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A Biblical Ethic of Work

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The typical American adult spends approximately 60 percent of his time in work or work-related activities.¹ Although issues relating to work dominate the lives of most adults, it is sad that the church has paid little attention to training Christians in biblical theology and ethic of work. Doug Sherman reports that the organization called Career Impact Ministries polled 2,000 professing Christians who regularly attend a church. Those polled were asked, "Have you ever in your life heard a sermon, read a book, listened to a tape, or been to a seminar that applied biblical principles to everyday work issues?" Sadly, more than 90 percent of those polled answered no.²

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In modern American evangelicalism there indeed seems to be a dearth of teaching on this common, yet critical, issue of relating the Word of God to the typical workaday world. Thankfully, recent books such as Colson and Eckerd's *Why America Doesn't Work* and Sherman and Hendricks' *Your Work Matters to God* are bringing the problem to the attention of many evangelical pastors and teachers. Those who have the responsibility of teaching God's people need to address the questions that many Christians are asking regarding the relationship of their faith to their typical Monday-through-Friday work. Pastor Bill Hybels echoes the questions many Christians are asking when he writes, "How should the Christian view his or her work? How should he behave there? Should he enjoy his profession or merely endure it? Should the sincere follower of Christ leave the marketplace and enter 'full-time Christian work' as a sign of his maturity and deep-level commitment?"³

Many Christians are asking, "Is there a connection between Sunday and Monday?" The Reformers would have answered this question, "Yes!" They differed from Rome by doing away with the secular/religious dichotomy. In teaching that every believer is a full-time priest in the service of

God, the Reformers emphasized that “the layman has a calling in Christ no less than the minister, and the daily labor of both, performed as consecrated sacrifice, is equally accepted as spiritual service.”⁴ In our day, however, by (largely) neglecting our Reformation and Puritan heritage on this issue,⁵ the evangelical church has implied by default that the answer is “No, there is little connection between Sunday and Monday.” Some have sought to “sanctify” the workweek by exhorting Christians to give verbal testimony in their places of work. While testifying at work of Jesus Christ may be a very worthwhile endeavor, it is not what “sanctifies” the Christian’s workweek. The Bible gives a much fuller meaning to work than is typically understood by modern evangelicals.

This paper is a small attempt to show more clearly the connection between Sunday and Monday. This shall be done by a brief persual of the biblical theology of work, and, arising from that theology, a presentation of some ethical issues facing the Christian workman.

A Biblical Theology of Work

A Christian work ethic needs a solid foundation. In this relativistic society, the Christian must first discern “a clear theology of work” from the teaching of the Bible.⁶ It is from this “vertical” aspect of work that “horizontal” issues must be based. What follows is a brief presentation of the biblical teaching on work in three “eras.” After establishing this biblical view of work itself, the following chapter will deal with key issues of how to “do” work in a God-centered way.

Work in the Paradise Yet to Be. Many Christians falsely assume that they will spend eternity in spirit form in “heaven.” The only activity that is envisioned by many believers is that of participating in an eternal worship service. While not disparaging the intermediate state of disembodied saints, it is *not* the final state. Scripture clearly speaks of “a

new heaven and a new earth.” Rather than being ethereal, this final state seems to be very physical, though without sin and the curse it brought (Rev. 21:1-4; 22:1-5).

What will the resurrected saints be doing in this “renewed” heaven and earth? Revelation 22:3 and 5 give us some clues. In verse three it is stated that God’s servants will “serve” Him. Verse five records that God’s people will “reign forever and ever.” This activity of “reigning” over the new heaven and earth no doubt includes more than singing and playing harps. In fact, God spoke through Isaiah the prophet that the saints would be actively, enjoyably and productively working on the new earth. In Isaiah 65:21-23 we read,

and they shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall also plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build, and another inhabit, they shall not plant, and another eat; for as the lifetime of a tree, so shall be the days of My people, and My chosen ones shall wear out the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they are the offspring of those blessed by the Lord, and their decendants with them.

Anthony Hoekema is correct in observing, “The rest which awaits the people of God in the life to come, therefore, will not be a rest of mere idleness.”⁷

While this is not a paper to explain the intricacies of eschatology, it is very appropriate in developing a biblical theology of work to note that the Bible teaches that God’s people will be working on the new, curse-free earth. God is moving all history toward that time in which man can work in the presence of God Himself, reigning as vice-regents for the King of kings. This eternal work will be enjoyable and productive as it experiences the pure blessing of God Himself. The Bible ends with a description of a “working

Paradise." Is this "de ja vu?" *Yes!*

Work in the Paradise Lost. The Bible not only ends by describing a working paradise, but it also begins by describing a very similar scenario—the Garden of Eden. *Before* sin entered the human race and *before* its curse affected the established universe, man was designed and ordained to work on behalf of God. In language that reminds us of what we read in Revelation 22:5 ("they shall reign forever and ever"), Genesis 1:26 gives us a key purpose of mankind's existence. It says, "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.'" In Genesis 1:28, God expands on this purpose for His special creation by saying that he was to "subdue" the earth. These words strongly imply that mankind was created to "reign" over the created order as a vice-regent of the Great King (God) through the means of work. The work that was laid out for the yet sinless man included both manual labor (Gen. 2:15, "Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.") and intellectual labor (Gen. 2:19-20, the naming of the animals).

Why was mankind to work? He was made in the image of a God who is a "working" God.⁸ Genesis 2:2 mentions that God rested from "all His work," that is, "the work of creating that He had done." Verse eight of the same chapter mentions that God "had planted a garden." The Bible speaks repeatedly of God's work in creation and of His work in redemption. Jesus could assert without apology, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working" (John 5:17).

From the creation account in Genesis it can be learned that work is not the result of sin and the subsequent curse. Colson notes,

God assigned Adam and Eve their tasks before the curse, not after; work itself is not a result of the cosmic curse. This is a crucial point, the misunderstanding of which has caused grave confusion and distorted the view of work from a biblical perspective."

Rather than viewing work as a punishment from God because of man's choice to sin, work should be seen as part of the original design of the Creator for His image-bearers.¹⁰ Seeing in the Bible that God designed mankind to do significant, fruitful, and enjoyable work as His vice-regent on this earth can encourage the Christian to develop a much more wholesome view of work. The Bible begins by describing a working Paradise.

Working in the Era Between the Paradises. Although the Bible begins and ends with descriptions of "working paradises," many Christians would describe their own workplace more in terms of being a "jungle." There is often heard the exclamation, "It's a *jungle* out there!" This description is actually quite accurate. Because of man's sin, God ordained that the earth would be cursed. Now work would entail "painful toil" (Gen. 3:17). There are "thorns and thistles," and man must gain his daily food "by the sweat of your face" (Gen. 3:19). Even the woman who is in the process of delivering a new baby is said to be in (painful) "labor." What should be the Christian's view of work in this era "between the paradises?"

Work in this fallen world can indeed be a "source of frustration."¹¹ Yet, in spite of this "frustration factor"—in spite of this "twisting by sin . . . the basic value of human labor remains unchanged."¹² Even mankind and his world have been affected by sin, he is still an image-bearer of God with the responsibility to rule and subdue this universe for the glory of the King of kings. Psalm 115:16 states that God has given the earth to man. Psalm 8 is a beautiful (yet haunting-

ly sad) reminder that man is still “in charge” of this created world. David writes, “Yet Thou hast made him a little lower than God, and dost crown him with glory and majesty! Thou dost make him to rule over the works of Thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet” (vv. 5-6). Even in this fallen world, man is still God’s glorious image bearer with the lofty job description of ruling over this creation for the pleasure of this majestic God.

How can we justify our job description in this era between the paradises with the reality that “it isn’t really working out the way it was designed?” With our lofty job descriptions (or purpose statement) before us and our daily failures and frustration around us, there seems to be great justification for sadness. In fact, we “groan inwardly,” longing for the day when a working paradise will be restored. This world is described by Paul:

For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom. 8:19-21).

It is that *sure hope* that this day *will* come that motivates Christians in this era to be faithful, redeemed image-bearers in this fallen world. What guarantee does the Christian have that this frustration factor will one day be removed? Can he go to work on a typical Monday assured that he is not caught up in some meaningless cycle, but that he is part of God’s great plan that will indeed undergo the ultimate renewal? Although an honest gaze around him reminds the Christian that the earth is not currently in perfect submission to his rule, he nevertheless “sees Jesus” (Heb. 2:9). The perfect God/Man has not only died in order to remove the

curse, but He is resurrected and glorified as “living proof” that He has accomplished the mission at which the first Adam failed (Heb. 2 in context). All those who are in Christ can go through a typical workweek with all its frustrations with a confidence that he is joined to the Great ~~Demonizer~~.¹³ *Dominionizer*. With hope and purpose the Christian can faithfully do the work God has ordained for him to do. Work is not meaningless drudgery if the Christian works for the pleasure of God with full confidence in his Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

Christ-Centered Work Ethics

If the Christian can be led to regain his “vertical bearings” regarding work, the horizontal implications will take on new relevance.¹⁴ Understanding afresh that work is not part of the curse but, rather, part of God’s original design for His image-bearers, the Christian can do his work in this fallen world with God-pleasing attitudes and ethics. As the renewed man (the Christian) goes to work in this yet-to-be-renewed world, what difference does having his faith and hope set on Christ make? What might be some predominant ethics of the worker who is working for his King? Although there are a number of passages in the Bible that explain this, focus will be made on the “twin” passages of Ephesians 6:5-9 and Colossians 3:22-4:1. Although these two passages deal with the slave/master relationship, there are general implications on the ethics of every Christian worker. Three of these are explained below.

Being Humble. The Christian employee who is seeking to do his work in a Christ-centered way will be marked by humility. Ephesians 6:5 says, “Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ.” The phrase “respect and fear” seems to be an idiom that connotes humility. The Christian worker who is cognizant of his stewardship to the Great King (dare we say “Boss” in our

American vernacular?), does his labor as one under authority. This attitude is revealed in how he responds to human authority in the workplace. The Christian employee ought to show humility to his boss, being teachable and willing to do his assigned tasks. He ought to abstain from participating in the cliques of coworkers who “secretly and verbally ‘beat’ their ‘tyrannical and unreasonable’ supervisors.”¹⁵

The Christian employee works with the humility of a steward of God. But the Christian employer must do his God-ordained task with a similar humble attitude. The Christian “boss” must work with the realization that he, too, is a servant—a servant of the King of kings. Paul wrote in Ephesians 6:9, “And, masters, do the same thing to them, and give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.” The Christian employer does not act in selfish, self-promoting ways by “throwing his weight around” and mistreating his employees. Rather, with the “vertical” relationship in view, he treats his employees with the dignity they should receive as fellow image-bearers of God.¹⁶ He must act in ways that are fair and gracious as he carries out his responsibility as a representative of that One who has ultimate authority.

Being Honest. A second aspect of the Christian’s work ethic is that of “honesty.” Both Ephesians 6:5 and Colossians 3:22 instruct the Christian slave to work with “sincerity of heart.” The same word is used in both references. It implies “singleness” of heart, that is, “without ulterior motives.” The Christian worker works with the single purpose of pleasing His Creator and Lord. He does not work with the ulterior motive of seeking to sinfully advance his own cause. Paul told Titus to “Urge bondslaves to be subject to their own masters in everything, to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every

respect” (Titus 2:9-10). The Christian worker will work without stealing products, money, tools, or time from his employer. He will avoid lying in an attempt to protect or promote his own (selfish) cause. Rather, he will be marked by an ethic of honesty that affects his tongue and his time.

What motivates the Christian worker to be honest? Again, the “horizontal” is based on the “vertical.” He is honest “out of reverence for the Lord” (Col. 3:22), not wanting in any way to discredit the honor and teaching of his heavenly Master (Titus 2:10). This ethic, based not on how one is treated (or would like to be treated) by his coworkers or his boss, gives the Christian a higher, more consistent, motive to be honest in his work.

Being Hardworking. In this era of decreasing productivity in many parts of the marketplace, the Christian should have work ethics that cause him to go against the trend. Ephesians 6:7 states that the Christian worker must “serve wholeheartedly.” In Colossians 3:23 we find the complementary instruction, “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men.” Rather than adopting the unsaved man’s attitude of “how much can I get paid for as little work as possible,” the Christian must work willingly and enthusiastically. Hybels describes Christian workers as individuals who “do their work without the need for constant pep talks, who are willing to go the extra mile, and who actively look for better, faster, more efficient ways to get the job done.”¹⁷

What motivates the Christian to clothe himself with this ethic of being “hardworking?” The Bible teaches that the impetus for the Christian worker is working “as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve” (Col. 3:23-24; Eph. 6:7-8 is very similar). Once again, the “vertical” dimension of work regulates and motivates the “horizontal” aspects, providing for the

Christian worker a higher work ethic than can be gained out of mere pragmatism or desires for self-advancement. The Christian does his very best for the pleasure of his King.

This ethic of being a "hard worker" relates to more than initiative and enthusiasm at the workplace. It also relates to doing the best quality of work possible. As one man has written, "The conviction of the Christian workman is that every piece of work he produces must be good enough to show to God" (attributed to William Barclay; bibliographic data not located). The Christian does not need to abandon his current vocation and go into a salaried ministry in order to be a "full-time Christian worker." Rather, he *is* a full-time Christian worker if he does the tasks God has set before him in a manner and motivation pleasing to his master, Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

A Christian work ethic must be firmly established on a biblical theology of work. Rather than seeing work as a necessary evil (or as an all-fulfilling "idol"), the Christian is to see any legitimate work as a means to serve God. Work is not the curse. Purposeful, enjoyable, productive work was a part of God's original design for His image-bearers even before sin entered the human race and the world for which he is responsible. Sin and its resultant curse have complicated the work of God's image-bearers, but the Christian worker can work faithfully in the midst of this "frustration factor" since he has his heart set on pleasing his Master and his eyes on that coming day when the frustration will be removed and this created order renewed.

With the pleasure of Christ and hope in Christ as motivation, the Christian worker does whatever task is set before him by being humble, honest, and hardworking. He works not for himself, but is an ordained steward for the King of kings. He works with high ethical standards, for he works

with a high mission—*sola deo gloria*.

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Endnotes

- 1 Sherman, Doug, and Hendricks, William. *Your Work Matters to God* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1987), 16.
- 2 Ibid., 16.
- 3 Hybels, Bill. *Christians in the Marketplace* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1982), 7.
- 4 Henry, Carl F. H. *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 43.
- 5 Cf. Ryken, Leland. "Puritan Ethics at Work," *Christianity Today*, October 19, 1979, 14-19.
- 6 Sherman, 7.
- 7 Hoekema, Anthony. *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 286.
- 8 Davis, John Jefferson. *Your Wealth in God's World: Does the Bible Support the Free Market?* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1984), 4. Cf. also Sherman, 77.
- 9 Colson, Chuck, and Eckerd, Jack. *Why America Doesn't Work* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1991), 191-92.
- 10 Hybels, 10.
- 11 Ryken, Leland. *Work and Leisure in Christian Perspective* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1987), 129.
- 12 Hybels, 10.
- 13 Manahan, Ronald E. "A Re-examination of the Cultural Mandate: An Analysis and Evaluation of the Dominion Materials," in a Th. D. dissertation for Grace Theological Seminary, 1982, 292.

- 14 Colson, 39.
- 15 Hybels, 21.
- 16 Colson, 130.
- 17 Hybels, 24.