

Session 1, Essay 1

A BIBLICAL VIEW OF WORK

Phyllis Crosby

The biblical story of work provides a “robust theology of everyday life.”¹ Vocational stewardship was once prominent in spiritual formation, supporting the church and its members to be faithfully present and engaged in the societies they inhabited. This robust doctrine has given way to a distortion of pietism, where the material world and its activities are considered to be less significant than those of the spiritual realm.*

Many churches have neglected to teach the biblical meaning of work, for the most part ignoring work’s image-bearing nature. As a result, the workplace, where most people spend 30-50% of their life, is strangely absent from the Christian understanding of mission and purpose in the world.

To properly appreciate vocational stewardship, we need to understand the purpose and meaning of work from a biblical perspective.

*In *The Call* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), Os Guinness provides the historical background for this distortion. See “The Catholic Distortion,” p. 31-35 and “The Protestant Distortion,” p.39-43.

The larger narrative of the Bible is comprised of the four “chapters” of the biblical story: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation. These chapters form a conceptual framework for understanding and engaging the world we live in. Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation correspond to ought-is-can-will in our framework and help us see what work was meant to be, why it often falls short of our hopes and expectations, and how we can work in a way that glorifies God and promotes human flourishing.

Creation: *Work As It Ought To Be*

Read Genesis 1 and 2.

Humankind was created to work and work is an essential part of our image bearing nature.

The history of work begins in the first chapter of Genesis and is tied closely to the creation of humanity. The first 25 verses of Genesis recount the story of God speaking creation into existence and declaring it good.

In verses 26-28, God created humanity and immediately employs the crown of His creation in meaningful work. As image bearers of God, humanity was made to be sub-creators,

to rule, to work, and to worship, continuing the creative process. In this passage, God works and pairs His image bearers with the structure of work. God works and we work.

Genesis 1:26 says: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’”

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary says we were created, “to be God’s responsible representative and steward on the earth, to work out [the] Creator’s will and fulfill the divine purpose.” The human race was meant to go from the garden and make all of the earth suitable for human flourishing. This was the incredible sequel to being created in God’s image.

Work is worship. Work is not only an incredible privilege it is also a form of worship. In *Work Matters*, Tom Nelson says, “The main goal of work is worship, through a lifestyle of God-honoring vocational faithfulness.”²

The idea of “work as worship” comes from the Hebrew word *avodah*, a rich word that is rendered into many different English translations. In Genesis, we see *avodah* as work. It can also mean worship, service, ministry, and craftsmanship. Genesis 2:15 reads: “The Lord God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and take care of it.” The Hebrew word for cultivate is *avodah*.

The use of the word *avodah* in the Hebrew Scriptures lends insight into how work, ministry, and worship are all connected. One word originally described all three, indicating that there was not a dichotomy between what was done for God in work and ministry and what was done for God in worship; all were *avodah*. (See *avodah* as craftsmanship (1 Chronicles 28:21), work (Exod. 34:21), worship (Exod. 3:12), and service or ministry (Num. 8:11).)

Humanity was created for leadership.

Humanity was created for leadership within each individual’s scope of responsibility. Genesis 1:28 gives us a picture of what God originally intended for humanity: “God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’”

While the word “dominion” (sometimes translated as “rule”) is a bit archaic, the idea is very important for several themes in the biblical narrative, especially vocation. As image bearers, humanity was created for dominion or what might be called leadership. And although we all lead in varying degrees, we all have spheres of responsibility, even if only for ourselves.

Dallas Willard describes this leadership: “We are made to ‘have dominion’ within an appropriate domain of reality. This is the core of the likeness or image of God in us and is the basis of the destiny for which we were formed. We are, all of us, never-ceasing spiritual beings with unique eternal calling to count for good in God’s great universe ...”³

God granted humanity the responsibility of being His representatives and stewards in creation, fulfilling His divine will. This is meaningful work and an unbelievable privilege. And this mandate, given before the Fall, indicates God’s original intent for the world and for human participation in it.

Work is a process of creating and recreating for the purpose of shalom. Tom Nelson defines work as “our specific contributions to God’s ongoing creation.”⁴ In this sense, work is not defined primarily as a financial transaction but as a creative contribution to the common good. This fits well with Genesis 2:15 where Adam is told to cultivate the land: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it.” Gardening, a *shalom*-building activity, is used as a paradigm for all work. As with all work, gardening is the process of taking raw materials and rearranging

them for the benefit and flourishing of the human race. The institution of work as well as individual vocations are designed to provide people with what they need to flourish.

Though one of Adam's responsibilities was to develop and care for the garden, his work was to extend beyond the garden to all of creation. Creation was not meant to be static. Adam's race was called to continue the creative process, cultivating the world for *shalom*.

Created before the Fall, the structure of work has been declared good. After a frustrating day at work it can be easy to forget that work came before the Fall and is part of the good created order. In Genesis 1:30, just two verses after God gives the mandate to subdue and rule, He says, "And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good."

The first human job description in Genesis 1:28, often referred to as the Cultural or Creational Mandate, was given before the Fall and not rescinded after the Fall. Even though human relationship with God is broken, the mandate to subdue and rule (take responsibility and lead) has not been rescinded; in fact, it was reissued after the flood (Gen. 9:1-7).

The Fall: Work As It Often Is

Read Genesis 3.

Every part of creation, including the structure of work, has been touched by the corruption of the Fall. The entire created order is affected by the Fall; both the material earth and the immaterial structure of work suffer brokenness. Romans 8:22-23 describes the whole created order including the structure of work, the workplace, and the worker: "For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now."

The Fall has introduced alienation into work, the workplace, and workers. As a result of the Fall, humankind experiences gross alienation in the four primary creational relationships, with: God, self, others and the created order.

This alienation is intensified through work because work is fundamental to human identity (we were designed to work as God works). This deep connection with human nature gives work the power to increase alienation in each of the creational relationships.

Alienation is apparent when the work we do is unpleasant and unfulfilling. Or when a worker is separated from the end result of her work and any contribution the work may make to the common good. This is particularly true for many lower income workers who don't have the luxury of looking for work that fits them. In its fallen state, work is often experienced as futile toil. Ecclesiastes 2:17-18, 22-23 describes the alienation we often see in work:

So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind. I hated all my toil, in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me... What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

Creational truths about work conflict with the fallen reality often experienced in work. There is a tension between what work ought to be and what it often is. Giftedness and personal interest are luxuries when work opportunities are limited. The need to eat takes precedence over a desire to enjoy one's work.

Sin distorts the work that was intended to create shalom. Fallen work is now part of the curse: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life" (Genesis 3:18). This dual aspect of creational goodness and corruption means that a thoughtful and nuanced approach is required to understand our work.

Redemption: *Work As It Can Be*

Work exists in the “now and not yet.” “Now and not yet” describes the context of the *Redemption* chapter of the story. The price of redemption has been paid and the work of renewal is breaking in upon the world, but the work is not yet complete. This creates tension (and hope) in everything we experience because both sin and redemption are at work in the world.

Our work is also impacted by this fact. Because of the work of Christ and the abiding life of the Holy Spirit, people are able to enter into work as it was meant to be. At the same time, there will always be an element of alienation in work until we work in the new creation.

Part of the alienation of work comes from how rapidly the results deteriorate; even great accomplishments can be quickly undone. We long for the new creation, but our work will never produce a utopia on earth. We create *shalom* but sin continues to mar it.

No matter how much alienation we experience in our work, we still have the option of working to honor God. “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men” (Col. 3:23 NASB). Both Ephesians 6:7 and Colossians 3:23 are written admonitions to men and women who were enslaved in the Roman Empire. Slavery, possibly one of the greatest corruptions of the structure of work, was commonplace in the early church. These verses don’t condone the practice, but they do set a redemptive direction for work that allowed slaves to embrace their work as an act of worship.

No matter how much alienation we experience in our work, it is still a reflection of our image-bearing nature. In Genesis 1:26-28, God creates humanity in His image and immediately assigns him meaningful work. In Ephesians, we see the connection between God as workman and humanity as both His workmanship and His workmen: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which

God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

Work can and should contribute to the flourishing of the common good. Tom Nelson ties work faithfully done to the Great Commandment: “Your vocational work is your specific and invaluable contribution to God’s ongoing creation and an essential aspect of God’s Great Commandment to love your neighbor as yourself.”⁵ (See Matt. 22:37-39.) Through work, we have good roads, utilities, entertainment, food, housing, clothing, technology, and communication. Most of our needs and many of our desires are met through the institution of work. The various creational structures represented by our work contribute to the common good and help others flourish.

Consummation: *Work As It Will Be*

Read Revelation 21:1-11.

In the final chapter of our story, *Consummation*, all the plotlines in the biblical narrative are resolved through judgment and re-creation. Sin and death are forever done away with. The created order is healed. Humanity is restored to God and the new creation is established.

Many of the details in this chapter are obscure so we must make assertions with cautious humility. Consummation is the most hopeful and most obscure chapter of the gospel. We have been given many wonderful promises but few details of how those promises will work out. As a result, it is important to communicate principles from this chapter carefully, neither overstating nor understating the biblical message.

The Bible teaches that there will be both continuity and discontinuity between the old and new creation. A Christian discussion of work and vocation must include the value of work, specifically the eternal significance of what we do today. The idea that work has little

value surfaced over the last 150 years, along with the modern notion that the judgment fire will annihilate the world. The more traditional view holds that “the fire” is a purifying fire, which will remove corruption and sin but leave the original good creation intact.

This issue affects how we understand our everyday work in light of eternity. If the world will eventually be healed, then what we do today matters. But it is uncertain how much of our work will follow us into the new creation. For a better understanding, consider the biblical teaching on the degree of *continuity/discontinuity* between the old and new creation.

The Bible is unequivocal that there will be both recognizable continuity and extreme discontinuity between the old and new creation. The earth, like our resurrected bodies, will be renewed but recognizable (1 Cor. 15:42-44). The purifying fire of judgment will not annihilate creation, but judgment will definitely be cataclysmic (2 Pet. 3:10-13). On the other hand, creation is waiting to be set free from corruption; it’s waiting to be healed and renewed, not obliterated (Rom. 8:18-25).

The extent to which the renewed earth will resemble the old earth or how much will carry over from the old to the new has not been revealed in scripture. There is evidence that the structure of work and various vocations will carry over, as well as some artifacts (the wealth of the Nations mentioned in Isaiah 60) and ethnic and language differences (Rev. 7:9). Paul explains that the judgment fire will reveal each person’s work; some work will last while other work will burn up (1 Cor. 3: 13-15).

This uncertainty of continuity is true for both physical artifacts and immaterial structures of society. For example, we don’t know to what degree the economy in the new earth will reflect the best economic systems created on this side of judgment. The answers to these questions have been obscured from human understanding; we simply can’t say for certain to what degree our work will be transferred into the new creation.

We can have absolute confidence that our work

has great value and significance. Though the Consummation chapter of the story is not full of certain knowledge, it is full of certain hope. Jesus Christ is making all things new and He is doing this, in some mysterious way, through His church. We know that the redemptive effect of our work is eternal and of unimaginable grandeur. And work done on behalf of the common good will in some way follow us to the new creation. Revelation 14:13 says, “And I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Blessed indeed.’ Says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!’”

Conclusion

Humanity has been tasked with the care and stewardship of creation. This is done primarily through the structure of work; thus faithfulness in work is essential for the disciple of Christ. Our work matters now. And we know that, in some way, our work matters in the future.

There is great value and dignity in work that is done to the glory of God and for the common good. We are called to live the eternal life now, in all of life, and especially in our work. God is making all things new and as 1 Corinthians 3:9 says, “We are God’s fellow workers. This is our sure and certain hope.”

1. Tom Nelson, *Work Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 128.

2. Tom Nelson, *Work Matters*, 27.

3. Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998), 21 and 23.

4. Tom Nelson, *Work Matters*, 24.

5. Tom Nelson, *Work Matters*, 92.