

Kingdom Eyes: A Reflection Paper

Steve Pavlicek | Bethel Seminary St. Paul | 2016 Colloquy Final Paper

Introduction

Have you had a bad day recently? Even better, do you or have you had a job where the bad days pile atop of one another and now you loathe going to work each day? I have, and I sustained work in this way for around twenty years. "Fake it till you make it," was the adage and mantra for which I used to greet each day. In April, I lost my job and then, in a weird and paradigmatic way, the release from a job I disliked made me anxious and unnerved because now I lacked it. I was in a strange set of circumstances because I really did not want to return to the place where I had come from, but felt empty because I didn't have a job to help form "who I was" and now I was being thrust into a "job" as a homemaker that I didn't feel equipped to handle. It was not the fact that I am not working, because surely I am as a stay-at-home dad, but the fact that I was not engaged in a vocation and now somehow I was lacking "purpose" and it was the cause of my anxiety. It was not until I understood the fact that *all of my work*, properly understood, was contributing to the restoration of the kingdom did I feel that I had any impact or any holistic view of work. What I have now found is that the anxiety relented as soon as my view and perception of vocation widened to include kingdom purposes.

Higher Learning

Prior to joining the 100,000 Hours Colloquy, I had only understood the purpose of my work in regards to the connection of my faith in two aspects: ethics and evangelism. My unique contribution to work was the fact that I was committed to my values of working according the virtue of my heart, treating others more favorable than myself. As another aspect, it was telling

others how my faith journey led me to Jesus and how I am better because of it. I would hopefully help them see that Jesus can and will transform them. While those aspects are still quite important, they fail to grasp the entirety of all that God calls us to when connecting our work to His work. Perhaps the recalculation of what it means to work with Kingdom purpose has proven to be most beneficial, even to my approach in everyday life; that it in all things glory belongs to God. Gaining a vocabulary and a framework to view my work has been paradigmatic in how to participate and cultivate a community that fosters a Kingdom preview in the present. And lastly, and most importantly, I understand my current calling, as a stay at home father, as the vocation for which God has led me to apply my newfound principles.

Why Work?

Before asking who we are in our work, a more profound question might be, who are we without work? If one were to follow the development of the theology of work, it would likely rely heavily on the scholarship of Martin Luther and other Protestant reformers. In his book, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*,¹ Miroslav Volf recounts some of Luther's principles such as describing that, theologically, that choosing not work, provided you have the choice, was a form of idleness and of course, idle hands lead to the devil's work.² In his book, *Work Matters: Connecting Sunday Worship to Monday Work*, author Tom Nelson he quotes the Apostle Paul, "If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat (2 Thess. 3:10)" to make the point that "For anyone

¹Volf, Miroslav. *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

² Volf quoted Luther in the context of work as a form of contributing to human sanctity, a way to obstruct evil from tempting humans in their laziness. In order to keep theology and doctrine sound, Luther did not advocate that work would participate in our salvation, but keep us from falling into temptation. It was a participation in sanctity, not justification for salvation. *Ibid*.

to refuse to work is a fundamental violation of God's creation design for humankind."³ While advocating for Luther's position, I also found that it does not describe well enough why it is important. It fails because work concerns itself only with keeping ourselves holy in the present. I have found in my studies that work is so much more than what it is for *us* and it is so much more than what it appears in the present. Tom Nelson reasons that work is more important because we are God's image-bearers and we were designed to work. Nelson asserts that in order to form a robust theology of work, it must be seen in a dialectic positioned between God and neighbor, in a paraphrase of Luther he states, "it is not God who needs our good works, but it is our neighbor who needs our good works."⁴

Viewing our work as God's way for us to participate and to benefit our community in the present is certainly one aspect of understanding work's comprehensiveness, but it begs the question; for what end are we working towards? Amy Sherman in her book, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good*,⁵ asserts that our program for work in the present should represent a foretaste of the Kingdom to come. Sherman points out that if we are taking about an eschatological renewal at the end of the age, we then should also be congruently speaking of salvation. I had such a narrow view of work because I was missing the vocabulary,

³ Nelson, Tom. *Work Matters: Connecting Sunday Worship to Monday Work*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011. Kindle Edition. pp. 22-23.

⁴ *Ibid*, 92.

⁵ Sherman, Amy L. *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011. Kindle Edition.

but also because I had grossly underestimated all that salvation completes.⁶ I knew that because I was “saved” it meant I was not going to hell and I had been forgiven for my sins. I also knew that God was going to “make all things new,” but ignorantly I had failed to see them as connected events. Sherman agrees that those individual aspects are certainly included in salvation, but it is too-narrow an understanding, she writes, “The gospel of the kingdom focuses on that plus the far-reaching ravages of the cosmic curse. It proclaims not only the redemption of individual sinners but also the destruction of the devil's work and the restoring of all things.”⁷ She continues to confirm what was said earlier, that God does not need us to complete this work, however he chooses us to be the agent through which we impact the process, she writes, “that we-saved sinners-are part of God's plan to heal the world...[and] tells us not only what we're saved from, but also what we're saved for.”⁸

It's All About Me

In the beginning of this study, I indeed always thought of my work in how it affects me. I now think about the ideas for which all four authors assert in unison, that our current work, from a Christian worldview, has present, future, community and societal implications and expectations. It is has been a hard realization for me that work has far weightier consequences when considering something other than my personal fulfillment. While I was working in a less-

⁶ “The glorious truths celebrated in this too-narrow gospel do not, in themselves, capture the full, grand, amazing scope of Jesus' redemptive work. For Jesus came preaching not just this gospel of personal justification but the gospel of the kingdom. Jesus' work is not exclusively about our individual salvation, but about the cosmic redemption and renewal of all things. It is not just about our reconciliation to a holy God-though that is the beautiful center of it. It is also about our reconciliation with one another and with the creation itself. The atoning work of Jesus is bigger and better than that captured by the Bridge illustration.” *Ibid*, loc. 679.

⁷ *Ibid*, loc. 895-897.

⁸ *Ibid*, loc. 929.

than personally satisfying career, it was likely frustrating because I failed to understand all that was at stake. Timothy Keller in his book, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work*,⁹ captures the sentiment of the Reformed viewpoint that I find favorable, he states, "Work not only cares for creation, but also directs and structures it...[so that] the purpose of work is to create a culture that honors God and enables people to thrive."¹⁰ Of course learning to me is not always about learning something new; it also includes reapplying knowledge that you already knew, in a new way. In a moment of revelation, Keller's quote, and his whole book, reminded of a profound truth, that one of sin's most unruly consequences is the fact that we, as humans, now have a competing desire to serve self. For example, in my previous career, my satisfaction stood taller than my commitment to bring God glory in serving my neighbor to help bring out the very best in them. As a result of sin, it requires a radical reorientation of our work. It has very little to do with ourselves and when properly understood it has everything to do with "structuring" and "cultivating" culture and to "enable people to thrive" in the name of the Lord.

Who Are the People in Your Neighborhood?

As stated previously, while considering that without work we are lazy and prone to temptation in our idleness, we also fail to remember that our neighbor benefits from our work. Think about if C.S. Lewis decided not to write or Frederic Chopin to not play music and what a loss that would be for us to enjoy their work. With graver consequences, what would have happened if Mother Theresa or Martin Luther King decided that working for the causes of others was not worth the effort? Who or what would advance the causes in their place and would it

⁹ Keller, Timothy, and Katherine Leary. Alsdorf. *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work*. New York: Dutton, 2012. Kindle Edition.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, Pg. 21.

have been done with similar impact? That is not the example they left for us nor is it the example that Christ modeled for us.

In the midst of personal suffering and strife, these exemplary people did not work for themselves, instead they accomplished monumental paradigm shifts in our society by serving others. Jesus was the key figure in ushering in *the* monumental paradigm shift for our world. He did *not for himself* on earth, instead he came *as a servant* and reoriented our perception of what service is like in his Father's Kingdom. His teachings, which are many, such as the greatest in the kingdom are those who are the least (ie. Mark 9:35), who care for the least (ie. Matt. 25:45) and who empty themselves in obedience demonstrate, for us, the life for which we are called (ie. Phil. 2:3-8). Jesus did not ask us to live one way at work, another at church and yet another at home. In all things, the model is clear but the application is difficult.

The idea of serving probably does not elicit much traction when measuring success in corporate America. Unless you are serving the corporation such as maximizing profits and increase market share. Serving "goals" and "metrics" is the end for which is sought in corporate life rather than serving the needs of all people. One would sparsely believe that it is typical in American corporate strategy to include inviting a competitor into a conversation in order to see how they can collaboratively serve the "common good" of their community together. That is not the face of corporate life in most circumstances. We, as Christians in our vocations, are called to be "a counterculture for the common good"¹¹ which means to use our influence, resources and material goods in all transactions for the benefit of others. And where corporate America's love

¹¹ Amy Sherman quotes Timothy Keller. Sherman, Amy L. *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011. Kindle Edition. Loc. 1423.

for individual achievement and recognition overshadows love for community, the Church, the body of believers, are the change agents who are called to close the gap that instead leads to justice and equity at the expense of self-interest. Rebecca Blank's discussion in the book, *Is the Market Moral?: A Dialogue on Religion, Economics and Justice*,¹² puts our preferred perspective into plain words, she states, "The church's role should be to speak out against the forces that oppress and limit human potential and that stunt the expression of human love"¹³ One of our unique contributions in our vocations should be the use of our voice calling for justice and equity, for all neighbors, both in the present and as we anticipate the restored Kingdom.

Job Satisfaction Guaranteed

While I never struggled with the fact that work was a good thing, I had a very hard time coming to terms with a vocation that was unfulfilling to my personal needs, desires and passions. Keller's observation and use of Dorothy Sayers describes precisely the point I am trying to make, the loss of passion to serve others leads to apathy, and she calls it "acedia." Acedia, Keller describes, is not apathy about all things, just all things that do not pertain to our own self-interests.¹⁴

In jest, I always wonder if there are any featured soloists in the heavenly choir? But in all seriousness, it calls into question a profound truth. Before the fall, we were never meant to serve any needs of self because God provided for all of our needs. Even though in the beginning, it

¹² Blank, Rebecca M., and William McGurn. *Is the Market Moral?: A Dialogue on Religion, Economics, and Justice (Pew Forum Dialogues on Religion and Public Life)*. Brookings Institution Press, 2004. Kindle Edition. Loc. 375-376.

¹³ Ibid, loc. 741-742.

¹⁴ Keller, Timothy, and Katherine Leary. Alsdorf. *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work*. New York: Dutton, 2012. Kindle Edition. Pg. 229.

was a good place to be, it will pale in comparison to the restoration of all things. Our desires and needs in the restored earth will be inextricably linked to God's desires for us. There will be no worrying about how heavenly work increases our status or recognition in the Kingdom. The needs of our neighbors will be met alongside our own without any anxiety about how it will be accomplished, we will expect them to be fulfilled in fullness and unhindered in their delivery.

In my opinion, a new conception of heavenly work is likely to be the antithesis of "acedia" and certainly toil will not be present is because we will no longer be concerned with how the work affects *us*! It will all be to the Glory of God. I like to believe that we won't know what it means to be fatigued and won't grow tired as we do today because we won't have any sense of what it means to grow weary in the work of the LORD. God will enjoy the work of our hands because there are no longer any competing and self-serving aspects connected to work in heaven. We will set our hands to work in the most excellent ways for his glory and we will not be lorded over by any oppression and toil, rather with love and the anticipation of peaceful rest. Timothy Keller again captures the image beautifully he states:

"There is a God, there is a future healed world that he will bring about, and your work is showing it (in part) to others. Your work will be only partially successful, on your best days, in bringing that world about. But inevitably...[it] will come to fruition...You will work with satisfaction and joy. You will not be puffed up by success or devastated by setbacks."¹⁵

This is a glorious vision to refer to at the start of any day of work and would likely help to inspire hope for the future in the present. As I wake up and greet the tasks laid before me each day,

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 30.

knowing that it is my job to bring forth a taste of the Kingdom to come, to my children, I realize I play a crucial role in the restoration of all things.

Time to Get Going

What a crazy few months it has been for me (and my family)! To say that my expectations were overwhelmingly exceeded during this study is an understatement. My theology of work has seen seismic and maturing growth and my praxis in regards to work has changed for the better. I see my work in light of the restored Kingdom to come and that I am one of God's agents for which he has called to help bring that into reality. In spite of not needing my help, he chose to have me help! That is working with purpose. I never thought that I would have to become unemployed in order for God to teach and help me appreciate work on a deeper level than when I was working, but indeed he has. When Tom Nelson in the introduction of his book refers to the "fog being lifted,"¹⁶ indeed it has been removed from my eyes. I eagerly anticipate the Kingdom to come, but while I wait I will participate in the work for which God has called me. His Kingdom Come! His Will Be Done!!

¹⁶ Nelson, Tom. *Work Matters: Connecting Sunday Worship to Monday Work*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011. Kindle Edition. pp. 13-18

References

Blank, Rebecca M., and William McGurn. *Is the Market Moral?: A Dialogue on Religion, Economics, and Justice (Pew Forum Dialogues on Religion and Public Life)*. Brookings Institution Press, 2004.

Keller, Timothy, and Katherine Leary. Alsdorf. *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work*. New York: Dutton, 2012.

Nelson, Tom. *Work Matters: Connecting Sunday Worship to Monday Work*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011.

Sherman, Amy L. *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011.

Volf, Miroslav. *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.