
The Value of Work

(A report from the Doctrine Commission.)

Introduction

1. In 1995 the Standing Committee of the Diocese asked the Doctrine Commission "to prepare a report for the 1997 Synod on the biblical doctrine of work". The request arose out of the difficulty that Christian organisations were reportedly having in recruiting Christian employees. In a briefing paper to the Standing Committee, Professor Chris Bellenger wrote -

"Is it possible that part of the problem for the Diocese of Sydney about locating workers may be related to a low view of the value of work? One view among some evangelicals world-wide is that work is a distraction from the real task of evangelism and that work is only of value insofar as it provides opportunities for witnessing and funding for (other persons to do) 'full time' ministry as missionaries, evangelists and pastor/teachers. It is remarkable that such a pre-Reformation emphasis on a special class of religious workers should be found among Protestants."

2. Members of the Doctrine Commission are aware of the tension referred to by Dr Bellenger and the conflicting arguments used in the discussion. On the one side there is an appeal to the ultimate worthlessness of human effort compared to evangelism and nurture, in the light of eternity. This is accompanied by a critique of the idolatry of career and work in our culture. On the other side the point is made that two classes of Christian are created, that little practical help is provided for those who spend a large part of their lives at work, and that an unfortunate divorce between the secular and sacred is being encouraged. These are clearly important issues.

3. In this context the Doctrine Commission understands the Standing Committee's request as asking it to answer the particular question about the biblical teaching on the value of work in relation to the ministry of the word, rather than provide a more general and complete "theology of work".

Finding a Starting Point

4. How can work be defined in a theologically useful manner? We all think that we know what work is, through our daily experience. But work may be classified in many ways. Is the unpaid toil of a mother who stays at home, work? What of a vigorous retirement hobby? Is slavery "work"? Is a person who lives off investments a worker? What is the difference between a job and a profession? Can we distinguish not merely the value of work, but the value of different types of work?

5. Furthermore, in our contemporary experience, the ministry of the gospel has developed into a "profession", a specialist service task in the community, with its own training, standards, literature and guild of

practitioners. This gives the impression that the ministry of the word is a career in the same way as that of (say) an engineer or a doctor. Consequently it appears that an emphasis (say) on evangelism is really another way of asserting that a minister has the most valuable “career” than other people.

6. In this matter, as with others, there is a tension between our common (God-given) human experience and the claims of the kingdom of God, between our doctrine of creation and our doctrine of redemption. When Jesus called his disciples, it was away from their daily labours, into a new life of labouring in the interest of the gospel. But they were not supernaturally relieved of their need for food and drink and clothing and shelter. They still depended utterly on the creation for life itself. Occasionally Jesus provided miraculously, sometimes they provided these things for themselves, sometimes others provided them for them. But the world of work and the world of ministry were inextricably bound together, and they must be considered in their bearing on one another if we are to assess their relative value. We must not relieve a tension that exists because we are creatures both of this world and the next. Rather, it is by thinking about the intersection of creation and redemption that enables us to understand what work and the ministry of the word are, and to assess their relative value.

Work in the Order of Creation

7. There have been societies in which all work has been despised and avoided. The Bible challenges such an attitude in its opening chapters. God's creative deeds are called “work” (Genesis 2:2), and human labour is instituted before the fall, arising directly from the relationship between God, man and the world. As the one who is in the image of God, and therefore shares God's task of ruling the world, man, male and female, is told, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves upon the ground” (Gen 1:29). At this stage the Lord provided man with plants for food; later he was given meat, and clothed with skins of animals (Gen 1:21; 3:21; 9:3). In the garden, he was “to work it and take care of it” (Gen 2:15). It is true that after the fall, the toil of man and the child-bearing of woman are cursed with pain and difficulty, but the mandate “to work the ground” remains, as does the image of God (Genesis 3:23; 9:6).

8. As we can see from the mandate “to work the ground”, human labour is originally thought of in very basic terms. The earth and its animals must be cared for, food, clothing, shelter and other necessities must be provided, and human-kind must reproduce. But the Bible provides no criticism for the specialisation of work that soon appears. Human gifts and skills find legitimate and creative expression in an extraordinary variety of occupations. However, we may say that it is humanity that works by divine command rather than individuals as such. The very young and the very old do not “work”, and their needs are provided for by others. One of the motives for work is that our surplus may provide for the needs of others, especially those in our own families

(Ephesians 4:28; 1 Timothy 5:8). Indeed, if we may make a rough calibration of the worth of any kind of work it may be found in its usefulness for the lives of others. Life in this world is utterly dependent upon work, but it may not be our own work which makes the direct provision. Work flows from our joint responsibility for the creation, and may be paid or unpaid, and directly or indirectly productive of basic necessities. We may not all, "work" but none of us can survive without work.

9. There is, therefore, no doubt about the value of work in this world, because it arises from the original work of God and hence from the purposes of God for man and the creation. The human race carries out its work because he has commanded us to do so as the ones who bear his image, who himself is the ruler of the world. In this sense, we may be confident that humanity's work is not some second-rate necessity, at odds with our "spiritual" labour, to be done as soon as possible so that we may get on with other more "godly" activities. We are given no exemption from the task that God has given us "to work the ground". The Creation depends on us, as we do on it. Human work - paid or unpaid - is one of the ways in which God works out his good providence for the world. God continues to work through human agents, whose work helps provide for the world. Furthermore, we are to work in a way pleasing to God. Thus, for example, the quality of our work and the relation we have with those who work over us or for us should be directed by our determination to honour the Lord (Ephesians 6:5-9).

10. Given the fundamental importance of work for human existence, it is not surprising to find many admonitions concerning it in the Bible. Thus there is admiration in the wisdom literature for the man or woman who works hard. Likewise, there is considerable criticism of the sluggard. The admonitions also remind us, however, that work is not always meaningful, useful or joyous. The work of the builders of the tower of Babel is an expression of human sinfulness; the work of the exiles in Babylon is what God has given them to do while they live in this world (Genesis 11; Jeremiah 29) Ecclesiastes represents a sharp reminder of the vanity of human effort and the ultimate futility of all work no matter how exalted in our terms. We are not to set our faith in work or define ourselves by the work we do. Indeed, the sabbath rest of God reminds us that there is also a cessation from work, that life is not determined by our work in this world. We ought even now regularly to cease from our labours in order that we may rejoice in God and the blessings he has given us. Paul's advice to the Corinthians show that, as with all things human, the significance of work is severely relativised by being set in the context of ultimate realities such as the passing away of the world (1 Corinthians 7:20-24). On the other hand, we may legitimately take delight in our work and not resent the fact that in the doing of it we may be focused on it rather than on God. We are also cautioned to work honestly, not to assume that the life of faith releases us from the obligation to work, and to pay particular attention to the well-being of those who work for us. Apart from the condemnation of dishonest "work" such as theft, there is no gradation of the value of the varieties of human

work. Contemporary culture may pay more richly for the doctor rather than the labourer, but there is no necessity to rank the value of their work in God's eyes by such a measure. Neither money nor skill are measures of worth.

Work in the Order of Redemption

11. The relationship between humanity and creation is, however, marred by sin. The image of God in us is distorted by our rebellion against him, and our work is accompanied by failures and corruption. The very frustrations inherent in the situation cry out for the intervention of God. But the manner of God's intervention does not negate his original creation. With the coming into the world of Jesus Christ we see that creation and redemption belong together. Our Redeemer, the Lord Jesus is the one through whom, by whom and for whom the created order has been made; he is "the heir of all things" (Hebrews 1:2). Furthermore, the New Testament reveals that he is the perfect image of God, and so the perfect ruler of the world. Through the work which he has done in his death and resurrection, he is the one who even now rules all things. In this age we live in "the kingdom of Christ".

12. When we acknowledge that Christ is the perfect man who now fulfils the Creator's intention and is ruling the world, we realise that we now must judge all things "through him". We see that our rule of the world, our "work", is fundamentally carried out as we please him in all things. We will be restored as the image of God as we grow more and more to be like him. That is, our basic work is exercised in our obedience to his word, and our doing of those "good works" which he has prepared for us to walk in. Part of this remains the work we have always done in the world, and the manner in which we do it. God's intervention does not negate his original creation, but the rule of Christ is fundamentally directed not to this world but to the world to come, the new creation. The vanity and foolishness of human existence in this world is set to pass away, with all those who so attach themselves to the things of this world that they fail to look for things eternal. For this reason it is most important to challenge any idolisation of human professional life in the name of the gospel, whether the problem is one of greed or a more subtle form of worldliness. But work in itself is not to be despised; our whole approach to it is transformed. It is one of the chief arenas in which we exhibit our obedience to Christ.

13. The gospel, therefore, sets us to work for Christ. Our work for him is our basic commitment, and should order the priorities of everyday life for each individual. High amongst those priorities is the necessity for every Christian to promote the ministry of God's word within our spheres of responsibility and influence. Thus the work of teaching our children the word of God is of greater significance than the work of managing a firm, though the latter may also be of great importance in our obedience to Christ. It is as we "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness", that "all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). In this sense, the gospel may "disorder" our lives by insisting on different standards and

values, or even, as in the case of the disciples, forcing them to leave their jobs to "labour in the harvest".

14. The Reformation insight about the "priesthood of all believers" is not intended to suggest that all are in the full-time ministry of God's word, but that all have access to God through Christ, without preferential treatment or mediatorial status being given to a special class. Inherent in this situation, however, is the further truth that all are responsible to make God known by declaring "the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). Where it is suggested that some are closer to God because of the special way that they spend their time, ordinary work becomes devalued, and the testimony of the church as a whole is similarly compromised. On the other hand, the impact of the Reformation led to the valuing of labour as such when done as for Christ, but not to the gradation of labour so that some jobs became more valuable than others, or that financial success became a special mark of God's favour.

The Work of Ministry

15. In Christ's kingdom, all are committed to the spread of the gospel. The Lord, however, sends some as evangelists and teachers as ministers of the word, whose special responsibility it is to preach and teach the word of God and shepherd God's flock. The significance of this responsibility in God's ordering of his world may be judged by such things as, the prayer of Jesus that such people will be provided (Matthew 9:37-38), the special arrangements made for their support, and by the eternal consequences of their work. As with the Body image in 1 Corinthians, there is an equality of persons but an order of tasks, in which the word of God takes precedence.

16. We call the exercise of this responsibility "the work of ministry", it must not be concluded that it is work in exactly the same sense as any other. Because we are creatures living in the created order, the task of ministry involves elements of any job or profession. But the specialisation of "full-time" labour is not inherent in this ministry, nor is the provision of financial support, though both of these elements are allowed for in the scriptures. It is unfortunate that in the modern world this ministry should be thought of as a profession or career. The historically basic rate of financial support for those in ministry is intended to signal that we are dealing with "work" of a different order. Indeed it is a responsibility which cannot easily be pursued, unless others work to provide for their needs, as is also the case with the young and the elderly.

17. The apostolic witness stands for ever in the New Testament, and we may expect that the Lord will continue to supply us with prophets, evangelists and pastor/teachers. We may also expect that the work of the kingdom will demand that many such people will need to give up their ordinary occupations so that the work of ministry may be done effectively and will therefore need to be supported by others. Experience shows, furthermore, that the work of ministry is not always attractive in human terms, and often involves the choice of what is necessary over what is

good and satisfying. It is not surprising that the need for workers is made a special subject of prayer by Jesus, who says, "the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few" (Matthew 9:37-38). Nor is it surprising that the challenge to the work of the ministry has often taken the form of an kingly call away from the ordinary labours of life in such a way that the work that sustains life is compared unfavourably with the work of the gospel. The language of the New Testament often makes sharp comparisons between things which are good in themselves and those which are absolutely needful. It would be foolish and unbiblical to query such language; it reflects a strand of biblical teaching from Ecclesiastes to Jesus.

18. Nonetheless, it is essential that those who do "the work of ministry" should do so with three things in mind:

- (a) Their task is not a "job" or profession, but the exercise of a service. It is not defined in terms of whether it is part-time or full-time, paid or unpaid.
- (b) Where the ministry of God's word is able to be conducted "full-time", it is only possible because others are working and providing. The minister can give up "all" for the kingdom precisely because others do not!
- (c) Attention needs to be paid in teaching to the lives of people as ones created and redeemed, to the work which people do, how they are to conduct it, what the dangers are, what their motives should be, how the standards of the christian life are to be displayed in the work-place, how they are to treat others, how they are to use their surplus money.

Conclusion

19. What then is the value of work in relation to the ministry of God's word? Put like that, there can be no doubt that the ministry of God's word is the more fundamental task. But it is a task shared by all Christians, though exercised in different ways. Confusion arises because of the overlap of daily work and the task of ministry. For some, the ministry of the word is their "work". Both are essential to the church and the world as long as we remain in the present order, and, indeed, essential to each other. Where the ministry is given such a priority that it seems that work is valueless, we should be reminded that in our work we are doing what God wants us to do as human beings in this age, and that it is needed for this ministry. Where work is given such a priority that the ministry of the word is neglected, we should be reminded that this world will pass away with all the kingdoms thereof, and that above all people need to be saved through the preaching of the word of God. For that reason the New Testament bids us pray for the provision of labourers in God's harvest, and commends the work of ministry as "a good work" (1 Timothy 3:1). Likewise, the Apostles put aside their good works in order to do this one good work, though they made provision for both (Acts 6:2-4).

20. Referring to Professor Bellenger's statement, therefore, we may conclude that our position as created beings should prevent us from

having a low view of the value of work. So too does our recognition that the ministry of God's word depends upon the work of men and women. On the other hand we observe that there is no gradation in the value of work and that not all can take part in paid employment. We cannot define our worth by our capacity for work. But we observe as well that the values of the kingdom demand from us all a commitment to the work of the gospel, and for some that the work of the gospel should take priority over our usual employment. In the end, we need to measure all we do by the great truth that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15).

12 June 1998