

A Biblical Overview of Work

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The Bible describes God as the first one who engages in work (Genesis 1:1-2:3; 2:4-9). Beyond this initial work of creation, God is seen to be working in believers (John 14:12; Romans 8:28; Philippians 2:13) and towards a new creation (Isaiah 65:17; Revelation 21). According to Genesis 2:15, Adam's first job was to till the garden and to keep it – this was his work, and it was good. While the fall introduced sin into work, work itself is clearly an activity ordained by God and therefore has its value deeply integrated with the one doing the work. This paper will discuss the purpose of work, how Christians are to discover their vocation, the challenges that come with work, and the desired outcome of work. Furthermore, I will discuss the personal and ministry application of the principles raised in the paper. Discussions will primarily center on the four assigned books.

Purpose of Work and its Contributions to the Economy

Work seems to have largely lost its purpose today – that is except for one: money. It seems that, at a minimum, work meets the needs for survival, and at best, it generates extravagant wealth. Quoting John Wesley, Finn harshly cautions:

“Do you gain all you can, and save all you can? Then you must, in the nature of things, grow rich. Then if you have any desire to escape the damnation of hell, give all you can; otherwise I can have no more hope of your salvation than for that of Judas Iscariot.” (Finn 2013, 176)

The tragedy is that most people, Christians included, are primarily concerned about the money a job generates rather than the work itself. Having worked with countless young adults in New

York City, Timothy Keller rearticulates David Brooks' quote, "so many college students do not choose work that actually fits their abilities, talents, and capacities, but rather choose work that fits within their limited imagination of how they can boost their own self-image." (Keller 2012, 102) Quoting Dorothy Sayers, Keller observes the tragic result of losing sight of the true purpose of work: "Doctors practice medicine not primarily to relieve suffering, but to make a living – the cure of a patient is something that happens on the way. Lawyers accept briefs not because they have a passion for justice, but because the law is the profession which enables them to live." (Keller 2012, 65) Undeniably, a narrow view of work and its purpose leads many to conclude that work is meaningless and its sole purpose is for financial return.

Yet when we look at the biblical story, work is fundamentally rooted in God and the way we were created. While work has been made more painful due to the fall, work was central in Genesis 1 and 2. "Work is a gift from God. Work is something we were built for, something our loving Creator intends for our good." (Sherman 2011, 102) We might ask what "good" does work bring? Gene Edward Veith would respond that work serves our neighbor (Veith 2002, 39). Quoting John Raines and Donna Day-Lower, Daniel Finn might say that work aims to produce the good that is humanity "dwelling together meaningfully and well" (Finn 2013, 288). Timothy Keller might respond that by "bringing order out of chaos, creatively building a civilization out of the material of physical and human nature," work exercises the stewardship over the rest of creation in God's place as his vice-regents, and therefore produces good. (Keller 2012, 36) Therefore, the purpose of work is not merely physical, but is primarily a *theological* concern; we must discover work in view of God, his creation, and humanity's role in creation. Furthermore, if work is intended for good, then it necessarily follows that competency is a basic value and

should be strived by all. Amy Sherman notes that it is “the quiet, faithful, diligent pursuit of excellent in a vocation [that] can be absolutely vital.” (Sherman 2011, 168)

Finding Your Own Vocation

Knowing this, how are Christians to find their vocations? Full ministry has and continues to be held up as the highest standard for Christian vocation, but obviously not all Christians are called to it. As a result, we must investigate more broadly: how do Christians, in general, find their vocations? I find Sherman’s Venn diagram to be helpful. In it, there are three circles: God’s priorities, an individual’s passions and gifts, and the world’s needs. The intersection of these three circles is the “sweet spot.” (Sherman 2011, 108) For example, the one pursuing full-time ministry might be compelled by the Great Commission (God’s priorities and the world’s needs) and be given pastoral gifts (individual passions and gifts) along the way. Sherman writes of a young woman who finds her career in architecture as her God-given vocation: Jill wanted to be a better steward of buildings’ purposes, resources, and materials. (Sherman 2011, 109)

Since God created humanity as well as work, finding one’s vocation cannot be an isolated, individual decision. In this generation, we tend to ask the question ‘what job shall I choose?’, but the real question to consider is ‘what is God calling me to do?’ Veith notes that “our vocation is not something we choose for ourselves. It is something to which we are called.” (Veith 2002, 47) The most basic things to do in seeking our vocation is through prayer, studying God’s words, and nurturing the relationship with God. Beyond this, Veith would argue that our vocational calling primarily comes from outside. What he means by this is that every individual’s circumstances are different. A young man might be pursuing a college degree but run out of funds, forcing him to drop out and earn a living. This man will likely be taking an entirely

different path than if he were to stay in school, but “in the long run, from the aspect of eternity, these developments can be seen as part of God’s plan.” (Veith 2002, 55)

With that said, not every vocation is God’s calling. Since the purpose of work is to bring good into the world and to serve our neighbors, harmful jobs such as selling drugs cannot be a calling from God. A few nights ago, an older brother shared stories about the many different types of jobs he held in the past. One of these was to import Chinese liquor and sell them in California. His pastor tried to dissuade him, but this brother thought alcohol was supported biblically (as examples, Jesus turning water to wine and 1 Timothy 5:23). After obtaining an alcohol license and having great success for a year, the brother began to feel the Holy Spirit’s disapproval of the vocation. Stories of vehicular accidents due to driving under the influence of alcohol sharply reminded the brother that his vocation was a part of the problem. This brother deeply learned the principle found in Veith, that jobs which harm neighbors cannot be a calling from God. (Veith 2002, 65)

Challenges in Work

An important aspect in our discussion of work is the fall and its effects. Although work is a blessing, it is also a curse. While work can be satisfying since it is what we were made for, it can also be frustrating, pointless, and exhausting. Work is a virtue, but it is tainted by sin. (Veith 2002, 63) Sherman fleshes out some of the effects of sin on work, warning Christians:

“...[W]e sometimes act as though success at work equates to a successful life. It doesn’t. Somethings we make an idol of our careers. We need to repent.

Sometimes we make decisions about jobs as though the ultimate purpose of work were self-fulfillment. It’s not. Sometimes we judge people’s worth based on

their career position or status. We should seek God's forgiveness. Sometimes we allow work – which is just one dimension of our lives – to crowd out family or worship or relationships or play or Sabbath. We must resist." (Sherman 2011, 105)

Making work our idol ultimately comes from poor theology – namely that Christians are not to have any gods before Yahweh (Exodus 20:3) and that work must serve the neighbor, not self (Mark 12:31). When our pride and need for personal significance become core to work, work necessarily leads to competition, disunity, and strife – which makes unity and love between people impossible. (Keller 2012, 111) Work becomes a vehicle for self-glorification and eats away at an awareness of human dignity rooted in humanity's creation in the image of God. Finn notes that "an excess of competitiveness can erode human relationships and undermine a life of faith." (Finn 2013, 285)

If the dangers of work are primarily found in sin, then the antidote is for Christians to be found in God. Finding our life in God does not mean a constant mystical experience, but rather a constant, deep awareness of God's hand in the ordinary day-to-day activities, including work. We must be constant in prayer (Romans 12:12), filling our vocational calling and work activities with prayers and petitions to God. When we fail to do so, "we are in effect shutting Him out from our work." (Veith 2002, 152) The consequences of vocation without God lead to greater misery for all.

Outcome of Work and Economy

The outcome of work goes well beyond the individual and the family – it extends to the economy and ripples into the future. As the history of Christian views on economic life continues to impact economic life in our times, our day-to-day work will undoubtedly have effects into

future economic life. Finn has compiled some helpful Christian foundations for us to think about as we engage in work:

- Creation and redemption calls us to a more responsible life;
- Economic life (and therefore work) is religiously significant;
- As Christians, we need to set proper vocational goals. Instead of simply pursuing economic rewards, Christians must recognize that human development is integral and that our deeper relationship with God is the ultimate good in our lives;
- Values beyond ourselves must be maintained, including human dignity and the common good. (Finn 2013, 331-337)

Sherman's book is rooted in Proverbs 11:10a: "When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices." Quoting Timothy Keller, Sherman defines the righteous as "those who are willing to disadvantage themselves for the community while the wicked are those who put their own economic, social, and personal needs ahead of the needs of the community." (Sherman 2011, 16) Since the righteous are oriented towards God, they do not fall into idolizing their jobs and they view work in eschatological terms. (Sherman 2011, 48-49) Prior to reading Sherman's book, I had no clue how many righteous individuals were operating in the business world. One of these people, Perry, is the founder of Bigelow Homes, a homebuilding company outside Chicago which never "lies to each other, a home purchaser, a supplier or subcontractor, or government official. [They] place a high premium on personal integrity." (Sherman 2011, 60) In an industry that grows and shrinks rapidly, Perry aims for careful and sustainable growth so that in the difficult times, his company is not forced to lay off its workforce. Perry's company is doing well and it has proven to the industry that it is possible to do well by doing good. (Sherman 2011,

62) This is just one of the many real-world examples of individuals and companies that have found economic success according to biblical principles.

Personal Reflection and Ministry Application

As a seminary student, I have the wonderful benefit of listening to my professors' lectures and attending reading groups such as this. They repeatedly reinforce the biblical principles (such as inherent human dignity, religious significance of work, care for and restoration of the whole of creation) which underlie the doctrine of vocation. Even so, the grind of daily life wears down my patience and tempts me to treat other people as objects rather than God's beloved, made in his own image. Therefore, the ultimate reminder and challenge for me as a future full-time minister is to stay connected with God through prayer, reflection, and meditation so that his love of mankind might pour into me and overflow into ministry. This is the only reliable source of hope for future ministry success.

As one called to minister to the Chinese people, I have come to recognize many significant challenges they face. Unlike those (atheists included) from the Western world, who are familiar with concepts such as human dignity, the Chinese culture historically does not teach these values. As such, it takes more time for the Chinese to hear, to process, and to live out core tenets related to work. The doctrine of work discussed in these four books will take time to understand and live out.

From the surface, the most significant issue is the Chinese people's reliance on wealth. I observe two groups of Chinese people who face this problem but in different ways. The first can be broadly categorized as the first wave of international students who went abroad to study during the mid-1980s and throughout the 1990s. These students likely came from poor families

but were intellectually bright (top 1% among their peers) and experienced a drastic change in wealth as they succeeded academically and in their careers. For those who became Christians, their reliance on wealth can be understood: earning and saving has made life better and provided new opportunities to their children. The challenge is to recognize that God is the one who is working in the background, giving them opportunities to study abroad, to succeed academically, and to have good careers.

The second group consists of the new wave of international students who went abroad after China's own economic boom. Unlike the first group, these students come from wealthy families and are not compelled to thrive academically compared to their predecessors. Like the first group, they also struggle with reliance on wealth. Their understanding of work must also be examined as many of them tend to fall back onto their family wealth and therefore find no purpose for work under the assumption that work primarily produces wealth. For many of them, work is meaningless and entirely unnecessary.

Conclusion

As I have tried to show, work – an activity which almost every individual will spend a significant amount of their life engaged in – must be grounded in correct theology in order for it to be the blessing that God intended it to be. As a Chinese-American Christian, I am particularly interested in the future of Sino-Theology. This reading group experience has opened my eyes up to some of the theological concerns behind the Chinese people's understanding of work and its purpose.

References

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