs that belong only to persons without material resources in the world. Let no one be deceived that the eternal worth of any of these tasks is merely equal to your salary. In fact, some of the most important works will not pay well at all. [30]

Is Vocation Over-Rated?

Recently some have questioned the concept of vocation, even suggesting that it may be over-rated in Christian circles, because

- Many have lost jobs they liked.
- Many find their work unfulfilling and their bosses difficult to work with.
- Many spent their lives looking for the “dream job” that never materialized.

Should a believer stay with a “vocation” if it turns out to be oppressing others? Scott Waalkes offers these insights:

(E)quating social stations with callings could baptize unjust social, political, and economic structures as part of God’s will. This reduces Christian faith to practicing interpersonal ethics

within these unjust structures, without challenging them. Decent people are often trapped in systems perpetuating injustice to themselves or others. Put simply, it is problematic to tell those suffering in - or perpetuating - situations of injustice that they should stay in their places...

A natural theology approach focused on the common good opens us to the dangers of secularity, making it entirely possible to carry out our work without any explicit attention to the distinctly cross-centered work of Jesus Christ, without any explicit grounding in the distinct person of Jesus, or without any participation in the body of Christ...

(W)e forget that human labor is also under the curse. Like the Reformers and their Puritan successors, we expect work to transform the world for the better by meeting the needs of others... Sometimes work is a job, just a way to pay the bills, not a vehicle for giving meaning to your entire life. Jobs, rather than careers, are a reality for many people. We risk raising our students' hopes about work too much. We need to give them permission to talk frankly about jobs...

(W)e may be training students to be narcissistic and elitist. As a result, they may fail to thrive in difficult workplaces or disdain blue-collar peers who are unable to work in jobs that they love...

(W)hen students do land in a career matching Buechner's... ideals, such ideals can easily lead them to treat their career as an idol. As such, service to career could overtake devotion to God and to the calling to follow Jesus and make disciples. [31]

David Vader has these concerns:

The career objectives of many graduates and employees of Christian colleges also mimic those of our culture. Too many of us have permitted the deceitfulness of wealth and worries of life to choke our lives, thus making them unfruitful¹⁰. Dreams shared confidently by first year students can be diminished, not enhanced, by four years of college if the realities of debt and the expectations of family, friends, and culture loom larger than God's call on our lives. We find it difficult to follow Christ before we have achieved for ourselves a certain feeling of security in the world by way of a market-competitive salary and benefits package; a home, furniture and a car similar to those we grew up with; a safe neighborhood for family life; entertaining area attractions; and if possible, work that is fun or at least amusing. Faced with the harsh realities of our world, what Jesus asks for seems unreasonable. [32]

Conclusions

I think we need to put the concept of vocation into perspective.

I think it is a Biblical concept, in that God calls us to Himself and then calls us to serve His church with our gifts and our community with our skills.

Vocation is neither a particular job nor a career. At any given time we may find ourselves doing something we weren't prepared for, or even looking for work. The ground-rules are the same: Whatever we are doing should be done to the glory of God.

There is no “perfect” job. As much as I have enjoyed teaching engineering there are parts of the job that I (don’t enjoy) (grading final exams, filing reports, attending meetings, and dealing with a student who’s making bad choices).

The key is that God can use us anywhere, and we can bless others and shine for Him anywhere. If the “dream job” doesn’t materialize take a job that’s available and pour your heart into it.

Waalkes recommends these steps to keep vocation in perspective: [33]

First, we should maintain the Reformed emphasis on living out callings in ordinary domestic life but acknowledge the prevalence of sin.

Second, a gospel vision of the "upside-down Kingdom" helps motivate students to work against injustice within their workplaces by placing them in a larger narrative: not just a narrative of gradual (and rarely seen) "redemption" or vague (and always distant) "renewal" but of disruptive, surprising justice centered on the cross and empty tomb.

Third, a gospel emphasis on community can help counter the subjective individualism of mainstream American spirituality.

Fourth, a gospel view can help our students avoid the modern world's idolatrous equation of work and identity.

Finally, we are to work, and worship, “with all out heart”:

Why work with all your heart? Because you are working "as though you were working for the Lord and not for people." ... God is your salary and supply. He is also your 'boss'. There may be someone who is your supervisor, but you are really serving a higher authority. No matter what I do, if it is to prepare a meal, if it is to sign an invoice, if it is to do an analysis, if it is to close a deal, if it is to make a sale, if it is to make delivery -- whatever it is, I am to do it as if I'm doing it for God, and so it becomes an act of worship. [34]

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