

A Theology of Work

In his book "Issues Facing Christians today" John Stott discusses the nature and purpose of work. In that book he attacks the notion that work is a curse imposed on humanity and has no value in and of itself. Rather he says "Work is intended for the fulfillment of the worker". We were made, after God's image, to be workers. And it is in work that we find self-fulfillment, satisfaction and dignity. This forms one plank in the backbone of his 'theology' of work.

I want to suggest that the focus of this theology finds little explicit support in Scripture and when taken too far can be responsible for subverting our gospel priority. (Sounds serious!!)

In constructing his theology, Stott heads straight to Genesis and the creation account. He draws the inference, from the refrain, that God saw what he made & thought it was good, that God found his creative work satisfying. As those created in God's image we also ought to find satisfaction in creative work. However, this is hardly the point of the refrain, or the point of Genesis 1-3. The refrain points to what God had made, not his satisfaction in making it. God may have enjoyed his work but no where is it said in Genesis that work was given to man for his satisfaction. There are only a couple of places in Scripture I know of that hint that this is the case. The first is an inference that can be drawn from the curse changing the way we work. We still work, but we do it through "painful toil" and by the "sweat of [our] brow". Work before the fall was without "painful toil". In this way it could be said that work was originally satisfying. The other hint is in Ecclesiastes. There we are told that despite the inherent futility, and meaninglessness of work, we may find satisfaction in it. If we do, be glad (Ecc 2:24, 3:22). It's important to note that nothing much is made of these ideas in Scripture. There is certainly nothing said concerning work being "intended for the fulfillment of the worker". The focus on man the worker in Genesis is not on his "self fulfillment" or his "dignity" and "worth" but rather that he cares for creation and from it derives his food

Before leaving Genesis it is important to note also that although God made man and put him in the garden to work it (he made man a worker), the goal of creation was not work but rather

'rest'. The seven days of creation culminate, not with man in the garden at work, but with the seventh day and man at rest enjoying God's rest. Now certainly God's rest does not mean inactivity (Jn 5:17, Heb 4) but it does mean relationship and the enjoyment of that. It seems then from Genesis the goal of creation, and hence the goal of life, is relationship with God - not work.

If we are going to get to the heart of what the Bible's view of work is, it is better to begin where the Bible addresses the issue of work directly, rather than attempting to draw inferences from a passage written for another purpose (this is simply to apply the reformers principle of letting the clear interpret the less clear). Perhaps the clearest teaching in the Bible on the issue of work is found in Paul's letters to the Thessalonians. It appears that at Thessalonica work was being undervalued. Consistent with the ancient Greek notion that work, particularly manual labour, was somehow below the dignity of humanity. The Thessalonians did not see it as important or even necessary to continue in it. Further, Christ was coming soon. Why bother? Within both of Paul's letters to this church we find this issue explicitly addressed.

In 1Thess 4:11 the Thessalonians are exhorted to, "make it their ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind their own business and to work with their hands". Verse 12 provides the purpose - "so you will not be dependent on anybody". Work, says Paul, so that you can provide for yourselves and for your relatives. It's not a very romantic purpose to work but is thoroughly biblical. In fact, it is repeated so often that it is clearly a very important purpose. It's repeated in 2Thess 3:10 ("If a man will not work, he shall not eat") and also in 1 Cor 4:10-17, Acts 20:34-35, Titus 3:14 and Eph 4:28. The Titus passage is worth quoting in full. Paul urges Christian to do what is "good *in order* that they may provide for daily necessities and not live unproductive lives".

Further Paul makes a point of modeling this attitude. "We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, labouring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

The purpose of work? The major focus of Scripture is that it's for the provision of our needs and the needs of others. No mention is made of it being for our fulfillment, our worth or our dignity.

This is surely significant.

Arguments from silence are always a little iffy but Paul was confronted with a classic situation where he needed to pull out all stops to get a group of people working again. He issues them a solemn command to work. He had numerous occasions to instruct them concerning work. No where does he mention the dignity working brings or the self worth or the satisfaction. In every instance, he urges them to work so that they might be able to care for others. The focus is always 'outward'; work, so that you will not be a burden on others; work so that you can provide for yourselves and others; work so you will not bring disrepute on the gospel. None of these are very romantic notions, but they are thoroughly biblical reasons to work. And I want to suggest that they flow out of the selfless notion of love. Here is one great difficulty with the focus of work as "self worth", "dignity", "satisfaction". As a focus these insights into work are 'me' centered. I suspect this is why the Bible is so uninterested in them. Rather we are to think about work as it relates to others. This is simply an application of a concern for Christians to love.

From the Scriptures, work is an essential part of life. They place great value on it - we were made to work, & we must avoid the kind of idleness that makes us a burden and brings discredit on the Gospel. When we work, we are to do it with all our heart, "as working for the Lord, not men" (Col 3:23). We are, by our hard work, to support ourselves, our family, and even be in a position to give generously to others (Titus 3:13, 14). In a word, we are to love.

Work is sometimes satisfying

But what of the fact that at times work is enormously satisfying? It is true that work may be a source of satisfaction. In our society where we enjoy the freedom to choose our work it is possible to find a job that will bring some measure of satisfaction. If we do find that satisfying job ... REJOICE! There is no need to feel guilty that you enjoy the work God has graciously provided you. There is nothing godly in avoiding jobs that are satisfying. However, a word of warning, as the writer of Ecclesiastes warns us, do not be conned! Ultimately, all work is futile and meaningless. "I hated life" says the writer "because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (Ecc 2:17). You see, in the big scheme of things, there are problems with work. In the first place, for most of us it is frustrating

and difficult. The 9 - 5 routine becomes a grind. If we do eventually amass anything through our work, we will one day die, only to leave it to someone else, who may be a complete fool (2:19).

The difficulty with work

But the fundamental difficulty with work is that the thing I produce in work never lasts. The bridge I build will eventually fall down. The patient I heal will eventually die. The grass I cut will only grow again (far, far too quickly!). Jesus directs attention to this with his warning about not working for 'food that spoils' (John 6:27). I may take satisfaction in the fleeting moments of achievement but on a scale of eternity they will all crumble into dust.

However, there is one kind of work that does have lasting significance - the work of the gospel. It is this work that can put an end to meaninglessness and futility. We have been redeemed from 'futile way of life handed down to us by our forefathers' (1 Peter 1:18) by the precious blood of the lamb. So that in the Gospel we are given a "new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1Peter 1:3). There is nothing hollow or temporary about our new life, for in it we are transformed into the very likeness of Christ and given a hope beyond decay and futility! It follows therefore that the one work that has top priority for Christians is gospel work - the proclamation of the gospel to believer and unbeliever alike. Only this work can transcend the futility of this present age. As those who have been given a view of eternity and can see life from God's perspective we ought to be seeking, as far as we are able, given the gifts, opportunities, and circumstances God has place us in, to give ourselves to gospel work. It is this logic that shapes Paul's command in 1 Cor 15:58. We ought to always give ourselves "fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your work in the lord is not in vain".

But please note, in this council of futility, do not make the mistake of equating a person's value with the value of their work. All our work under the sun, in and of itself, may be meaningless but for those whose value and significance is tied to the one who takes us into eternity our value is assured. It is in relationship with Christ that we find our significance, worth, value and dignity, whatever job we do. A full time Christian worker is not more valuable than the Christian who mows lawns for a living. The thing that will count eternally for each of us is 'how' we do our jobs and 'how' we use our jobs for gospel work.

The Gospel and work

All work in and of itself is futile. In fact according to Ecclesiastes all of life is futile outside of the eternal hope we have in Christ. Given this truth, we should seek to anchor our lives on what will last - relationship with God and the proclamation of the Gospel. We ought to work for 'food that endures to eternal life...' (John 6:27).

What then are we to do with the fact that we will spend half our waking life engaged in work? Is my career as an Accountant completely unrelated to things of eternal significance? Is there any relationship between my secular job and gospel work? Given the all pervasive character of the Cross of Jesus we ought to expect there is some kind of relationship.

In any theology of work the cross must make a significant contribution. As God's work of redemption is considered it becomes obvious that at the heart of God's concerns, priorities and efforts is the redemption of mankind and the recreation of all things. However on the periphery of this concern is God's work of preserving the created order - so that his redemptive activity can take place. The theologian, Karl Barth has described this order of things by suggesting that in God's activities there is a centre and a circumference. At the centre of his work is the work of the gospel. At the circumference is the providential care of the world. God works to maintain the universe (circumference), so that he can proceed with his work of saving a people to be his own (centre). Here, in the character of God's work, is a pattern for us. In the work of our lives there will be a centre and a circumference. At the centre is our work of Gospel proclamation. At the circumference is what we have called our secular work. Like God, our secular work, functions to facilitate gospel work.

This idea is found in Scripture, in the words of Paul. Work was to be the ambition of the Thessalonians "so that your daily life will win the respect of outsiders". In Paul's letter to Titus slaves are instructed similarly. They are to be "subject to their masters in everything [work hard?], so that they will make the teaching about God our saviour attractive" (2:9,10).

Conclusion

What is the significance of paid secular employment? In and of itself it is futile and meaningless. The idea that work is for man's self fulfillment, satisfaction & dignity (most often based in the Genesis accounts) is not the focus of the Biblical witness to work. Indeed it is dangerous in our western, middle class culture to focus on these things too much because these things draw us away from the cross and away from love. It is only in the cross that we ultimately find our worth, significance and dignity. Finding these things in the cross drives us then to be focused on loving others. Work is about caring for the needs of others first and foremost. In contrast to Stott's position, I would suggest this the chief purpose of work.

What is the relationship between gospel work & other work? Undergirding all I do is a desire now to be a person who loves, but whose love is shaped profoundly by the shape of God's love which focuses centrally on the love of saving (John 3:16).

So foundationally, my focus in work is no longer on myself. I don't do it for my own satisfaction and fulfilment. I do it out of love for others. In this sense my secular work is an expression of a transformed heart. Everything I do must now be for the good of others. And so every job ought to be a deliberate expression of 'public service' (something Stott very helpfully focuses on). This should be so in paid and *unpaid* work. Christians should be the first to care about 'pulling our weight' in a society that needs the labor of many to function and remain healthy. This is back to Genesis 3:15. We work to 'take care of' the world we live in. And given the proximity of statements in Genesis about caring for creation and providing for needs, it seems best to see this care as particularly related to the provision of needs. We now do all our work – paid and unpaid – as the overflow of a heart that is transformed to be concerned to love by providing for people around me.

But! Ultimately and pre-eminently our love must be focused where God's love is focused – on seeking to save the lost (John 3:16). We must labor for food that doesn't spoil. So although we work now out of a general desire to serve and care for the world around us and provide for our own families and not be a burden, we more consciously care that all we do might serve the cause of the gospel. Our labour must '*adorn*' the gospel, so that the world sees the power of

Christ to save us from the power of sin as well as the penalty. We work as 'unto the Lord and not as man pleasers'. Honest, hardworking, reliable, and so on. But further, our labour must have a clear eye to how it might help *expand* the work of the gospel. So we work to earn money to give it away – to those in need, yes; but most particularly to the support gospel ministry. We look for ways to partner in gospel work by giving more and more of our earnings to further the missionary endeavor.

These activities correspond to God's activity which centers on his recreation of all things through the cross but which requires that he uphold all things with his loving, providential care. Just as God's energies centre on the work of eternal significance so our work must also. In the scheme of Barth, there is a centre and a circumference to God's activity, one serving the other.

In this way a Scriptural view of work will not subvert the urgency and centrality of declaring the gospel to all people.