

# Work and the Christian

## 1 The value of work at the creation

In contrast to much contemporary discourse, the Bible strongly values work as a key component of life; indeed it is seen as essential to being self-fulfilled as a human being and having been created in God's image (Stott 1999). The Bible after all begins in Genesis 1 with God's work of creation, the outcome of which is in all cases that "it was good". In the Garden of Eden we are told in Genesis 1:28 that man is to "fill the earth and subdue it", while in 2:15 "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it."

As discussed in Atkinson et al (1995), the creation mandate refers not only to farming but "applies to all everything that can be cultivated and kept....all aspects of human civilisation, including the sciences, social affairs, arts, literature and education"<sup>1</sup>. There is no basis for considering intellectual work higher – or lower - than manual. Stott (1999) suggests that Genesis mandates work not only as a form of self-fulfilment but also as service to others, as for example Adam's caring for nature also provided food for Eve. Work is not to be all-consuming however. Like God we are to work and also to rest, in line with God's work and rest in the days of creation "Six days to do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest and the slave born in your household and the alien as well may be refreshed." (Exodus 23:12).

## 2 Work and the fall

We would argue that work only became burdensome due to the fall, and its alienation of man from God, from one another and from nature. Hence in Genesis 3:17 the Lord states "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.". An echo of this is the amazingly contemporary passage in Ecclesiastes 2:22-23 "What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving with which he labours under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest," which could certainly apply to overstressed City bankers. In Genesis 4:23, Lamech exults in killing a man with weapons made from human labour. The perversion of work is seen in the construction of the tower of Babel, (Genesis 11:1-9) "a human community destroying itself as it tries to go beyond human limitation by putting its own achievements in competition with God"<sup>2</sup>. These passages warn us against the evil that work may entail when man is separated from God, which is consistent with a desire to cease it at retirement.

However, despite the fall, there are many positive views of work in the Old Testament. Explicit favourable reference is made to varied types of work such as construction, raising livestock, musicianship and metalwork in Genesis 4:17-22. Work is seen as a normal feature of life, see Psalm 104:23 "Then man goes out to his work, to his labour until evening." Hard work is praised and laziness criticised as in Proverbs 6:6 "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!" Even in Ecclesiastes there is 2:24 celebrating self fulfilment from work that "A man can do

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<sup>1</sup> Atkinson et al (1995), p899 "Work"

<sup>2</sup> Atkinson et al (ibid)

nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God.”

Again, service and sharing in work is stressed in Deuteronomy 24:20 “When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow.” Later, when the Messiah comes to redeem mankind, work is expected to continue as in Isaiah 65:21 “They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit”, also Micah 4:3 “They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks” (not throw them away!). Note the echo of the creation mandate, that work should again be a joy for all of life as God intended.

### **3 The New Testament – work and service**

Developing from the concepts cited above, Jesus, and the rest of the New Testament, emphasises a broader concept of service, of which paid work is a subcategory. In effect, Jesus’ redemption includes lifting the curse that the fall put on work. See Matthew 20:26-28 “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Such service arises from faith in Jesus and is the ultimate good employment, see John 6:25-39 “Do not work for food that spoils but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval”.....“The work of God is this, to believe in the one he has sent”.

Jesus also emphasises the limits of work, that it is not a means to salvation, when he praises the birds and lilies that do not sow, reap or spin (Matthew 6:26-28). Mary the contemplative is praised over Martha the busy in Luke 10:40. We note that the early church wrongly considered the message of such passages to give a higher value to pastoral and contemplative occupations, but Luther corrected this, seeing everyday work as also a “calling”. Supporting this, Calvin noted that in the parable of the talents, Jesus speaks positively of those working hard with varied talents God has given them (Matthew 25:16-30). Paul uses the same terms for his manual work in 9:16 “Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living?”, and his apostolic work in 15:10 “No, I worked harder than all of them--yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.” Addressing the relationship of work to service, Barth suggests that we are called to be servants of God and our fellow human beings; our work in this light is then sustaining and directing and caring for the world and about the welfare of creation (Atkinson 1994).

Further insight can be gained from Paul who is proud of working for a living as shown in 1 Corinthians 4:12 “We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it.” He emphasises that by working well we are honouring God, and this should be our objective, not pleasing employers (Col 3:23) “(Slaves), whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord and not for men.” and earning favour for the Christian faith (1 Thess 4:11) “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.” Meanwhile idleness is seen, as in Proverbs, as unacceptable (2 Thess. 3:6-15) “In the name of the

Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle." 1 Timothy 5:13 warns of idleness and its link to gossip and becoming a busybody.

Paul also emphasises the gifts that God gives us and which need to be used and not neglected, and not restricted to church life either (Romans 12:6-8) "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully." Again, in 1 Peter 4:10 "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms."

#### **4 Being a Christian at work**

I maintain that this overview of work as service and ordained by God gives us a firm basis for being a Christian at work, where in effect we follow Jesus' mandates, first in Matthew 5:16 ""You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." At the same time we have his injunction to share his message, from Matthew 28:19 "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

What is my experience?

I've been a Christian since 1997, was at an International Church in Germany at the time. Testimony on website.

Setting up prayer group in ECB – some opposition from "French fringe" but also a witness. You try to do a book but the Bible passages always speak most clearly.

Some revival of Christian Union at Bank of England, dare to send an email to the whole staff. Short series, e.g. Jonah, Isaiah's servant songs.

Difficulty at university, where established chaplaincy, but rather moribund – to set up something new or try to work with the chaplain? (In the end, he is leaving.)

Getting your views known – not being a hidden Christian - leads other to questions and dialogue. What is there to share – I find people respond to charismatic aspects of church life more than one would expect.

I've found wearing a cross leads to discussion e.g. at dinners.

Experience of finding Christians where you least expect them among colleagues.

On long distance travel – some talks. But I need more courage to witness.

Moral dilemmas – I've been very lucky, work on monetary policy, financial stability, pension policy – contrast with Christian friends in law and the City.

The need to support other such Christians in work situations. House groups but also men's breakfasts (weekly in our church).