

Developing a Theology of Work:
Work through the Lens of Creation, The Fall, Redemption and The Kingdom

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INTRODUCTION

Americans spend more time per week working than any other activity.¹ Yet for many Christians, the church has not helped them integrate their faith and work. David Miller calls this the “Sunday-Monday gap.”² Pastors need to develop and articulate a theology of work to help the laity live a more integrated life. Miroslav Volf notes how central work is to the human experience. He writes,

The significance of human work ... goes far beyond providing human beings with the necessary means of sustenance. We not only live from what we do, but to a large extent, we also are what we do. Although there is an important sense in which this statement is not true, one can hardly deny that we cannot understand ourselves anthropologically (i.e. who we are as human beings) and sociologically (how our societies are structured and how they function) without taking into account the ways in which we go about doing our daily work.³

In 1981, Pope John Paul II wrote a theological treatise on work called, the *Laborem Excernes*, in which he states, “the key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question is to be found in the phenomenon that we call work.”⁴ The Pope’s high view of work is significant because it lays the foundation for what it means to be human. Darrel Cosden says, “since [work] is grounded in human existence, the activity we call work becomes central to the life and mission of the Church.”⁵ Just as pastors and ministry leaders develop and articulate theologies of sin,

1. “Charts from the American Time Use Survey,” *United States Bureau of Labor Statistics*, accessed April 13, 2017, <https://www.bls.gov/tus/charts/>.

2. David Miller, *God at Work: The History and Promise of the Faith and Work Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 9.

3. Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1991), 26.

4. John Paul II, “Laborem Exercens,” September 14, 1981, accessed April 13, 2017, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html.

5. Darrell Cosden, *A Theology of Work: Work and the New Creation* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 3.

salvation, or eschatology, developing a theology of work is equally as important to guide laity in their discipleship.

A theology of work is a relatively new development. Most attempts to develop a theology of work focus on one particular branch of theology.⁶ This neglects the full biblical presentation of work. Darrell Cosden's definition of a theology of work is helpful. He writes,

A theology of work then, is not merely a discussion of how one should carry out work, or a discussion of how to resolve specific difficulties and problems faced in the working world. This would essentially be an ethics of work. Nor is a theology of work satisfied with only making theological comments about work as they arise within a discussion of some other broader point of doctrine. This would constitute a theological reflection on work. A theology of work is a much broader concept. It is a recent theological methodology developed for comprehensively exploring the phenomenon of work itself as a part of created reality.⁷

It is the intent of this paper to present a comprehensive theology of work by not only defining what work is, but also how work is presented throughout the *created reality* of Scripture. Miroslav Volf notes that to develop a theology of work, one must “consciously place biblical statements about work in the context of a reading of the Bible as a whole and to apply both these individual statements and the overarching reading of the Bible to the contemporary world of work.”⁸ This paper will present a theology of work through four major theological events in Scripture: Creation, The Fall of Humanity, The Redemption of the World, and The In-breaking of God's Kingdom.

6. R. Paul Stevens, *Work Matters: Lessons from Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 2. Paul Stevens lists nine different systematic theologies and how each presents a unique theology of work. Stevens' list includes: Trinitarian Theology, Creation Theology, Image of God Theology, Curse Theology, New Creation Theology, Vocation Theology, Spirit Theology, Kingdom Theology, Heaven and End Times Theology.

7. Cosden, *A Theology of Work*, 5.

8. Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 78.

CREATION

In the opening verse of Genesis, God is at work. “In the beginning, *God created* the heavens and the earth.”⁹ Work is not a by-product of creation.¹⁰ Nor is it something forced upon humanity. Work, rather, is part of God’s nature. Paul Stevens notes that the image of God as a worker is found throughout Scripture, especially in the Old Testament:

The Old Testament is rich in metaphors to describe God as worker (Gen. 1-2, Job 10:3-12; Psa. 139:13-16), as builder/architect (Prov. 8:27-31), teacher (Mt. 7:28-9), composer and performer (Deut. 31:19), metalwork (Is. 1:24-6), garment maker and dresser (Job 29:14), potter (Is. 31:9), farmer (Hos. 10:11), shepherd (Ps. 23:1-14), tentmaker and camper (Job 9:8). These metaphors, while limited, offer a correspondence of meanings between the work of God and the work of humankind. They suggest that our work is a point of real connection with God and therefore a source of meaning and spirituality.¹¹

The writers of Scripture are emphatic that God is active in the world, rejecting the notion of God sitting idly by as human history unfolds.

This view of God contrasts many ancient religions. The Babylonian view of creation notes that the world was created as the aftermath of a cosmic battle between two gods.¹² Creation was accidental and not purposeful. The Hebrew texts contrasts the Greco-Roman religious systems one finds later in Scripture. Theologian David Jenson notes how radical a working God was in ancient times. “God does not sit enthroned in heaven removed from work, willing things into existence by divine fiat. Unlike the gods of the Greco-Roman mythologies, who absolve themselves of work — dining on nectar and ambrosia in heavenly rest and contemplation — the

9. Gen. 1:1 (NRSV).

10. Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 21.

11. R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 113.

12. Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavor* (New York: Dutton Publishing, 2012), 34.

biblical God works.”¹³ The Hebrew understanding of God’s work and activity in the world stems from his love of and care for his good creation.¹⁴

Of all of God’s work, however, humankind is the “crown of creation.”¹⁵ God created humanity in his own image.¹⁶ To be an image-bearer is to be infused with the nature and characteristics of God—thus God as a worker means humans are to be workers. Genesis 1:26-28 notes that part of the human experience is to fulfill God’s commandment to *have dominion* over all of creation and to *subdue it*.¹⁷ Humanity is also invited to co-create with God as they are instructed to increase their fruit and multiply. Scholars call this command, *The Cultural Mandate*.¹⁸

Dr. Art Lindsley notes that this is a cultural mandate “because it shows the place of human beings in creation and calls us to work with the things God has made—ruling over, ordering, classifying, reshaping, developing, and unfolding the potential we have been given.”¹⁹ Nancy Pearcey describes the relationship between the cultural mandate and work, stating,

13. David H. Jensen, *Responsive Labor: A Theology of Work* (Louisville: Westminster John Know Press, 2006), 22.

14. Gene Edward Veith Jr., *God at Work* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 26.

15. Tom Nelson, *Work Matters: Connecting Sunday Worship to Monday Work* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 20.

16. Gen. 1:26 (NRSV).

17. Terence Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2010), 152. Fretheim notes that creation has always been wild and in need of taming. Some think that taming, subduing, and having dominion over creation is a result of the Fall. Fretheim believes that while creation *was good* it was never tranquil or tame. This says something remarkable about God. It means that not only was humanity made to work, God created humanity for a specific type of work—taming and subduing God’s good creation.

18. Hugh Whelchel, *How Then Should We Work? Rediscovering the Biblical Doctrine of Work* (Bloomington, Indiana: West Bow Press, 2012), 14.

19. Art Lindsley, “The Call To Creativity,” *Institute For Faith, Work & Economics*, accessed April 19, 2017, <https://tifwe.org/resource/the-call-to-creativity/>.

The lesson of the Cultural Mandate is that our sense of fulfillment depends on engaging in creative, constructive work. The ideal human existence is not eternal leisure or an endless vacation . . . Our calling is not just to “go to heaven” but also to cultivate the earth, not just to “save souls” but also to serve God through our work. For God himself is engaged not only in the work of salvation but also in the work of preserving and developing his creation. When we obey the Cultural Mandate, we participate in the work of God himself.²⁰

Genesis reveals that work has always been a part of the human experience. God placed Adam in the garden “to till it and keep it.”²¹ Stevens notes,

The two words used by God in his command for Adam to work are *abad* (work) and *shamar* (take care). Interestingly, these words are also used to mean “service to God” and “keeping of his commandments,” respectively. This implies that we should make no distinction between sacred and secular work. In God’s design there is no dualism — sacred and secular.²²

Work, then, is not only a continuation of creation, it is also a means by which humanity has been called to serve and worship God.

Some scholars believe that work only came into being as a result of the Fall, adding to a sense of disillusionment with work.²³ This does not honor the Creation Story. Ben Witherington notes, “It is perfectly clear that God’s good plan always included human beings working, or, more specifically, living in the constant cycle of work and rest.”²⁴ Genesis seeks to make clear that humanity’s work is not a result of sin, but rather a continuation of God’s providence in the world.

20. Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity From Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 47.

21. Gen. 2:15 (NRSV).

22. Stevens, *Work Matters*, 11-12.

23. Ben Witherington, *Work: A Kingdom Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 2.

24. *Ibid.*, 3.

While work is good and a part of the natural order of life, there are limitations to humanity's work. Just as God rested on the seventh day, so too is humanity commanded to observe a day of rest.²⁵ Rest becomes a central part of work throughout Scripture. Timothy Keller says, "As beings made in his image, then we can assume that rest, and the things you do as you rest, are good and life-giving in and of themselves."²⁶ Jeff Van Duzer also notes that as image-bearers, while humanity can co-create with God, they are limited in their creation capacities and were never created to be gods themselves.²⁷ Work should be celebrated, honored, and respected within certain boundaries.

THE FALL

Genesis 3 is a central text in developing a theology of work. The Fall of humanity resulted in the degradation of four relationships experienced by humanity—a relationship with God, relationship to themselves, relationship with others, and relationship to all of creation.²⁸ While each of these degradations have had an impact on humanity's experience in the world, "alienation from God ... inevitably causes alienation in all areas of life."²⁹ As God's image-bearers, alienation affects the intended purpose of work. As seen in the creation narrative, work was a means of participation in the continuation of creation. The Fall, however, tainted work as

25. Ex. 20:8-11.

26. Keller, *Every Good Endeavor* 40.

27. Jeff Van Duzer, *Why Business Matters to God (And What Still Needs to Be Fixed)* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 33-34.

28. "The Bible and Work - Theology of Work," accessed April 19, 2017, <https://www.theologyofwork.org/resources/work-in-the-bible>.

29. Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 167.

laborious and sometimes destructive. As a result of Adam and Eve's rebellion, God responded with an indictment about the future nature of work. In Genesis 3:17-19, God says,

Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it", cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.³⁰

In this text, the language of work became associated with the language of curse.³¹ What was once celebrated as good, became the source of "thorns and thistles." Work was meant to be a fulfillment of living out God's image and continual purposes in the world, but because of the Fall it became a yoke humanity was cursed to bear.

Throughout the progression of Scripture, work is often represented as an idol in place of the worship of God.³² The idolatry of work has led to a seemingly insatiable appetite for wealth and the accumulation of goods, Sabbath was replaced with workaholism, and personal identity became associated with one's work and not God.³³ The degradation of work can also be witnessed in the global exploitation of human workers rather than as a means of being in relationship with others.³⁴ Nelson notes that because work became separated from God's intentions for humanity. A divide between what is often called *secular work* was separated from *sacred work*.³⁵ This false dualism has led to many "followers of Jesus [living] their entire lives in

30. NRSV.

31. Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 167.

32. Ibid.

33. Nelson, *Work Matters*, 42-45.

34. Ibid., 43.

35. Ibid., 44-46

the workplace under the soul-suffocating distortion that their work is not as important and God honoring as the work of a pastor or missionary.”³⁶

At creation, work had purpose and meaning, but post-Fall some biblical writers present it as an endless and a pointless task.³⁷ The struggle to find purpose in work is seen vividly in the book of Ecclesiastes. The writer laments the nature of work, saying,

So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a chasing after wind. I hated all my toil in which I had toiled under the sun ... So I turned and gave my heart up to despair concerning all the toil of my labours under the sun ... What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.³⁸

The paradox of work after the Fall is that the Bible presents work as “both a noble expression of human creation in the image of God and a painful testimony to human estrangement from God.”³⁹ The biblical writers seem to say work it is not all it should be, nor what it was created to be.⁴⁰ Work needed redemption.

THE REDEMPTION OF THE WORLD

From Genesis to the Gospels, it is easy to see the result of sin and the broken state of God’s good creation. During this time, “God’s grace continues even in the face of his people’s chronic sin and rebellion ... but [God] promises never to abandon his commitment to full

36. Nelson, *Work Matters*, 45.

37. Keller, *Every Good Endeavor*, 98.

38. Eccl. 2:17-23 (NRSV).

39. Keller, *Every Good Endeavor*, 168.

40. Nelson, *Work Matters*, 37.

restoration.”⁴¹ Jesus said, “My Father is still working, and I also am working.”⁴² The work of God through Jesus brought salvation to a broken world. Dr. Amy Sherman writes:

[Jesus’s] salvation is full-orbed, dealing with every dimension of the Fall. Through his life, death and resurrection, he overcomes *all* the effects of the Fall. He pays the price for our sins and all sin, accepting God’s punishment on the cross. His resurrection brings the renewed possibility of shalom between humans and God, within humans themselves, among humans, and between humans and the created order.⁴³

In Jesus, all curses on humanity are reversed. Vivian Ligo believes that because of redemption, participation in work becomes one of the unique ways in which humans live into what it means to be fully human again.⁴⁴

Certainly, Jesus’s death and resurrection has implications for individuals. However, the Apostle Paul asserts that the cross and empty grave have cosmic implications as well. In Jesus, God reconciled the entire world to himself.⁴⁵ In Jesus’s preaching, teaching, and in his death and resurrection, he offered a gospel that wasn’t just for personal salvation, but one that ushered in a new kingdom—a kingdom set to renew all things.⁴⁶ In this light, conversion for an individual means not only eternal salvation, but a participation in solidarity with the purposes of God’s kingdom.

41. Amy L. Sherman, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 78. *Italic original.*

42. John 5:17 (NRSV).

43. Sherman, *Kingdom Calling*, 78. *Italics original.*

44. Vivian Ligo, “Configuring a Christian Spirituality of Work,” *Theology Today* 67, no. 4 (January 2011), 444.

45. 2 Cor. 2:19.

46. Sherman, *Kingdom Calling*, 67.

The redemption of all things has profound implications on work itself. Not only does this affect humanity's righteous standing before God, it also redeems the nature of their work. Sherman writes extensively on how the righteous understand and experience work. She believes that the work of a Christian is for God's glory, not self-fulfillment.⁴⁷ It rejects workaholism and seeks balance in Sabbath keeping.⁴⁸ It sets boundaries on institutional loyalty, especially when institutional work contradicts gospel-living.⁴⁹ A Christian's understanding of work embraces a dependence on the Spirit, and, no matter the work, recognizes that God is the primary audience.⁵⁰ Work, once again, becomes a form of worship and an act of service to God.⁵¹ Work points toward justice in the world, and seeks to reestablish shalom and order.⁵²

In 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul speaks about the resurrection of the body. Christ not only redeems the soul of a person, but He redeems the whole person—mind, body, and spirit. The resurrection asserts that what is physical and a part of the human experience matters to God. Scholar N.T. Wright says,

The point of the resurrection... is that *the present bodily life is not valueless just because it will die*. God will raise it to new life. What you do with your body in the present matters because God has a great future in store for it ... What you do in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself—*will last into God's future*. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether ... They are part of what we may call *building God's kingdom*.⁵³

47. Sherman, *Kingdom Calling*, 47.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*, 48-49.

50. *Ibid.*, 49-50.

51. *Ibid.*, 50.

52. *Ibid.*, 55-56.

53. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 193. Italics original.

Because of the cross and the resurrection, one's work has lasting significance and importance in the kingdom.

THE IN-BREAKING OF THE KINGDOM

Early in Jesus's public ministry, he preached that the kingdom of God was at hand.⁵⁴ Understood as the reign of God and "how God's saving work in the world may be understood and experienced," the kingdom has practical implications for how people are to experience their work.⁵⁵ While speaking to those awaiting the full consummation of God's kingdom, the Apostle Paul wrote that Christians are to "work with their hands."⁵⁶ He also said, "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.... Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters."⁵⁷

Work that awaits the full restoration of the world, no matter how mundane, has profound purpose in the kingdom. This is witnessed in the redemptive nature of work itself. Stevens states, "Since the scope of redemption in Christ is the same as the scope of creation, therefore work is done for God's realm ... [bringing about] *shalom*."⁵⁸ He also notes that "some people are doing the work of God's realm without knowing God and without knowing that they are doing God's work."⁵⁹

54. Matt. 3:2; Mark 1:5.

55. Howard Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom: Gospel, Culture and Mission in Biblical and Historical Perspective* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 11.

56. 1 Thess. 4:11 (NRSV).

57. Col. 3:17, 23-24 (NRSV).

58. Stevens, *Work Matters*, 137.

59. *Ibid.*

Not only does work reveal God's kingdom, it is a part of how God restores all things. Romans 8:19-23 speaks of creation groaning and awaiting the revealing of God's children. The focus is not just on the fallen state of the world, but rather on Christ's redemptive work through humanity. Cosden notes,

It is we who are "in Christ" and thus also now the new humanity (the image of God completed), who take on the role, as we justly should, of bringing the non-human creation to its glorification, or "glorious destiny." ... Since nature co-inheres "in us," our salvation and glorification become creations' own salvation and glory. That this salvation of the natural world includes our work follows logically. Work, which has further shaped nature, is now just as much a part of nature as what God made originally.... We must conclude from this biblical material that our work experiences salvation along with us.⁶⁰

Human work has a powerful role in the world. There truly is no menial task, but rather human work, albeit slowly and purposefully, is a part of a much grander narrative of the redemption of the world.

The Apostle Paul states that the work of humanity is a co-operating with God.⁶¹ Volf sees this through two theological lenses—one that looks backward toward the original intent of work, while the other looks forward to God's future purpose for work. He writes, "The one rests on the doctrine of creation and sees work as cooperation with God in *creation continua*, the others rest on the doctrine of the last things and sees work as cooperation with God in the anticipation of God's eschatological *transformation mundi*."⁶² It is important to note, as Volf does, that humanity is limited in their participation, as ultimately it is God who brings the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2) to earth.⁶³ It does not mean, however, that humanity is idle in their activity.

60. Darrell Cosden, *The Heavenly Good of Earthly Work* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 71.

61. 1 Cor. 3:9.

62. Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 98. Italics original.

63. *Ibid.*, 99-100.

Christians are not just to be “a sign and foretaste of ultimate salvation: they are to be part of the means by which God makes this happen in both the present and the future.”⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

From Genesis to Revelation, work matters to God. God created work and created humanity to participate in it. In Christ’s death and resurrection, God redeemed not only the individual, but what the individual does. While humanity’s work has its limitations, a strong theology of work can help the laity discover that what they do is important in revealing the kingdom of God. The Apostle Paul wrote, “let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you.”⁶⁵ Understanding that one’s work is not just for personal wealth or gain, but rather a part of God’s kingdom, rejects Ecclesiastes’ premise that “all is vanity.”⁶⁶ Work viewed through the lens of Scripture asserts that it is not mundane or ordinary. It is a central part of God’s good world.

64. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 200.

65. 1 Cor. 7:17 (NRSV).

66. Eccl. 1:2 (NRSV).

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PRACTICAL APPLICATION ADDENDUM

Part of the role of the pastor is to provide practical applications for laity to connect what they hear on Sunday morning from the pulpit to their everyday lives. Unfortunately, many pastors fail to help the laity connect their faith with their work. Paul Stevens speaks of where many laity find themselves in the church today. He says,

The Christian faith, which arose as an extraordinary experience of the in-breaking of God's reign in history through Jesus Christ, was meant to be lived out in the midst of the world. Yet through the merging of many different intellectual and cultural currents, the call to being God's life and justice to this world became relegated to the religious sphere of life and the rituals of the church. The extraordinary dualism between the spiritual and the secular that has so divided the Christian life for many people has had a devastating impact on those who try to live "in Christ" in every dimension of life.⁶⁷

I witness the struggle for laity to connect their faith and work at the church I serve as senior pastor. Scioto Ridge United Methodist is teeming with highly educated, successful, driven professionals. Some of them view their work as a necessary evil, while others view it as the means to a certain suburban lifestyle. Work, for many, has little connection with their faith. It is my conviction that as their pastor, I am responsible to teach the Scripture and to help them discover what the Bible says about the importance of their work.

The way out of the problem of a lack of integration of faith and work is to reengage the Bible as the source to discover the purpose of life. This paper has sought to bridge the gap between what is labeled sacred work and secular work by presenting all work through the lens of Scripture. Scripture makes clear that one's work is a part of God's tool for revealing the kingdom in the world. Pastors must help lay people bridge this divide by becoming practical theologians. Developing a robust theology of work will help pastors craft sermons and teachings that honor the work of the laity.

67. Stevens, *Work Matters*, vii.

This paper has only scratched the surface of the larger conversation happening within theological spheres about the integration of faith and work. It is a fast-growing field in theology. This paper can serve as a starting point for pastors to begin to engage with the theology of work. The Bibliography alone highlights some of the brightest minds in this field and those who are engaging this topic in impactful ways. Pastors must take seriously the ways in which Scripture engages the topic of work. If pastors begin to look at Scripture through this lens, they will see that they have much to teach and offer their people.